Your Strength in Our Hearts:
New Zealand Churchgoers in Midlife

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Abstract

Midlife is a period marked by transitions. Sudden or gradual changes in individuals’ circumstances and responsibilities can prove to be catalysts for personal growth and development. Re-evaluation of priorities and changes in faith may occur as people in midlife reflect on their lives and reassess their values, beliefs, achievements, desires and expectations. Midlife has the potential to be a time of rich discovery, exploration and spiritual growth. However, within the church in New Zealand this period of spiritual development receives relatively little attention. In many parishes the value of specific ministries to those in other stages of life – particularly to children, youth, young adults and the elderly – is readily accepted, but initiatives directly addressing the needs of people in midlife are less likely to exist, or even to be discussed. This project has sought to redress this situation by attending to the experiences and needs of churchgoers in midlife.

Qualitative interviews with people from three participant groups were conducted: twenty churchgoers aged between forty and sixty, from Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican congregations; ten members of the clergy from the same denominations; and ten spiritual directors with clients in midlife. All participants described challenges and opportunities that had arisen for them in midlife, or that they had observed in members of their congregations or among their directees. Middle-aged Christians’ experiences of church were explored. The twenty churchgoers spoke about aspects of their church involvement that they valued and from which they derived support – including elements of worship services, fellowship with other Christians and participation in a range of small groups, ministries and programmes within and beyond their parishes – and also suggested ways in which the church might offer further support to people in midlife. Clergy and spiritual directors presented further insights into the pastoral and spiritual needs of Christians in this life stage, and identified specific challenges in attending to the issues raised. The desire for “something more” in life and in faith that often emerges at midlife was a recurring theme in these interviews. Denominational differences were noted, but were far outweighed by similarities in the perceptions and experiences of people from each of the three denominations included in this project.

Findings from the research revealed that churchgoers in midlife draw strength from their faith and support from the church, although many churchgoers in their forties and
fifties find themselves somewhat overlooked, pastorally and spiritually. Midlife interviewees were actively involved in serving their parishes and their communities, and many had been proactive about seeking guidance and support for their own ongoing spiritual formation. The church can assist Christians in midlife to connect with God, connect with one another, and connect with the world by offering a range of corporate and individual worship opportunities, fostering relational depth within congregations, and equipping individuals with tools for their spiritual journey. Numerous possibilities that clergy and congregations could discuss and explore together have emerged from this research.
Acknowledgements

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
be there at our labours and give us, we pray,
your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

- English author and hymn writer, Jan Struther

The title of this thesis comes from the well-known hymn, Lord of all Hopefulness. The final line of each of the hymn’s four verses asks God for gifts appropriate to childhood, middle adulthood, old age, and “our sleeping ... at the end of the day.” This hymn reminds us that each stage of life has its own demands, blessings, and character, but God’s love and care is constant. The lyricist, Jan Struther, considers the gift of God’s strength to be particularly needed at midlife. Many of the participants in this project clearly derived strength from their faith.

In conducting this research, I had the privilege of interviewing twenty churchgoers, ten members of the clergy and ten spiritual directors. In addition to these forty interviewees, several other people with expertise in relevant fields (including counselling, sociology, and psychology), and clergy who were working in denominations other than those that were the focus of this project, also gave up their time to speak with me. For reasons of anonymity, I am unable to acknowledge interviewees by name, but I want to express my sincere thanks to every person who shared their experiences and their wisdom with me. I felt honoured to meet with, and learn from, so many generous people.

My primary supervisor, Rev. Dr. Lynne Baab, has written numerous books in the field of spirituality and pastoral care, including two books relating to midlife. I am so glad that she was willing to supervise my project. I have been blessed by Lynne’s energy, efficiency, expertise and encouragement through every stage of the research process. As a student working 360 kilometres away from the University of Otago I was enormously appreciative of Lynne’s prompt responses to enquiries, the detailed feedback she has given, and her timely “pastoral care” at crucial moments. My secondary supervisor, Dr. Kathleen Rushton, is a member of Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sister of Mercy New Zealand, and teaches Scripture for The Catholic Institute of Aotearoa New Zealand. I

1 Excerpt from the hymn “Lord of All Hopefulness,” which is commonly sung to the Irish melody, “Slane.” It was first published in the enlarged edition of the English hymnal, Songs of Praise (London: Oxford
benefited from Kath’s erudition, her understanding and appreciation of spiritual
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My third supervisor has played a more passive role, but has rarely left my side during
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Chapter One: Introduction

The well-being of middle-aged adults affects the many others with whom they interact, give care, advise, or influence. Thus, a better understanding of middle age can have far-reaching consequences.

– Psychologist Margie E. Lachman²

For many people, midlife is a period of significant change. It is also a time of life in which reflection on values, aspirations and beliefs frequently occurs. Midlife has the potential to be a time of rich discovery, exploration and spiritual growth. It is the purpose of this project to examine the needs of Christians in midlife, to investigate how well these needs are being addressed within the church, and to suggest a range of practical responses to the issues raised. It is hoped that greater understanding of the issues facing numerous Christians in this life stage may have a positive impact on church members whose needs may be overlooked, and upon many people with whom they interact and influence.

Within the church in New Zealand midlife appears to receive relatively little attention. In many parishes the value of specific ministries to those in other stages of life — particularly to children, youth and the elderly — is readily accepted, but initiatives addressing the needs of middle-aged churchgoers are less likely to exist, or even to be discussed. Clergy and congregations may assume that the spiritual needs of parishioners in midlife are being met through involvement in church services, participation in small groups, and commitment to other parish activities and ministries, but little research has been undertaken to support or refute this assumption. This project seeks to investigate these issues. Prior to explaining the intentions of this research, and outlining the specific questions that will be addressed, some key concepts will be explained. The term “midlife” will be defined and the subject of “midlife crisis” will be explored. Next, a brief description of the place of religion in New Zealand will be given. A summary of the key concerns of this research and an explanation of their significance follow. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

Some personal factors have prompted my interest in this topic and have influenced certain choices relating to the design of this project. The first is my age – I am fifty years old. For me, the past decade has been punctuated by a number of significant life events, which have included my voluntary departure from a rewarding career as a high school

teacher, the loss of both my parents, several major earthquakes in my home city, and, of course, the opportunity to engage in stimulating study at the doctoral level. During my forties it was very apparent to me that many people around my own age were dealing with similarly significant transitions and challenges, and embracing new opportunities, some of which related to their “age and stage” of life, and some of which did not. I am single. I was aware that married friends and family members were adjusting to changes in family dynamics and in their marriages as their children moved into their teens, or left home. Some friends who had been at home with children were enjoying moving into the paid workforce. A number were coping with challenges in their own health or in the health of those close to them. For us all, attendance at funerals was becoming a more frequent occurrence. Accompanying these obvious events and transitions were more subtle shifts in attitudes, values, beliefs and spiritual practices, which intrigued me. These things stimulated my interest in the complexity of midlife.

“Middle age makes no exclusive claim to stress, trauma and the need for resilience,” as journalist and author Barbara Bradley Hagerty points out. She adds, though:

People break bones, lose their jobs, develop cancer at all points in their lives. But it seems that for many of us, troubles start to cluster in midlife: You are more likely to lose a parent or a spouse after forty, more likely to be diagnosed with cancer after forty-five, and much more likely to be replaced by a younger, cheaper, more tech-savvy employee after fifty.4

I became interested in the connection between the “cluster” of issues that seem to arise for many people in midlife, the internal shifts that seem naturally to occur, and Christian faith. I wondered how clergy and congregations were responding to the challenges and transitions that middle-aged parishioners might be coping with, and how attentive they were to the spiritual needs connected to the issues arising in this stage of life. Having attended church since childhood, I had frequently observed the needs of people in other age groups being taken into account within the church, but I had rarely, if ever, heard any discussion of the concerns or aspirations of people in midlife. It seemed to me that midlife, with all its complexity, could be a part of life during which people might be particularly open to spiritual matters. These things made the topic worth investigating.

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3 The diverse impacts of the earthquakes upon Christchurch residents, including participants in this project, are described at various points within this thesis, and their influence on the research data is discussed in the first section of Chapter Eight.

The forty interviewees who contributed to this project were drawn from three Christian denominations: the Presbyterian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church. I am a member of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, but I participate regularly in church services within all three of the denominations from which participants in this project were selected. My upbringing within the Presbyterian Church, and involvement in it throughout my life, has shaped my understanding of Christianity and undoubtedly colours my perception of other church traditions and particular spiritual practices. Having also sung in Catholic choirs for nearly thirty years, and having attended spiritual direction and occasional retreats led by Catholic directors over a similar period, I have some breadth of experience of Catholic practices and teaching. In my twenties, the liturgy of Evensong and Choral Night Prayer attracted me to the Anglican Church, and I continue to attend those services regularly. Involvement in Lenten studies developed into monthly participation in a small study group within an Anglican parish. “Inside knowledge” of these churches has been a driving force in my interest in exploring the experiences of people in midlife within them. The choice of these denominations reflects my own background and church involvement, but, as will be explained in Chapter Three (Research Methods), this was not the only reason for selecting these three – and only these three – denominations from which to draw interviewees.

**Defining midlife**

Midlife can be described as “the part of life between youth and old age,” but, as Margie E. Lachman, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Brandeis University Lifespan Initiative on Healthy Aging, notes, “its boundaries are fuzzy, with no clear demarcation.” Churchgoers between the ages of forty and sixty were invited to participate in this research. However defining midlife is not as straightforward as that choice may suggest. Establishing an age range within which people may be deemed to be in midlife is fraught with difficulties.

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5 Throughout this thesis the word “Roman” will be omitted when references to the Catholic Church are made, for ease of reading, and because the Catholic Church in New Zealand describes itself as the Catholic Church (or its Māori equivalent, te Hāhi Katorika ki Aotearoa). See, for example, The Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand website <http://www.catholic.org.nz> (9 July 2017). The word “church” will not be capitalised unless, as in the instances that occur within the paragraph above, the definite article is used prior to reference to a whole denomination. Again, this is for ease of reading.

Examination of official New Zealand surveys and publications of state-funded research illustrates how challenging it is to define midlife by age alone. Statistics New Zealand, in the New Zealand General Social Survey (NZGSS), describes four adult life stages with “middle-aged people” being forty-five to sixty-four years of age. Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand, which also describes middle age as “the third quarter of life” and uses the same age parameters as Statistics New Zealand, links the age of midlife to life expectancy and to the age of superannuation, which, in New Zealand is sixty-five. Waikato University’s Population Studies Centre’s five-year examination of wellbeing among midlife New Zealanders, Enhancing Wellbeing in an Ageing Society (EWAS), uses the slightly wider age range of forty to sixty-four. Research exploring educational and training issues for those in the workforce, published by The Ministry of Social Development, takes the age group forty to fifty-nine as representative of people in midlife, whereas a recent analysis of leisure time in midlife, published by researchers from the Universities of Auckland and Waikato, assumes forty to fifty-four to be the midlife period. Reporting on the 2014 Neilsen Survey of Wellbeing, conducted on behalf of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA), the Christchurch Press described as “middle aged” a group between the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine identified as the “new vulnerable” in post-earthquake Christchurch, thus prompting debate and discussion among readers about the definition of middle age and the pressures facing those in midlife. There is apparently no commonly agreed age-range for “midlife” in New Zealand.

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8 “As life expectancy has increased, each life phase has changed. In 1950 people moved into midlife at about 35 and claimed a government pension at 60, which signalled the start of older age. In the 2000s midlife started at about 45 and superannuation was claimed at 65 – typically signifying the end of the midlife period.” Alison Gray, “Midlife Adults - Middle Age and Midlife,” Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/midlife-adults/page-1> (8 January 2015).
12 Marc Greenhill, “Quake Stress Creates the ‘New Vulnerable’,” The Christchurch Press, 19 March 2014. One on-line reader, responding to another’s comment that people in their 30’s were too young to be described as middle aged, replied: “According to this we have become middle aged while we’ve been waiting for EQC/insurance, we were young when all this started!” <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-
The difficulty of establishing an age range for midlife is also evident when one considers the work of some of those who have been most influential in shaping contemporary understandings of midlife and its place in adult development: Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Elliott Jaques, Gail Sheehy, and Daniel Levinson. Jung suggests that between the ages of thirty-five and forty “a significant change in the human psyche is in preparation.”\(^{13}\) He considers that “the noon of life”\(^ {14}\) is around the age of forty, at which point a number of predictable developmental tasks may be undertaken. The “tasks of midlife” will be discussed in Chapter Two. Erikson, who, despite his extensive influence, has less to say about development in midlife than earlier life stages, also sees the age of forty as pivotal in human development, the key polarity addressed at this age being “generativity vs. stagnation.”\(^ {15}\) Jaques, who is frequently attributed with coining or at least popularising the phrase “midlife crisis,” considers that a significant (sometimes tumultuous) period of transition starts at around the age of thirty-five.\(^ {16}\) In the 1976 bestseller, *Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, Sheehy accepts Jaques’ view of the mid-thirties and early forties as “the halfway mark, the prime of life” but two decades later revised her opinion, stating, “Now the second half [of life] may not begin at 40. It’s more like 50.”\(^ {17}\) Building on Jung and Erikson, and writing about men, Levinson describes a sequence of developmental “eras” which overlap. Middle adulthood, in Levinson’s schema, falls between the ages of forty and sixty-five,\(^ {18}\) but he notes that although the developmental periods are aged-linked “they are not a simple derivative of age. The timing of a period, and the kind of developmental work done within it, vary with the biological, psychological and social conditions of a man’s life.”\(^ {19}\) This qualification is important.

Whether midlife now begins as early as suggested by some of these influential theorists is open to question, and, as will be explained in Chapter Two, the concept of linear development in adult life is itself considered debatable.\(^ {20}\) Oliver Robinson, Senior
Lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Counselling at the University of Greenwich, notes that using age as the basis of categorizing developmental stages and transitions is problematic as “individuals increasingly live in ways that do not accord with age-graded norms.”21 Lachman expresses a similar view. She suggests, “Age norms are less stringent for midlife than for periods that occur earlier (e.g., school entry or graduation) and later (e.g., retirement). Many people of the same chronological age are in different life phases with regard to social, family or work events and responsibilities.”22 Lachman observes, “The nature of midlife varies as a function of such factors as gender, cohort, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, culture, region of the country, personality, marital status, parental status, employment status and health status.”23 She also notes, “The subjective boundaries of midlife vary positively with age.”24 In other words, the older a person is, the later he or she believes midlife begins and ends.

In the Western world, midlife is increasing in length and in complexity. Medical advancements and increased life-expectancy, changing patterns of participation in education and work, changes in expectations and practices in relationships and family life, and many other factors, mean that it is no longer possible to predict whether a person in his or her forties may be celebrating the birth of a first child or anticipating the departure of children from home, reaching the peak of a career or gaining the necessary qualifications to strike out on an entirely new one. “The old demarcation points we may still carry around — an adulthood that begins at 21 and ends at 65” do indeed seem “hopelessly out-of-date,” as Gail Sheehy observed as early as 1995.25 Sheehy’s assertion is supported by recent empirical evidence. In the developed world the average age of menarche has been dropping since the 1950s, while the average age at marriage has been rising. According to developmental psychologist Laurence Steinberg, by 2020 “adolescence will take almost 20 years from start to finish,”26 with unknown flow-on effects for those in midlife and beyond. In 2013, for the first time, more New Zealand women became mothers between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine than those aged

23 Ibid., 306.
24 M.E Lachman, C. Lewkowicz, A Marcus, & Y. Peng, “Images of Midlife Development among Young, Middle-aged, and Older Adults,” Journal of Adult Development 1: 201-211.
25 Sheehy, New Passages, 3-4.
twenty to twenty four. Life expectancy at birth for children born in New Zealand in 2012 is now over eighty years, for both boys and girls. In defining midlife there is a place for focusing upon particular roles and responsibilities held by individuals, rather than a particular age span, but it is clear that this approach needs to be part of a broader picture.

In undertaking this research it has been necessary to establish an age range from within which to select interviewees, but assigning age boundaries to midlife is clearly an inexact science. As Raymond Studzinski, Associate Professor of Spirituality at the Catholic University of America, notes, “The issues concerning the self, its limits, and a person’s future potential are more crucial than chronological age for designating midlife.” The snapshot of recent New Zealand publications given earlier, and international research, both suggest that “the most common conception is that midlife begins at 40 and ends at 60 or 65” although “it is not uncommon for some to consider middle age to begin at 30 and end at 75.” Some researchers distinguish between “early midlife” (approximately forty to fifty) and “late midlife” (approximately fifty to sixty). Given the complexity and varied nature of midlife experience this distinction can be helpful. In New Zealand, where a universal pension is paid to citizens from the age of sixty-five onwards, people in their early sixties may be considered to be in a period of transition into late-adulthood; they are likely to be grappling with quite different issues from those who are a little younger. Taking all of these factors into account, the midlife interviewees who were invited to participate in this project were all aged between forty and sixty.

29 It is interesting to note that Daniel Levinson considered, but rejected, this approach to his study of the human life cycle and its seasons. The Seasons of a Man’s Life, 5.
30 Raymond Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), x.
32 Robinson, Development Through Adulthood, 142-3. Lachman agrees that this division can be helpful when exploring the experiences of people in midlife. She writes, “Given the expanding period of midlife, it may be useful to think about early and late midlife, as the experiences, roles, and health are likely to be vastly different for those who are 30 to 40 and those who are 50 to 60 and beyond.” “Development in Midlife,” 311.
Midlife Crisis

Whenever the topic of midlife is raised, whether within the church or in other contexts, it is almost inevitable that the idea of “midlife crisis” will be mentioned. Throughout this thesis the phrase “midlife crisis” is employed sparingly, and, when used, it is mostly in the context of quotations from interviewees or other authors. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that the expression is one that is used so widely that it means a variety of things to different people. This limits its usefulness. As Elaine Wethington, Ronald Kesseler and Joy Pixley note, there is a “disjunction between popular and researcher views of midlife and its ‘crisis’. ... Those who are less familiar with the theories justifying the concepts are more inclusive about ‘what counts’.”33 In colloquial usage, the phrase “midlife crisis” is frequently applied to an individual’s response to a range of stressful circumstances and events which may not be exclusive to midlife but which are likely to arise more frequently in the middle decades of life. The phrase “midlife crisis” may also bring to mind images of people embarking on ill-advised pursuits symptomatic of emotional upheaval, a desire for novelty, or an attempt to regain lost youth. In light of these stereotypes, a crisis in midlife may be considered by some people to arise from weakness or deficiency of character, rather than describing an experience which some psychologists consider “necessary to growthful change.”34 The phrase also begs the question of the degree of emotional upheaval that must be experienced for a person to be deemed to be having a “midlife crisis.”

Among academics, much of the literature pertaining to the subject of “midlife crisis” relates to a predictable period of transition, occurring at some point in the middle decades of life, which may include a sense of stagnation and alienation, turmoil, and questioning of beliefs, values and self-worth.35 Studzinski notes that, at midlife, feelings of uncertainty, stagnation and disequilibrium may combine in such a way that it is not uncommon for people to find themselves “suddenly adrift.”36 External events, such as

35 O’Connor and Wolfe, "On Managing Midlife Transitions in Career and Family."
36 Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, 2-4. The theme of “crisis” is emphasized by some authors, as is evident in the following titles: Rosemarie Carfagna, Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2008). Gail Sheehy,
career changes, episodes of ill-health, or the death of a loved one, can provide impetus for change, and, in this context, certain developmental tasks, which “often go beyond conscious awareness,” seem naturally to begin to emerge as important. The developmental tasks of midlife, although understood and described in a variety of ways by different authors, include learning to cope with significant and often cumulative losses, adjusting to a changing perspective of time and one’s own mortality, integration of sometimes surprising and often conflicting aspects of self, values clarification, and dealing with aspects of the past while looking towards the future. These themes will be explored in some detail in Chapter Two. Focusing on specific developmental tasks and other “spiritual issues” which may arise in midlife, rather than dwelling on the more nebulous concept of “midlife crisis,” avoids unnecessary ambiguity and potential misunderstanding.

The phrase “midlife crisis” is also used with some caution in this thesis because there is some debate about the scientific validity and prevalence of crisis in midlife. The Te Ara Encyclopaedia of New Zealand asserts that, “In reality, there is little evidence that midlife adults have more crises than other age groups.” According to psychologists Carolyn M. Aldwin and Michael R. Levenson, midlife “does normatively involve serious challenges” but “it is incorrect to identify midlife as a time of crisis.” Rather, they describe midlife as “a psychological turning point,” which “may include new insights ... that can lead to significant changes or redirections in life.” Whether or not one considers a psychological turning point which leads to significant changes in life to be a “midlife crisis” is obviously a debatable point. Barbara Bradley Hagerty argues that, “Midlife is about renewal, not crisis. This is a time when you shift gears – a temporary pause, yes, but not a prolonged stall. In fact, you are moving forward to a new phase of life.”

Summarizing a range of recent studies relating to midlife, Hagerty concludes, “There is

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37 Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, 40.
38 Lynne Baab examines some of the “spiritual issues” which commonly arise in midlife, in Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 18-39.
41 Ibid., 194.
almost no hard evidence for midlife crisis at all, other than a few pilot studies conducted decades ago.”

Recent studies of considerable size have not been so dismissive of the midlife crisis. Elaine Wethington, Professor of Human Development and Sociology at Cornell University, conducted interviews with 724 American adults and found that among respondents aged over fifty, thirty-four percent reported that they had experienced a midlife crisis, with a peak age in the late forties and early fifties. When interviewed by Barbara Bradley Hagerty a decade and a half after this study was published, Wethington said, “If I were to redo the study now with a bunch of forty-to-fifty year olds, I think I might find an extraordinarily higher estimate of [people] having a midlife crisis.”

Research conducted by Oliver Robinson and his colleagues from the University of Greenwich, based on interviews with over 900 people, found that nearly one in four people aged forty to fifty-nine do go through an “emotional upheaval” at this time of life. In an interview with Kathryn Ryan on RNZ National (formerly Radio New Zealand) Robinson described midlife as “the peak period of crisis” adding, “It certainly doesn’t have an exclusive on crisis, but it is the time when it’s most prevalent.” These studies suggest that midlife is a time of crisis for a minority of people, but, as Robinson observes, “Although midlife crisis may be an event that only a minority of adults experience, this does not make it any less important.”

A further reason that the phrase “midlife crisis” is employed sparingly in this thesis is that the experience of crisis is not the only concern of this project. The purpose of this

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44 Hagerty links Wethington’s comments to a discussion of the impact of the 2008 economic recession. Wethington (aged 63) added, “I think the people fifteen to twenty years younger than I am have much higher expectations for their lives and for success. But also, I think they’ve had a lot harder time in the job market. Their lives have been eventful in a way my life has been very stable. So I think the estimates would be much higher for having had a midlife crisis.” Hagerty, Life Reimagined, 32.
45 Oliver Robinson was interviewed by Kathryn Ryan on RNZ (Radio New Zealand) on 9 May 2016, and the interview was reported on the programme’s website under the heading, “The Mid-Life Crisis ... It’s Real.” <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoonoon/audio/201799963/the-mid-life-crisis-it’s-real> (9 May 2016).
46 Robinson, Development Through Adulthood, 145. Whether or not the majority of people describe an experience of “crisis” at midlife, a particularly large recent study by Arthur Stone and colleagues which collated data from a Gallup survey of 340,000 American adults, on wellbeing, enjoyment, happiness, stress, worry, anger and sadness, revealed that enjoyment and happiness remain relatively stable across the lifespan, but dip at midlife, and sadness shows a slight incline at midlife. More positively, there is a “particularly pronounced decline in stress after the age of 50.” Robinson, Development Through Adulthood, 86-87. Robinson summaries findings from A. A. Stone, J. E. Broderick, and A. Deaton, “A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 107, 9985-9990.
research is to explore the diverse experiences and needs of Christians in midlife and to examine ways in which the church can support churchgoers in this life stage. If crisis is a significant part of some people’s midlife journey it is important that members of the church endeavour to understand something of this experience and seek to offer appropriate support. However, as has already been noted, midlife experience is very varied. Participants in this project were asked to describe both challenges and opportunities which have arisen for them in midlife. This question allowed them to reflect with gratitude on aspects of life which afforded them joy and gave them a sense of fulfilment, as well as the opportunity to talk about some of the difficulties they faced. Their responses reflect findings from other studies which demonstrate the variable and even contradictory nature of people’s experiences at midlife. Aldwin and Levenson note:

For some individuals, midlife is a time of struggle because they are forced to cope with problems such as job loss or failure to achieve critical goals; health problems, both of one’s self and also those of parents, spouses and siblings; problems with troubled adolescents or infertility; or divorce, widowhood, and parental bereavement. For others, midlife may be a time of achievement and relative comfort.47

Lachman notes that while it is common for people in their middle years to be juggling many interlocking obligatory roles and experiencing an increasing number of “overload stressors” (such as those involving children, financial risk and compromised health)48 midlife can also be a period of “peak functioning in many domains, including some aspects of cognitive functioning and in the ability to deal with multiple roles and stress”.49 She believes that, “The portrayal of midlife as both a time of upheaval and a time of mastery is plausible and explicable.”50 The church has a role to play in supporting people as they cope with the challenges of midlife but also in encouraging them to use their energy and gifts in this period of “peak functioning.” Too narrow a focus on “midlife crisis” limits the ability to explore the opportunities as well as the issues that may arise in midlife.

47 Aldwin and Levenson, “Stress, Coping and Health at Midlife,” 189.
49 Ibid., 325.
50 Ibid., 313.
Finally, it should be noted that “midlife does not exist as a concept in all cultures.”\textsuperscript{51} Not only is the notion of midlife related to life expectancy, which differs widely across the world,\textsuperscript{52} but there are cultural differences in responding to midlife transition:

In many Eastern cultures where advanced aging is equated with experience and wisdom and aging increases status in the family and society, midlife transitions are thought of as a time of celebration, not crisis. In contrast, in Western cultures senior status is often equated with disability and lack of autonomy — hence it is no surprise that the midlife crisis appears to be much more prevalent in the West.\textsuperscript{53}

This project is concerned with the experiences and needs of churchgoers in New Zealand. As will be explained in Chapter Three, the majority of interviewees identified as “New Zealand European” (or Pakeha) but interviewees who were born in Asia, the Pacific Islands, and South Africa also contributed to this project. Those born overseas occasionally commented on cultural differences they considered of relevance to this research, and these observations are included in Chapters Four to Seven.

\textbf{Religion in the New Zealand Context}

Many New Zealanders aged between forty and sixty do not attend church. The reasons for their absence are more complex than quantitative data such as census results might suggest. Lack of identification with established religions and declining church attendance may be attributable to many causes. It is beyond the scope of this project to investigate these issues in detail because the focus of this research is on the experiences and needs of middle-aged Christians who do attend church. Having said this, in later chapters consideration will be given to some of the reasons that Christians who have formerly attended church regularly may reduce their church involvement during midlife. Prior to embarking on research which examines the needs of midlife churchgoers it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the place of religion in New Zealand because the fact that so many New Zealanders in midlife do not regard religion


\textsuperscript{52} The Western concept of midlife is not meaningful in certain societies where life expectancy is extremely low. “Global life expectancy for children born in 2015 was 71.4 years (73.8 years for females and 69.1 years for males), but an individual child’s outlook depends on where he or she is born.” In 22 countries, all of them in sub-Saharan Africa, newborns have life expectancy of less than 60 years. World Health Organisation website, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2016/health-inequalities-persist/en/> (23 May 2016).

as of great significance\textsuperscript{54} has multiple affects on the experiences of their churchgoing peers.

It is common to hear New Zealand described as a “secular” society. Like the phrase “midlife crisis,” this word needs to be explained, as the related concepts of “secular” and “secularism” can be used quite differently in a range of academic and cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{55} According to the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, New Zealand is officially “a secular state with no state religion, in which religious and democratic structures are separated.”\textsuperscript{56} The country may also be described as secular because religious organisations have been marginalised by the establishment and expansion of secular institutions in the field of social provision. Also, religious bodies are no longer expected to perform certain “societal functions of religion.”\textsuperscript{57} However, in New Zealand, the Judaeo-Christian influence of the European settlers who arrived in the nineteenth century is evident in a range of societal contexts,\textsuperscript{58} and the institutional church still contributes to public life in conspicuous ways. Church agencies are actively involved in the provision of social services including eldercare, housing and education, religious leaders are sometimes called on to officiate at national ceremonial occasions and to demonstrate leadership at times of crisis, several public holidays are observed which (nominally) mark Christian festivals, and so on. Alongside such activities and observances, Māori spirituality also holds a special place in public life, and this is sometimes underpinned by legislation.\textsuperscript{59} New Zealanders, whether they claim affiliation


\textsuperscript{55} José Casanova draws useful distinctions between these terms, the first of which can be understood as a way of constructing or codifying “a realm or reality differentiated from the religious,” and the second of which refers more broadly to “a whole range of modern secular world-views and ideologies” which may be consciously or unreflectively held. José Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularism,” in \textit{Rethinking Secularism}, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55.


\textsuperscript{57} Sociologist Bryan Wilson suggests could these might include “legitimizing secular power, underpinning the law, educating the populace, and interpreting world-historic and cosmic events.” Alan Aldridge, \textit{Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction} (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 77.


\textsuperscript{59} There are Māori blessings at state occasions, \textit{karakia} (prayers) are permitted in courtrooms and in parliament, and Māori values – especially ones associated with the sacredness of the land – are respected. “These values are also enshrined in law, and the Resource Management Act 1991 and the Historic Places
with a particular faith or not, are affected by the complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards religion which are expressed in the media and in community life.

In New Zealand, religious freedom has been enshrined in law since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) in 1840. The culture of “inclusive secularism” which has since evolved in Aotearoa New Zealand — “adopting a stance of even-handedness between different faith communities,” while rejecting secular fundamentalism, which seeks to remove “all traces of ... religion from public life” — allows for considerable freedom of religious belief and observance. Although many New Zealanders have little interest in participating in religious activities, the majority of citizens tacitly accept that tolerance towards those who are affiliated with a range of religious traditions is desirable. Researchers analysing data from the 2011 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey of New Zealanders’ religion concluded, “Most participants seemed to have a positive attitude towards religion.” It is true that “ignorance, hostility, cynicism and deep dismissiveness in the NZ culture towards the Christian faith” exists, but the majority of New Zealanders espouse willingness to accommodate religious and cultural diversity, and appreciate the place that greater understanding of world religions can play in promoting peaceful international relations. New Zealand itself is becoming more ethnically diverse. In recent years, immigration,
particularly from Asia and the Pacific, has led to an increasing number of New Zealanders affiliating with non-Christian religions, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, although in New Zealand the number of adherents to those faiths is still small in comparison with those claiming some connection to Christianity.\textsuperscript{66} As Australian author and Catholic priest Frank O’Loughlin suggests, “Secularism is an important element in our contemporary situation, but the term ‘pluralism’ is more accurate. ... We are not merely dealing with Christianity and the secular world, but a plurality of worldviews – some of which are religious, some of which are not.”\textsuperscript{67}

Societal openness to various religious beliefs obviously allows for the freedom to express non-belief. According to data from recent censuses New Zealand has one of the highest rates of people claiming to have “no religion” in the world.\textsuperscript{68} In the 2013 census, 1,635,345 or 38.55\% of New Zealanders claimed to have no religion, while a further 173,034 objected to answering the question.\textsuperscript{69}

![Graph showing religious beliefs over years](http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-culture-identity.aspx)

**Figure 1. Identifying religious beliefs**

Source: Statistics New Zealand\textsuperscript{70}


\textsuperscript{67} Nachowitz, “New Zealand as a Multireligious Society,” 87.


Younger people were more likely to indicate they had no religion:

![Figure 2. Religious identification by age](image)

Source: Statistics New Zealand

The usefulness of results from the religious affiliation question asked in the census is sometimes questioned. New Zealand sociologist, Kevin Ward, author of *Losing Our Religion: Changing Patterns of Believing and Belonging in Secular Western Societies*, observes that it can be difficult to ascertain "what people mean when they tick 'no religion'" in the national census. Ward argues that declining church attendance on the part of New Zealanders does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in spirituality, but that the dual quests for the sacred and for community — for believing and belonging — are no longer being addressed within the "primary institutions through which older...

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71 Ibid.

72 "The findings [based on the religious questionnaire developed by the International Social Survey Programme] that (1) many New Zealanders are not tied to a religious organisation, but consider themselves to be spiritual, and (2) many who belong to religious organisations do not consider themselves spiritual, show how ineffective census statistics are in capturing the strength of people's personal religion and predicting the future of religion." Vaccarino, Kavan, and Gendall, "Spirituality and Religion in the Lives of New Zealanders," 94.


74 An International Social Science Survey Programme conducted by Massey University in 1991 and 1998 indicated that 60 percent of New Zealanders believe in God and a further 20 percent in some higher power. 60 percent indicated they prayed. "Seeking God?" Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/seeking-god> (21 November 2015), 1.
generations belonged.”75 In New Zealand, there may be a difference between “believing and belonging,”76 as English sociologist Grace Davie has observed in Britain and Western Europe. Davie notes that there is “an increasingly evident mismatch between statistics ... which measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment” and those concerned with “feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief.”77 A number of social scientists have drawn attention to a dichotomy between spirituality and organized religion,78 which may be a factor in explaining certain attitudes towards religion and religious affiliation in the New Zealand context. Declining church attendance is hardly surprising if, as Wade Clark Roof argues, “religion” connotes “rigid, authoritarian, oppressive institutions; dogmatism and lack of openness to alternative perspectives; and cold formalism or ritualism [and] ‘spirituality’ by contrast, suggests flexibility and creativity; tolerance and respect for alternative insights from others; room for doubt and searching; and an emphasis on personal experience.”79 One Anglican priest who was interviewed for this project observed that “spirituality” is a word that still seems to be “OK” to secular New Zealanders, as it does not have “all the institutional trappings of the ‘church’ word.”80 Some overseas studies suggest, however, that the tendency to bifurcate the meanings of religion and spirituality may create a “greater polarization than is necessary.”81

It is beyond the scope of this project to explore the causes and consequences of shifts in attitudes toward religion in society, but it should be noted that, by one measure of New Zealanders’ “subjective perception of the importance of religion to their life and identity,” Christians in midlife identify less closely with their religion than those in other

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80 Interview with author, Christchurch, 11 March 2016.
age groups. Geoffrey Troughton, Joseph Bulbulia and Chris G. Sibley have explored responses to the question, “How important is your religion to how you see yourself?” posed in the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study. Participants ranked their answers from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). Analysing the responses of the 3505 New Zealand participants who identified as Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, or simply Christian with no further definition (NFD), using a “curvilinear moderated regression model,” the authors found a “disparity in strength of affiliation across age cohorts, particularly within the historical mainline churches.”

![Figure 3. Slopes showing the age gap in religious identification for Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and those identifying as “Christian” with no further definition.](image)

“The evident pattern within the Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches is for greater strength of religious identification among younger respondents than among each successive age group into middle age,” although there is currently insufficient data to determine whether these findings represent “an age effect” or “a generation effect.” According to this measure, within the denominations which are the focus of the present project, Christians in midlife do not perceive their religion to be as important to them as those who are older or younger than themselves, although “the nadir of identification”

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83 The New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS) is a longitudinal social survey endeavouring to track repeat responses from 12,000 participants, between 2009 and 2029. New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/new-zealand-attitudes-and-values-study.html> (27 July 2017). Troughton, Bulbulia and Sibley were analysing results from 2012.
85 Ibid., 32.
86 Ibid.
for Catholics is slightly younger than for those in the Anglican and Presbyterian churches.\textsuperscript{87}

Tim Muldoon, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Philosophy and Theology at Mount Aloysius College, Pennsylvania, asserts, “If spirituality is the lived practice of faith in the concrete, everyday experiences of our lives, then culture has an important impact on spirituality.”\textsuperscript{88} Faith is lived out in context. New Zealand churchgoers in midlife, who may already be coping with many conflicting demands and adjusting to significant life-events and transitions, practise their faith within a secular, multicultural, postmodern society,\textsuperscript{89} frequently without a great deal of support or understanding from their peers.

**Key questions**

A detailed description of the design of this project and the research methods used will be provided in Chapter Three. For example, choices regarding the number and selection of interviewees – twenty midlife churchgoers, ten members of the clergy, and ten spiritual directors – will be explained in that chapter. Here, the three key questions this projects seeks to address are listed and explained.

1. **What are the needs of churchgoers in midlife?**

This is clearly a very broad question. My original intention was to ask, “What are the spiritual needs of churchgoers in midlife?” Upon further reflection, and as the interviews with participants took place, it became evident that inclusion of the word “spiritual” in this question was both unnecessary and unhelpful. Christian spirituality is concerned with “the deepest values and meaning by which people seek to live” and “a quest for ultimate meaning and fulfilment”\textsuperscript{90} (among other things), so attempting to separate a person’s “spiritual needs” from needs relating to mental or emotional wellbeing and personal development is somewhat futile. As James M. Nelson, Professor of Psychology at Valparaiso University, points out, “The issues faced by people at midlife can be seen as

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\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{89} Postmodernism may be understood to be a reaction against or response to the perceived weaknesses of modernity, being expressed in an enormous variety of ways. Features of postmodernism include ideological pluralism, relativism, denial of absolute truth, an emphasis on experiential rather than rational knowledge, and the privatisation of spirituality. Friedrich L. Schweitzer explains, "Postmodernity is a time of many stories and also of many different voices." *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2004), 4.
\textsuperscript{90} Philip Sheldrake, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambridge Theological Federation, and former president of the International Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, defines Christian spirituality in these terms in *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 238.
having spiritual components that are addressed in the teachings and practices of most religious traditions.”

All forty interviewees were asked to identify challenges and opportunities that had been part of their midlife experience. This question gave them scope to talk about any aspect of midlife they wished. Participants had been sent a statement of the purpose of the project (identical to the opening paragraph of this chapter), and were thus aware that this research was about the church’s support of people in midlife, and was being conducted by a theological student. It is likely that participants considered that the church’s primary concern and responsibility is for people’s “spiritual needs” or, as James Fowler puts it, “the care and cure of souls and the formation of persons.” Such factors presumably influenced the choices they made in responding to questions about their “needs.” As will be seen in Chapters Four to Seven, relational issues, the busyness of this life stage, the freedom and fulfilment to be found in using gifts and talents to support others within and beyond the church, shifts in values and beliefs, and many other subjects, were discussed, but interviewees were selective. Very few, for example, talked about the need or desire to maintain or improve their health or fitness, although this issue often occupies the attention and time of people in midlife. Addressing the “spiritual needs” of midlife churchgoers inevitably involves consideration of other aspects of their lives, but there are limits on what churches can do, and middle-aged churchgoers are realistic about the scope of the support churches can provide.

2. How effectively is the church in New Zealand addressing the needs of Christians in midlife? (What is already working well? What is not so helpful? What could be done better? How?)

There are three points that need to be made about this question. First, it is necessary to define what is meant by “church.” Second, the word “effectively” also needs some elaboration. Third, the concept of the church “meeting the needs” of members (regardless of age) must be explained. The word “church” has multiple definitions, and it is used in a variety of ways within this thesis. It can mean the whole people of God, all

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92 “Information Sheet for Participants,” Appendix One.
94 “Midlife is a period when implementing health-promoting behaviors can help to maintain health and possibly prevent physical problems in later life. It is a time when a sense of control can provide motivation to tackle impending declines in many domains, including health or cognitive functioning.” Lachman, “Development in Midlife,” 326.
believers, or all members of “the body of Christ” (Eph 1:22-23). The word can also be applied to the “institutional church” (or the “established church”)95 or to a denomination, as in, “the Presbyterian Church.” The word “church” may also refer to a community of people worshipping in a particular location (1 Thess 1:1), although within this thesis the words “parish” or “congregation” are more frequently used to denote a group of believers gathering regularly for worship in one venue. The word “church” can also be applied to a building (within this thesis the phrase “church building” is usually employed), or to a service of worship, as in, “She goes to church every week.” Despite the fact that interviewees used the word in different ways, throughout this thesis the meaning of “church” should be clear from context. In the question above, “How effectively is the church in New Zealand addressing the needs of Christians in midlife?” the focus is on the institutional church and also on the parishes and organisations that are part of that wider body. While many comments are made within this thesis about implications for “clergy and congregations” – that is, the church at parish level – reference is also made to various groups, networks, social services,96 and Christian ministries (such as spiritual direction) that are part of the church but not usually part of parishes.

“How effectively” is the church addressing the needs of middle-aged churchgoers? Participants spoke of their church involvement and of the support they received from people, services and programmes offered within their parishes, and as they did so they described aspects of their parish participation that they found helpful, and that they were satisfied with, and also identified “gaps” in the church’s support of middle-aged people. Their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with church was the primary measure of the effectiveness of the church’s support to them. But the church’s work of caring for souls and contributing to the formation of persons97 may not be adequately assessed by that measure. Members of the clergy and spiritual directors, all of whom were in midlife, or slightly older, were also able to share their perceptions of the ways that the church was addressing the needs of Christians in midlife. Having three participant groups share

95 Alan Jamieson defines “established church” as “those churches which function in established ways. They have established organizational, leadership, legal, financial and liturgical structures which operate in a consistent way as church have for the last century or more in western societies.” Alan Jamieson, Jenny McIntosh and Adrienne Thompson, Five Years On: Continuing Faith Journeys of those who left the Church (Wellington: Portland Research Trust, 2006), 12.

96 The Anglican Care Network in New Zealand, for example, aims to be “an expression of the love of Christ and the mission of the Church in loving service and working towards justice and equality for all in society.” The Anglican Care Network of Agencies, Parishes and Diocesan Social Services in Aotearoa, New Zealand, <http://www.anglicancarenetwork.org.nz> (10 July 2017).

97 Fowler, Faith Development and Pastoral Care, 20.
complementary perspectives built a bank of stories and examples which illustrated how well the church was responding to the needs of parishioners in their forties and fifties. As will be seen in Chapters Four to Eight, at times participants’ subjective responses were also supported by data from relevant overseas research.

I am aware that the question of how effectively the church is addressing the needs of midlife members could be misinterpreted. It is not my intention to portray churchgoers in midlife (or any other churchgoers) as passive consumers of ministry. As Anthony B. Robinson, author and ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, states, “Ministry is not a product or service generated by some for others in the congregation to consume; it is a way of life and living in which we are all invited to share.”98 The participants in this project did not have a “consumer-oriented approach to the church,”99 but sought to find ways to serve God and others, within the church and beyond it. As a forty-one year old interviewee put it, “I see more now that I am a part of a community. ... Can we create something which then meets our common needs?” A second misconception could be that, by undertaking this research, I am suggesting that the needs of midlife churchgoers are more important than the needs of those in other age groups. They are not. But they are important. If the church is to care for souls, support the formation of persons, and to equip people for service, it must be attentive to the needs of all individuals within it. People in congregations must encourage one another and build up each other (1 Thess 5:11), pray for one another (Eph 6:18), and support weaker members as they develop in faith (Roms 14:1-15:2). Pastoral and spiritual care of all members, including those in midlife, is fundamental to what it means to be church.

3. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of those in midlife, clergy who serve in churches that include parishioners in midlife, and from spiritual directors who meet with people in midlife from a range of denominations? How might these lessons be translated into practical outcomes for individuals and churches in New Zealand?

Interviews with churchgoers, clergy and spiritual directors were undertaken so that the experiences and needs of Christians in midlife may be better understood. Implications or “lessons” for churches and for individuals in midlife are identified throughout this thesis, and explored in detail in Chapter Eight.

98 Anthony B. Robinson, Transforming Congregational Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 82.
99 Ibid.
The importance of this research

Very little has been published about the experiences or needs of midlife churchgoers in the New Zealand context. This is not surprising, as, until recently, midlife itself has been an under-researched field in other disciplines. It has been described as “perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined of any period in life.” Ursula M. Staudinger and Susan Bluck suggest that one reason midlife has received relatively little attention by psychologists is that it has not been considered a “particularly problem-stricken phase of life.” Those in midlife have been considered to be “one of the pillars that maintain societal functioning, rather than appearing to be in need of special support.” Middle-aged Christians are frequently regarded as “pillars” of the church, as participants in this project attested. But there are further reasons that New Zealand researchers may have overlooked the experiences and needs of churchgoers in midlife. First, as has been explained, in many congregations in this country, people in midlife are conspicuous by their absence. It is understandable, therefore, that exploring the needs and experiences of middle-aged Christians who are attending church has seemed less urgent than investigating why many people in this age group are not (or no longer) attending church. These are, of course, related questions. Second, the diverse experiences that may be part of the middle decades of life makes it difficult to pinpoint the challenges individuals in this age group may be experiencing. Lachman observes:

What is perhaps most striking is the wide variability in the nature and course of the midlife period. As scholars begin to focus attention more directly on the middle years, it is apparent that to portray midlife is a challenging and

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100 The experiences of adult church leavers in New Zealand has been explored by Christchurch Baptist pastor, Alan Jamieson, in A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000). The subjects of Jamieson’s interviews were Christians, predominantly in their thirties and forties, who had chosen to leave New Zealand Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (which he calls EPC churches). A follow-up study was published by Alan Jamieson, Jenny McIntosh and Adrienne Thompson, Five Years On: Continuing Faith Journeys of those who left the Church (Wellington: Portland Research Trust, 2006). The participants in my own study are members of Catholic, Presbyterian and Anglican churches, in their forties and fifties, who are attending church.


103 Research regarding the “churchlessness” of New Zealanders has been described in the following studies: Jamieson, A Churchless Faith; Troughton, Bulbulia and Sibley, “Strength of Religion and the Future of the Churches;” Ward, “Is New Zealand’s Future Churchless?”
complex task because the experiences of middle-aged adults are so diverse and variable.\textsuperscript{104}

Describing the experiences and needs of individuals in midlife is “challenging and complex,” and exploring practical responses to those needs is also a demanding task. Third, parishes have limited resources and obviously wish to invest them where the need is greatest. As it is often perceived that people in midlife are doing well, and have well-developed mechanisms for coping with challenges,\textsuperscript{105} it is understandable that churches will choose to offer more pastoral and spiritual support to those who appear to be most vulnerable, such as the frail elderly. However, the assumption that people in their forties and fifties need very little support at all is worth questioning.

In recent years international research on midlife has gathered some momentum through the work of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development;\textsuperscript{106} studies conducted by Margie E Lachman and others involved in the Lifespan Developmental Psychology Lab at Brandeis University and the Brandeis University Lifespan Initiative on Healthy Aging; the work of Oliver Robinson and team members at the Department of Psychology, Social Work & Counselling at the University of Greenwich; and others. Despite this upsurge in interest in midlife the link between midlife, human development and Christian spirituality has not received much attention. The 1980s and 1990s produced a number of publications on this theme as Christian writers grappled with the significance of theories of adult development which had been published and popularized in the latter half of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{107} While much of this work remains of interest, it is naturally based on certain presumptions and perspectives which differ in some significant respects from those held by many people today. Over the past twenty or thirty years societal changes of unimaginable scope and impact – not only in the areas of familial relationships, technology, life expectancy and career diversity, but also in world-view – have shaped the life experiences of Christians and non-Christians alike. In addition to coping with many midlife transitions and external and internal challenges, Christians navigating midlife today are doing so in a global environment in which constant change is the norm. As Benedictine author Joan

\textsuperscript{104} Lachman, Development in Midlife, 306.

\textsuperscript{105} “Middle-aged adults often show high levels of mastery gained from successful coping and accumulated experiences of juggling different roles.” Ibid., 326.


\textsuperscript{107} More recent publications include Rosemarie Carfagna’s, Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2008) and Paul David Tripp’s Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004).
Chittister puts it, “The world is getting ... infinitely more confusing, infinitely more uncontrollable at the same time.”\textsuperscript{108} It is therefore timely for further exploration of the needs of midlife churchgoers to occur.

There is a predictable quality about certain midlife experiences, but for a great many people they can come as a surprise\textsuperscript{109} or even sudden shock.\textsuperscript{110} It is important to study the issues that often confront people in midlife, and to share these findings within the church, because individuals in this stage of adult development are likely to find it both comforting and empowering to be able to identify and understand common elements of midlife experience. Australian psychotherapist and spiritual director Mary d’Apice suggests that, “To know that times of disorientation and confusion are normal, alleviates much of the fear and concern often accompanying these periods of disruption.”\textsuperscript{111} The opposite is also the case, as Gerald O’Collins points out: “Profound experiences that are neither described nor explained can turn terrifying. This holds true of second journeys.”\textsuperscript{112} Those who are unprepared for the transitions of midlife may negotiate them less successfully, as Jung observed.\textsuperscript{113}

Large numbers of adults are currently in midlife — including some of the population bulge of baby-boomers born between 1946 and 1964 — and midlife covers a considerable portion of a person’s lifespan.\textsuperscript{114} Greater understanding of the issues facing Christians between the ages of forty and sixty has the potential to have a positive impact on church members whose needs can easily be overlooked, and upon those with whom they interact and have the potential to influence. These factors place a degree of responsibility upon clergy, religious and lay-people to be better equipped to accompany people in their middle years during times of transition. Constructive and sensitive responses to the needs of those in midlife can be generated if people within the church have greater understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of the issues they face.

\textsuperscript{108} Joan D. Chittister, Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 8.
\textsuperscript{109} Lynne Baab summaries what several of her interviewees said: “They were surprised by the issues that arose in their lives. If they had known ahead of time that those issues would probably arise, it would have helped them a lot, they believed.” Embracing Midlife, 37.
\textsuperscript{110} Gerald O’Collins, The Second Journey, 14.
\textsuperscript{111} Mary d’Apice, Noon to Nightfall: A Journey through Midlife and Ageing (Burwood, VIC: Collins Dove, 1989), 41. Comma in original.
\textsuperscript{112} Gerald O’Collins, The Second Journey, 65.
\textsuperscript{114} Lachman, Development in Midlife, 308-309.
Overview

This thesis is comprised of eight chapters, including the present chapter. This chapter and the next provide an overview of key themes relating to midlife and of literature pertaining to development in this life stage. Chapter Three explains the research methods used. Chapters Four and Five present results from the interviews with midlife churchgoers. The first of these chapters explores midlife participants' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities of midlife, while the second (and longest) chapter focuses on midlife churchgoers' comments about church. Two chapters are dedicated to exploring data from the midlife participants' interviews, partly because there were twice as many churchgoers as clergy or spiritual directors (whose comments are explored in one chapter each) but also, more importantly, because hearing the “voice” of midlife churchgoers is essential if their experiences and needs are to be understood and addressed. Chapter Six presents data from the interviews with members of the clergy. All but one of the ministers and priests who were interviewed were in their fifties, and therefore their comments about their own experience of midlife are included in the first part of Chapter Six. Their thoughts about the needs of middle-aged parishioners are presented in the remainder of the chapter. Chapter Seven attends to the opinions and experiences of spiritual directors who have clients in midlife. In Chapter Eight, reflections on aspects of the research process are followed by discussion of the implications of the research findings for the church and for individuals in midlife who are part of church communities.
Chapter Two: Development

To everything there is a season. – Ecclesiastes 3:1

People in midlife are often very busy attending to numerous commitments at home, at work, and beyond. At the same time as they are juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, and coping with the challenges that are an inherent part of multi-tasking, significant changes in their external circumstances and in the lives of those they love and care for are likely to arise. In this stage of life it is also common for people to become aware of shifts in their attitudes, desires and values. Activities that used to seem important may no longer seem as worthwhile, while new pursuits may be the source of unexpected joy. Questions about meaning and significance seem to become more pressing. Changes in religious beliefs, and in the outworking or practice of those beliefs, may also occur. Much of the literature relating to midlife is concerned with the interior shifts that occur in this stage of life.

This chapter addresses the topic of development in adult life. Several developmental theories are considered, and metaphors and images that can enhance our understanding of psychological and spiritual development during midlife are explored. James Fowler’s work in the field of faith development theory is also discussed. The “tasks of midlife” that have been identified by social scientists as critical to adult development, and links between psychosocial development and spiritual growth, are explored. Finally, the place of faith communities in supporting spiritual development is considered.

This chapter provides a theoretical framework within which the experiences of the midlife churchgoers who were interviewed for this project may be understood and interpreted. However, it should be noted from the outset that while patterns of human behaviour and development may be described, individuals’ experiences of midlife are extremely diverse. Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan emphasise, “The common life cycle can be a profound experience of human solidarity and at the same time a profound experience of individuality. No two people have the same story or history. We live through the stages of our life in our own unique ways.”115

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Development in adult life

Over the past century a number of complex and contrasting theories have been propounded which illuminate certain aspects of human development. Carl Jung is considered by many to be the “spiritual father of the life-cycle theory.” Jung draws a distinct contrast between the first half of life, oriented primarily to development of the ego and conformity to the outer world, and the second half of life, in which interiority and integration of incongruent parts of the self are seen as critical to a person’s development. Erik Erikson’s similarly influential stage theory of psychosocial development stresses the influence of culture and relationships on the development of children and adults. Six of the eight stages of development Erikson describes precede midlife, but his identification of a critical antithesis in adulthood between “generativity” and “self-absorption and stagnation” has been accepted and extended in many studies of midlife experience. Generativity in midlife involves finding ways to contribute to society and to benefit future generations, and a widening commitment to what Erikson calls the “virtue” of “Care.” Daniel Levinson’s analysis of developmental periods in men’s lives builds on the work of both Jung and Erikson. His life stage theory describes four eras – predictable stages of life lasting approximately twenty-five years each – between which significant periods of transition occur. The three themes of interiority, generativity, and transition, explored by Jung, Erikson, and Levinson (among others), are topics that recur throughout literature relating to midlife.

Prior to commenting further on these themes it is necessary to acknowledge that although many academics accept core elements of the theories propounded by Jung, Erikson and Levinson, those working in the field of life span developmental psychology today question certain aspects of the work of these founding fathers of adult development, and/or are concerned with different issues. Two factors of particular concern to modern researchers are gender and diversity. Psychologists Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James note that the key propositions and constructs of

119 Ibid.
Jung and Erikson’s theories are difficult to test and are “limited in their insensitivity to variation across gender, ethnicity and culture, social class, and historical time.”  

Most of the studies of normative development during middle age have focused entirely on the trajectories of men’s lives. James D. Reid and Sheryl L. Willis argue, “Issues of gender and gender equality are important areas of understanding that have not received enough attention within the literature on midlife.”  

There is still room for considerably more research surrounding women’s development. Levinson’s study of men’s lives not only excluded women but also only included men from middle or upper class backgrounds. As Diane Papalia, Sally Wendkos Olds, and Ruth Duskin Feldman point out, “The findings of these studies may not apply to people of other backgrounds or socioeconomic levels.”  

It can also be argued that descriptions of the life cycle formulated in the twentieth century do not adequately reflect the range of individuals’ experiences and diversity of life trajectories today. The developmental theories of Jung, Erikson, and Levinson, and of a number of others whose work they have influenced, reflect a modern world-view and share certain cultural assumptions. Although punctuated by crises and turning points, in these models human development is understood essentially to be a cyclical, linear or stepwise process (often neatly summarised in charts or diagrams) within which a notion of progress is explicitly articulated or implicitly accepted. As the course of midlife becomes more diverse and varied, it is becoming increasingly difficult to describe. Gail Sheehy observes in New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time, “Some of the social roles and developmental tasks formerly associated with one stage have been postponed to another or ignored altogether. Multiple tasks have piled up in the same stage, creating tremendous either/or conflicts. Not only the shape but also the sequence of stages has been altered.”  

The idea that “development follows a universal, age-

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122 James D. Reid and Sheryl L. Willis, “Middle Age: New Thoughts, New Directions” in Life in the Middle: Psychological and Social Development in Middle Age, ed. Sheryl L. Willis and James D. Reid (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), 279.
124 Modernists were optimistic about human development and potential for advancement, encouraged by increasing technological sophistication and Darwinian evolutionary theory. A belief in the “perfectibility of human nature” was an underlying assumption, as Peter C. Moore explains: Disarming the Secular Gods: How to Talk so the Skeptics will Listen (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 73.
linked sequence”\textsuperscript{126} is upset by cohort differences, according to Papalia, Olds, and Feldman. Even more significantly, the very notion of a developmental model is now questioned by postmodernity, which asserts that “all attempts at comprehensive description or explanation of society, history, human behavior, or the meaning of life have broken down.”\textsuperscript{127}

Although some of the presumptions of “normative-crisis perspectives”\textsuperscript{128} of human development can and should be challenged, their influence and continuing relevance should not be underestimated. Jung’s emphasis on interiority at midlife, his recognition of the need to foster inner growth and to reconsider fundamental values, and his exploration of the process of individuation, offer insights of real value for New Zealand churchgoers in midlife who not only seek to integrate disparate parts of self but are doing so within a society which is itself increasingly fragmented, individualistic and pluralistic. Individuation – a term derived from the Latin \textit{individuus}, for “undivided,” “not fragmented” or “whole”\textsuperscript{129} – is defined by Levinson as the process by which each person acquires “a clearer and fuller identify of his own, becomes better able to utilize his inner resources and pursue his own aims” and “generates new levels of awareness, meaning and understanding.”\textsuperscript{130} The desire to grow in what one New Zealand spiritual director has described as “interior integrity,”\textsuperscript{131} the desire for uniqueness, and the longing to be authentic, are of significance both psychologically and spiritually. Whether or not the Jungian concept of individuation is accepted in its entirety, aspects of Jung’s theories can be helpful to some people as they seek to grow in knowledge of self and of God. For example, many have found the work of Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Briggs, which is based on Jung’s theory of psychological types, helpful in understanding of self, in interactions with others, and in prayer.\textsuperscript{132}

Erikson’s discussion of midlife in the context of the eight stages of the lifespan focuses on the dichotomy between “generativity” and “stagnation.”\textsuperscript{133} The desire “to invest one’s

\textsuperscript{126} Papalia, Olds and Feldman, \textit{Human Development}, 513.
\textsuperscript{127} Brewi and Brennan, \textit{Midlife: Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives}, 4. American spelling retained from the original.
\textsuperscript{128} Papalia, Olds and Feldman, \textit{Human Development}, 506.
\textsuperscript{129} Brehony, \textit{Awakening at Midlife}, 18.
\textsuperscript{130} Daniel Levinson, \textit{The Seasons of a Man’s Life} (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 33.
\textsuperscript{131} Interview by author, Christchurch, 26 May 2015.
\textsuperscript{133} Levinson, \textit{Seasons of a Man’s Life}, 30.
substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self"\textsuperscript{134} \textemdash to leave a legacy \textemdash that emerges or intensifies in midlife continues to be evident within families, local communities and globally, as people seek to transmit values, mentor those younger than themselves, or contribute to the world through art, literature or philanthropic ventures. Recent research supports Erikson’s theory that generativity plays a critical role in midlife development.\textsuperscript{135} Harvey L. Sterns and Margaret Hellie Huyck refer to a number of social surveys that reveal, “Those who are more generative show higher well-being, both in psychological well-being and confidence in the social system.”\textsuperscript{136} For Christians, generativity may be a theme of particular significance. Sterns and Huyck claim that generativity may be connected to “a renewed appreciation” of religion and spirituality, because actions such as helping others, or striving to improve society in a range of ways, “have meaning because they are embedded in a larger set of meanings.”\textsuperscript{137} Additionally, the capacity and willingness to care compassionately for others, and to exercise one’s gifts and share one’s resources in a way that contributes to the common good, are marks of Christian maturity. At the heart of Jesus’ teaching is the challenge for his disciples to love one another (John 13:34), those who are strangers or are in need (Matt 25:40), and even enemies (Luke 6:35). For many Christians in midlife, there is a new appreciation and deepening joy in serving others, particularly in sharing experience, knowledge and wisdom with younger people. As will be seen in later chapters, the middle-aged churchgoers and the clergy who participated in this project spoke of the richness of this aspect of midlife experience.

Daniel Levinson’s decade-long study of the lives of forty men, \textit{The Seasons of a Man’s Life}, draws upon Jung and Erikson’s developmental frameworks, but a theme that receives additional emphasis in his work is the significance of transitions. Levinson’s depiction of the life cycle incorporates predictable periods of transition between four eras of human development. These transitions may be times of “profound inner conflict” as they mark the end of familiar and perhaps cherished aspects of life, as well as presaging new, possibly daunting, experiences ahead. As Levinson observes, it is rarely easy “to accept the losses the termination entails; to review and evaluate the past; to decide which


\textsuperscript{135} Dan P. McAdams, “Generativity in Midlife,” 395-443.


\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
aspects of the past to keep and which to reject; and to consider one’s wishes and possibilities for the future.” This process of review and evaluation will be explored closely later in this chapter. Developmental transitions are, of course, just one significant form of change among a number of other changes people in midlife must face. As individuals in midlife endeavour to accommodate and respond to changes occurring on a personal level, societal change, over which they may have little control, continues to occur. Times of transition and rapid change in society “bring widespread experiences of dislocation” which may both parallel and exacerbate the sense of disequilibrium already felt by many people in their middle years. Levinson’s insights into the psychological growth that change may precipitate, and observation that transitions provide a significant opportunity for personal development, mean that many elements of his work have enduring resonance for people in midlife today. Christians, in particular, may consider that learning to respond appropriately to change is important because the call to follow Jesus demands continual openness to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. In times of transition, when reliance on self is often shaken, people may be most open to God. As Jacques Philippe, a Catholic priest in the Community of the Beatitudes, states, “The situations that make us grow are precisely those we do not control.”

Without accepting uncritically all aspects of the developmental models of Jung, Erikson and Levinson, it is evident that their work continues to offer some useful insights, some of which find parallels within the Christian tradition. This being noted, it is also apparent that universal, stage-oriented models have their limitations when it comes to exploring the experiences and needs of people in midlife today. Lachman argues that traditional developmental models, which have been relatively useful for studying childhood development, are less applicable to middle adulthood as there are “multiple paths of midlife development.” George Vaillant, director of Harvard University’s longitudinal study of adult development, observes that the process of adult development is not nearly as orderly as the intellectual development of children, asserting that “adult developmental tasks are more often than not sequential, but not always.”

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138 Levinson, The Seasons of a Man’s Life, 51.
140 Levinson, The Seasons of a Man’s Life, 26.
142 Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James, “Charting the Course of Midlife Development,” 20.
143 George E. Vaillant, Aging Well, 44.
Hudson, author of numerous books and articles on adult learning, development, and life planning, portrays human development as a “cycle of continuity and change” rather than something that occurs in “progressive, straight lines.” In this cyclical model, “people experience stability for a period of time, followed by a period of transition and reevaluation, followed by more stability.” Hudson employs a memorable simile when he depicts adult life as being “something like a large slinky, with cycles that go on and on. Each new life period is different from yet similar to the last one.” Friedrich L. Schweitzer, Professor of Religious Education and Practical Theology at Tübingen University, also believes that it is time to consider replacing traditional images of the life cycle with alternative models. He proposes that adult lives could be depicted with a lot of intersecting lines or strands which sometimes flow together but sometimes do not, as “adulthood itself now means transition — many transitions between different segments of a life cycle that no longer has a circular shape.” In Schweitzer’s view, the challenge in postmodern society is “how to come to terms with a life cycle that presents itself like a permanent construction site, with an overabundance of competing construction plans and no clear criteria for choosing among them.” After thirty-five years studying development in adults George Vaillant concludes, “The theory of adult development is still waiting for the sage who can provide universal principles that transcend cultures and centuries. ... Adult development is a mystery.”

Development in adults evades easy analytical description, but several metaphors and images pertaining to development in the Christian life may be helpful in accommodating some of the “mystery” that is part of midlife experience, as well as part of Christian spiritual formation. Images of rootedness and fruitfulness, which abound throughout the Bible, may be helpful in thinking about human development, as well as Christian faith, in a postmodern context. Traditional models of the life cycle incorporate a notion of progress which is closely linked to modernity, as Robert Schweitzer has argued; it is therefore worth considering whether organic models of growth which are non-linear and depict fruitfulness as a natural outcome of rootedness in God may offer some

145 Ibid., 43.
146 Ibid., xiv.
147 Ibid., 120.
149 Ibid., 17.
150 George Vaillant, Aging Well, 44.
balance to the “highly ideological and one-sided view of adulthood” which portrays the truly adult person as “autonomous, independent, and rational, and ... dynamically increasing in his or her capacities.”152 Old Testament images of fruitfulness depict those who are faithful to God as being like “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in season” (Ps 1:3) or “willows by flowing streams” (Isa 44:4). Within the New Testament Jesus describes himself as “the true vine,” the Father as “the vinegrower,” and his followers as “branches.” Those who do not grow in him, and bear fruit, are pruned and thrown away (John 15:1-8). Paul urges his readers to ponder the truth that their lives are “rooted and built up” in Jesus (Col 2:6-7). Sociologist and spiritual director Susan Phillips points out that in the spiritual life the concept of fruition, which “has to do with receiving grace and allowing it to work in oneself and through oneself,”153 provides a necessary counter-balance to cultural attitudes which frequently “equate striving with thriving.”154 Images of rootedness and fruitfulness, which involve co-operation with the work of God, broaden and deepen our understanding of human development and spiritual growth.

In The Psychology of Christian Character Formation, Joanna Collicutt notes that although “the fruit-bearing tree is a very helpful picture of the spiritual life” it is, “like all metaphors ... not complete in itself.”155 She suggests that multiple images are necessary for a fuller understanding of development in the Christian life. Alongside “the flourishing plant” she draws on another Biblical metaphor, that of “the fit body,”156 to explore truths about the psychological and spiritual growth. The dynamic image of a person running a race, straining forward towards a goal (Phil 3:13-14) balances the evocative but static picture of the fruit-bearing tree. Phillips also draws on “holy mixed metaphors,”157 when she writes of “rootedness” alongside “journeying.”158 Phillips believes, “The melding of the imaginative domains of garden and journey allows for some of the wisdom we see in modern developmental theory, which portrays human psychosocial development as involving growth in autonomy (like the forward movement on the road) coupled with

152 Ibid., 83.
154 Ibid., 96.
156 Ibid., 14.
158 Ibid., 34.
maturing in interdependency (like the ecology of the garden).” Certainly more than one metaphor is needed to illustrate the complexity of development throughout life.

Within Scripture, images of journey proliferate, particularly in the Old Testament. Stories of individuals and groups of people who move with deepening faith from the security of what is known, into the unknown, are illustrative of the myriad possible directions that life may take and the place of faith in responding to the challenges presented by periods of transition and uncertainty. Such stories hold multiple layers of meaning, and in a number of faith traditions they are recalled and recounted regularly. Kevin Ward’s work in the field of sociology of religion suggests that the metaphor of “journey” may have particular resonance today as “a spirituality of seeking” or “quest” has assumed increasing dominance since the 1960s, in New Zealand as in other parts of the world. It is certainly a description of life that people in the church are accustomed to hearing and using. Sixty percent of midlife participants, eighty percent of clergy, and ninety percent of the spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project employed the metaphor of “journey.” One spiritual director stated that “the image of journeying is very significant” for people who start to attend spiritual direction at midlife. Referring to the gospel narrative of Jesus walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) she said, “People come with a story that’s been going on for all their years. And it’s like we just come alongside at the point they come, and whatever the story is where we come in.” Her comments highlight a significant dimension of spiritual development, which is that it does not occur in isolation. The role of community in supporting spiritual formation at midlife is a theme which is central to this project.

Numerous other images and metaphors for spiritual growth and development can be found within Scripture, many drawn from nature. A useful image in considering psychosocial development and development in Christian maturity is that of “seasons” (Eccl 3:1-8). There are some obvious parallels between periods of life and seasons of the year, as Daniel Levinson’s work, The Seasons of a Man’s Life, emphasises. Each season has its necessary place and contributes its special character, each is equally important, and, as Levinson notes, although the pattern of the seasons is stable, change occurs

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159 Ibid., 34-35.
161 Interview with author, Christchurch, 18 November 2015.
within the seasons and between them.\textsuperscript{162} The seasons are beyond our control, but, to some extent, it is possible to prepare for them. Author and educator Parker J. Palmer considers seasons “a wise metaphor for the movement of life.” He writes, “The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all – and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.”\textsuperscript{163} For those grappling with some of the challenges or uncertainties of midlife, reflection on the familiar metaphors of rootedness and growth, of journey, and of seasons, as well as more novel images and analogies, can be helpful.\textsuperscript{164}

In considering adult development in the context of Christianity, it is useful to have some understanding of Faith Development Theory (FDT). In New Zealand, the work of American theologian James Fowler has been extremely influential. Fowler was, for much of his career, Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. His most well-known book, \textit{Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning},\textsuperscript{165} was first published in 1981. Its key concepts continue to be taught in Theology programmes at tertiary level and have been included in the training and formation of many clergy and spiritual directors within this country. Fowler describes six stages in faith development, which he believes can be recognised across a range of faith traditions. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted between 1975 and 1979, the psychosocial and psychological frameworks of Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, and the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, Fowler concluded that stages of faith development are “sequential, invariant, and hierarchical.”\textsuperscript{166} He entitled these stages Intuitive-Projective faith, Mythic-Literal faith, Synthetic-Conventional faith, Individuative-Reflective faith, Conjunctive faith, and Universalizing faith. According to Fowler’s research, people in midlife may be found at almost any point on this spectrum of development, after the first two stages. “Many persons and groups can and do find

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{162} Levinson, \textit{The Seasons of a Man’s Life}, 6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Transitions in life, and in faith, are often likened to other processes that occur during nature. For example, author Sue Monk Kidd describes finding the metaphor of development and growth within a chrysalis particularly helpful during a difficult period of transition in midlife. This image is used throughout her book, \textit{When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life’s Sacred Questions} (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1990).
\end{enumerate}
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equilibrium at Stage 3”167 – Synthetic-Conventional faith – which is conformist and relatively unreflective. Fowler notes that religious institutions often thrive when the majority of their members are contentedly operating at this stage of faith.168 At Stage 4 – Individuative-Reflective faith – individuals become less reliant on external sources of authority and question much of what they have learned and believed. This transition is likely to occur at some point during adulthood. It “represents an upheaval in one’s life at any point and can be protracted in its process for five to seven years or longer.”169 Fowler suggests that Stage 5 – Conjunctive faith – is rarely reached before midlife. Conjunctive faith “accepts as axiomatic that truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp.”170 It is “alive to paradox and contradictions,” inclusive of other faith traditions, “and with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others’ generating identity and meaning.”171

Part of the enduring influence of Fowler’s Stages of Faith may be attributable to the fact that many readers recognise something of their own experience in the theories and narratives that are included within it. In particular, Fowler’s descriptions of transitions between faith stages, which can feel bewildering or distressing, appear to resonate with mature Christians for whom the journey of faith may have included bumpy terrain, unexpected detours, and lost luggage.172 However, certain aspects of Fowler’s faith development theory have been subject to critique in recent decades. One stringent criticism of his theory of stages in faith development is that, despite Fowler’s insistence that “each stage has the potential for wholeness, grace and integrity and for strengths sufficient for either life’s blows or blessings,”173 it is easy to presume that the stages described are hierarchical in quality. As Christchurch-based Baptist pastor and sociologist Alan Jamieson observes, “There is the inherent reality that the later stages are broader and deeper in their faith experience, understanding and expression than

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167 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 164.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 181.
170 Ibid., 186.
171 Ibid., 198.
172 Spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project spoke at some length about faith transitions during midlife, and a number referred to Fowler’s work, quite explicitly, in doing so. See Chapter Seven.
173 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 274.
earlier stages. They may not be better but they seem so.”174 This perception has certain implications within congregations. Jamieson notes, “Because of this apparent hierarchy people at the later stages may see themselves as somehow better or more mature than they used to be and also more mature than others.”175

Secondly, some critics of Fowler’s model consider a structural approach to faith development to be incompatible with the Christian concept of divine grace. His work can be interpreted as suggesting that faith development is a human achievement. Susan Phillips warns against seeing stages of faith as “building blocks that get stacked up one on top of the other.” She believes that seeing spiritual growth as “linear and cumulative” can lead to an “achievement orientation toward faith.”176 Fowler acknowledges that faith development theory “focus[es] resolutely on the human side of the faith relationship”177 but he also emphasises that “faith is a response to action and being that precedes and transcends us and our kind.”178 In his conclusion to Stages of Faith he includes the statement, “The transcendent other with whom we have to do in faith is not confined by the models we build or to the patterns we discern.”179 Having some knowledge that there are predictable patterns of faith development, including periods of stability and periods of change, can certainly be helpful to some individuals in understanding their experience, but faith is a response to God’s invitation and faith journeys are always unique.

A third criticism of Fowler’s Faith Development Theory is that it can seem anachronistic in a postmodern context. David Heywood, a lecturer in Pastoral Theology at Ripon College, Oxford, describes Fowler’s Faith Development Theory as “quintessentially modernist”180 and “a paradigm nearing the end of its useful life.”181 Heywood argues that “the idea of sequential, hierarchical stages of development, is an erroneous description of the rich complexity of personal knowing” and that “the attempt to fit this complex pattern into six or seven stage descriptions may in fact do violence to the manifold

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175 Ibid.
176 Susan S. Phillips, Candlelight, 137.
177 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 302.
178 Ibid., 33.
179 Ibid., 302.
181 Ibid., 281.
variety of the paths by which people arrive at the meaning of their lives.”\textsuperscript{182} Jamieson acknowledges that Fowler’s framework is useful, but he also believes that new models of faith development need to be sought. He suggests that today “many people feel uncomfortable with the idea of moving from one stage of faith to another. Stages sound like boxes; and moving through stages sounds like a logical hierarchy when life and faith are experienced in a more chaotic, organic and less hierarchically structured way.”\textsuperscript{183} Heinz Streib, Professor for Religious Education at the University of Bielefeld, Germany, describes Fowler’s faith development theory as an “indispensable explanatory tool for the religious diversity of modernity and postmodern times,”\textsuperscript{184} but proposes a more fluid model. Streib argues that faith development is better understood as a series of five religious “styles,” which he depicts as an overlapping series of bell-shaped curves. Again, transitions are important. “Earlier religious styles call for attention; they require working through and demand distanceation and integration; earlier orientations need revisiting and reflection. Under healthy conditions, this working through means both distanceation and integration in order to consolidate the present style.”\textsuperscript{185} Others, too, have proposed metaphors of faith development which are more flexible than the concept of stages.\textsuperscript{186}

No matter how different phases of faith are described – as Jamieson puts it, whether one thinks of “rooms, terrains, stages, styles, dimensions, zones, spaces or places of faith”\textsuperscript{187} – many people experience predictable changes in faith during adulthood. Fowler suggests that developmental theories “allow us to speak of the dynamics of change and transformation. They also allow us to focus on equilibrium and continuity.”\textsuperscript{188} As will be evident in later chapters, and particularly in comments made by spiritual directors about midlife clients’ faith journeys, in this respect Fowler is certainly correct.

### Disorientation

Fowler observes, “Development is a process of alternations between times of provisional balance and coming unbalanced, then finding recovered balance in a new

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 293.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 150-153.
\textsuperscript{186} Alan Jamieson, “Off-road Faith,” 3.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Fowler, Stages of Faith, 88.
place.”\textsuperscript{189} This statement recalls Frederic Hudson’s description of development in adult life as being “something like a large slinky, with cycles that go on and on.”\textsuperscript{190} Joanna Collicutt, writing about spiritual development, employs an image that is not dissimilar:

The trajectory of the life of faith has something of the spiral about it. Images of straight roads and ladders do not do it justice. A spiral staircase might be nearer the mark, but it would have to be highly convoluted. Perhaps the image of a three-dimensional labyrinth is the nearest we can get. The spiral motion fits quite well with some influential contemporary secular models of psychological development, which see it as recursive.\textsuperscript{191}

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has described a sequence of orientation-disorientation-reorientation, reflective of the contours of human experience, within the variety of prayers the book of Psalms includes. Brueggemann suggests that the psalms both mirror and provide opportunities to respond to the rhythms of human experience: times of stability, in which “there is no great movement, no tension to resolve”; times of dislocation and loss of equilibrium; and times of reorientation into which enters recognition of “a genuine newness which is wrought by gift.”\textsuperscript{192} Brueggemann’s paradigm of life’s rhythms provides a coherent yet flexible structure within which some elements of midlife experience may be explored in the light of faith.

Experiences of “disorientation,” followed by periods of “reorientation,” are common throughout life. In the literature relating to midlife the experience of disorientation usually receives considerable attention. This is described in a range of ways. As was explained in Chapter One, in writing about disequilibrium at midlife, some authors use the language of “crisis.” Paul David Tripp is one such author. He identifies a cluster of emotions that may be characteristic of a person in the throes of “midlife crisis,” including discouragement (becoming more cynical than expectant), disappointment (regret at not achieving one’s goals or dreams), disinterest (no longer feeling motivated by things that were once stimulating and attractive) and disorientation (“I thought I knew who I was and what I was supposed to be doing, but now I am not so sure”).\textsuperscript{193} “Crisis feelings” of regret, anger, self-doubt, doubt about all relationships and


\textsuperscript{190} Frederic M. Hudson, \textit{The Adult Years}, 120.

\textsuperscript{191} Collicutt, \textit{The Psychology of Christian Character Formation}, 80.


\textsuperscript{193} Paul David Tripp, \textit{Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God} (Wapwallopen: Shepherd Press, 2004), 38-42.
commitments, religious doubt, anxiety, hopelessness, fear, and a number of other feelings, are identified by Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan as characteristics of midlife.\textsuperscript{194} Daniel Levinson observes that midlife experience may include “intense periods of suffering, confusion, rage against others and ourselves, grief over lost opportunities and lost parts of the self.”\textsuperscript{195} According to Joanna Collicutt, some people may simply experience “a chronic low level of dissatisfaction, expressed in semi-conscious awareness that ‘this isn’t really me’ or ‘I am stuck’ or ‘there’s got to be more to my life than this’.”\textsuperscript{196} These emotions may be precipitated by external events – such as relationship breakdowns, serious illness, redundancy, promotion at work beyond one’s capabilities or interest, children leaving home, or bereavement – but a sense of “uneasiness with one’s self and one’s world,”\textsuperscript{197} which cannot be linked to a specific cause, is also characteristic of midlife and can prove unsettling.

Individuals’ experiences of disorientation at midlife vary widely. Some people may find “the very foundations of life falling away” whereas others navigating the transitions of midlife may be aware of little more than listlessness or apathy.\textsuperscript{198} For some the experience of disorientation may be short-lived, but others may experience turbulence and inner conflict for a number of years.\textsuperscript{199} Brueggemann observes, in his analysis of “Psalms of Dislocation,” that the various shapes and nuances of distress are affected by “how fully the subject has accepted and embraced the dislocation or how much there is resistance or denial.”\textsuperscript{200} Psychologist Judd Marmor identifies four common responses to the inner anxieties that may be experienced at midlife, three of which are forms of resistance. “Denial by escape” is the avoidance of serious self-reflection through engagement in compulsive activity, including workaholism or ceaseless socialising. “Denial by overcompensation” is seen in a person’s attempts to recapture feelings of youth by devoting greater attention to his or her bodily appearance, seeking sexual conquests, and so on.\textsuperscript{201} Marmor suggests that a third reaction to the stresses of midlife, “decompensation,” is a movement to lower levels of psychological functioning, such as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Brewi and Brennan, \textit{Mid-Life Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives}, 39.
\item Levinson, \textit{The Seasons of a Man’s Life}, 225.
\item Collicutt, \textit{The Psychology of Christian Character Formation}, 6.
\item Raymond Studzinski, \textit{Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development} (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 57.
\item d’Apice, \textit{Noon to Nightfall}, 44-45.
\item Studzinski, \textit{Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development}, 21.
\item Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” 7.
\item Raymond Studzinski includes interest in the music, sports and possessions advocated by youth culture as another means by which a person may which to prolong his or her own sense of youthfulness. \textit{Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development}, 38.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
depression, apathy, or rage. In contrast to these three forms of resistance, a fourth response to midlife disorientation is possible. “Higher integration” is a movement towards emotional maturation, which leads to an increase in the capacity to serve others and a renewed capacity for productivity and creativity. Marmor notes that these responses to disorientation are not mutually exclusive.\footnote{Judd Marmor, \textit{Psychiatry in Transition, 2nd ed.} (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 71-76.} The desire to return to an old period of orientation, or to what is familiar and comfortable, clinging to former perceptions and beliefs, is an understandable response to inner conflict and confusion, because, as Raymond Studzinski observes, “to accept the diverse tendencies within oneself can be a frightening and overwhelming experience.”\footnote{Studzinski, \textit{Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development}, 20.}

For Christians, a sense of God’s distance or inexplicable absence during times of disequilibrium may compound their anxieties. Janet Ruffing, then Professor of Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at Fordham University in New York (now at Yale Divinity School) notes that during times of spiritual struggle and change prayer “may be one of life’s stressors rather than a stress-reducer.”\footnote{Janet Ruffing, “Personality Sciences,” \textit{The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality}, ed Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 322.} As will be illustrated in later chapters, there are three common responses to experiences of disequilibrium in faith at midlife. If familiar spiritual practices fail to bring any sense of consolation, some individuals may withdraw or distance themselves from their communities of faith or from activities which have formerly been faith-building for them. Others, however, find that support from other Christians and the exercise of familiar spiritual practices can provide much-needed stability during times of inner turmoil. A third response is for people to seek new ways of encountering God or serving others. Some midlife participants, members of the clergy and spiritual directors described these experiences in their interviews. The spiritual directors, in particular, addressed these issues in some detail.

Resistance is a common response to the experience of disorientation in midlife, but even those who wish to embrace change may find themselves feeling “stuck” for a significant period in “an in-between, liminal space.”\footnote{Phillips, \textit{Candlelight}, 124. Feeling “stuck” is, of course, a sensation that may occur at any time of life, but it is a common experience in midlife, as Rebecca Manley Pippert points out in her introduction to Lynne Baab’s \textit{A Renewed Spirituality: Finding Fresh Paths at Midlife} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 8.} This can be stressful. In describing “midlife
impasses,” writers employ a number of metaphors. Susan Phillips describes a place of “wilderness” which holds opportunities for reflection and clarification, but where temptation and discouragement may threaten. Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan appropriate Brian Hall’s metaphor of “No-Man’s Land” – “We are neither here nor there, betwixt and between” – drawing an analogy with Daniel Levinson’s description of times of transition feeling like being “on the boundary.” Presbyterian minister and author of two books on midlife, Lynne Baab, perceives the metaphor of “half time” to be helpful, as it suggests that pausing at midlife can be both necessary and constructive, allowing a person time to evaluate the past and to prepare for the future. This aspect of midlife experience is neatly captured in the title of Marina Benjamin’s recent book, *The Middlepause: On Turning Fifty*. It is evident from these metaphors, and other descriptions of midlife impasses, that experiences of being unable to move forward for a time provide individuals with opportunities to reflect on their lives and the circumstances, influences, and personal choices that have led to the point each has reached. Being forced to stop can enable people in midlife (and, of course, people in other stages of life, also) to gain clarity and perspective on aspects of their lives that may otherwise have remained unexamined. The time of waiting can often be accompanied by a sense of powerlessness. This can foster humility, openness to the wisdom of others, and, frequently, special openness to God. As the 1689 *Book of Common Prayer* acknowledges, a sense of weakness may add strength to faith. The readiness to embrace change, and to engage in what are frequently called “the tasks of midlife,” may emerge from this period of “necessary” stagnation.

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209 Ibid, 86.
212 d’Apice, *Noon to Nightfall*, 146.
213 “The Visitation of the Sick,” in *The Book of Common Prayer*: “Hear us, Almighty and most merciful God and Saviour; extend thy accustomed goodness to this thy servant who is grieved with sickness. Sanctify, we beseech thee, this thy fatherly correction to him; that the sense of his weakness may add strength to his faith.” <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer/the-visitation-of-the-sick.aspx> (7 November 2015).
The tasks of midlife

While it is widely accepted that significant adjustments are a normal part of human development in midlife, the tasks of midlife can be defined and described in a variety of ways. In the mid-twentieth century, educational theorist and expert on aging, Robert J. Havighurst, best known for his conceptualization of human development as accomplishment of a series of age-related cultural tasks, identified the seven core tasks of midlife as “achieving social and civic responsibilities, establishing and maintaining an economic standard of living, assisting teenage children to become responsible adults, developing leisure time pursuits, relating to one’s spouse as a person, accepting the physiological changes of middle age, and adjusting to aging parents.” Encompassing career and relationships, biological and psychological change, and the societal demands of midlife, Havighurst’s developmental tasks continue to reflect the needs and aspirations of many midlife individuals today. Parallels with Havighurst’s theories may be found in the Harvard University longitudinal study of adult development published in 2002 by George Vaillant. Based on interviews with 824 individuals over five decades, and building on Erikson’s theoretical framework, Vaillant concludes that tasks of particular significance in midlife include career consolidation, generativity, and being a “keeper of the meaning” (which involves a sense of social justice and care for those beyond one’s immediate social radius). The tasks identified by both Havighurst and Vaillant “offer opportunities for the middle-aged individual to learn more about life and about the world while making a contribution to others’ well-being.”

The influence of Erikson and Jung may be seen in the similarity of developmental tasks many other social scientists identify as significant. Daniel Levinson argues that there are three major tasks to be worked on during the midlife transition. The first is to review one’s life and reappraise the past, reflecting on values, talents, achievements and desires. Second, a person must “modify the existing life structure,” addressing the negative elements of the present structure and making choices that may have a significant impact on lifestyle or relationships, or may involve less visible shifts in personal values. The third task is “to deal with the polarities that are sources of deep

216 Vaillant, Aging Well, 141-158.
division” within each person. Here, Levinson acknowledges Erikson’s emphasis on the tension between generativity and stagnation in midlife, but devotes closer attention to Jung’s theory of individuation.218 According to Jung, a significant psychological change that occurs at midlife is an increased need for balance, such as greater balance in one’s gender identity. Levinson focuses on the integration of four incongruent parts of the self: being young versus being old, being destructive versus being constructive, being masculine versus being feminine, and being attached to others versus being separate from them. He suggests that grappling with these issues at midlife ultimately enables a person to find “a better balance between the needs of the self and the needs of society.” Becoming less tyrannized by ambitions, dependencies and passions, a person “can be involved with other individuals and perform social roles in a more responsible way than ever before.”219 Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan has challenged certain aspects of Levinson’s explanations of development, especially views of attachment and separation, which are based on men’s experiences. Gilligan suggests that relationships, and the importance of interdependence and care in those relationships, are of deep and ongoing significance in women’s sense of identity. She argues that, for women, “affiliation is valued as highly as, or more highly than, self-enhancement.”220 Although it has been thirty-five years since Gilligan’s work was published, and women’s roles have changed significantly in Western cultures during that period, gender differences in development are still of interest to psychologists today. Irrespective of gender, though, growth at midlife seems to be linked to the successful accomplishment of certain developmental tasks.

In Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, Raymond Studzinski describes ten tasks of midlife transition. Like Levinson, Studzinski considers that “assessing the limits of achievement,” “re-evaluating the life structure” and “balancing polarities” are necessary aspects of development in midlife, but “facing loss, mourning and death,” “cultivating care” (which may be considered synonymous with “generativity”), “gaining wisdom” and “searching for the Other” are also included in his list of “adjustments and adaptations” that must be made at midlife.221 Studzinski draws explicit links between the tasks of psychic integration and spiritual growth. Given the overarching theme of his work, it is

218 Levinson, The Seasons of a Man’s Life, 191-197.
221 Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, 40-47.
not surprising that Studzinski asserts that the support of others – be they spiritual directors, mentors or friends – can play an extremely important part in facilitating an individual's growth as they work through the complexities of midlife, a view which is shared by Lynne Baab, as the title of her book, *Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems*, suggests. In addition to naming a number of the developmental tasks explored by Levinson and Studzinski, Baab identifies as “spiritual issues” some further challenges to be grappled with during midlife, including “letting go of the illusion of control,” “the call to meaningful service” and “facing old wounds and receiving healing.”

As Baab points out, people who are involved in faith communities are likely to look to their faith for answers when such issues arise, although her interviews conducted with members of North American congregations in the late 1990s revealed that a considerable number of committed churchgoers felt unsupported, or even “abandoned and neglected,” as they sought to address midlife concerns. Comments made by midlife participants in the present project about various “tasks of midlife” – which they spoke of as challenges, opportunities, changes, and inner shifts – are presented in Chapter Four.

**Review and reappraisal**

At midlife, many people find themselves looking back and reflecting on the first half of life, while simultaneously looking forward to what might lie ahead. The realisation that the time remaining within which to accomplish goals is decreasing can strike home with new force, although Lachman notes that, when considering the life-span, most people in midlife assume that “there is still a substantial, but not an infinite, amount of time left.”

By midlife many people have had personal experience of “wake-up calls” such as significant illness, serious accidents, or bereavement, any of which can lead to reassessment of priorities or trigger a new appreciation for life. Whether the awareness that there is diminishing time left to achieve goals comes slowly or suddenly, it is likely that part of midlife experience will include the realization that, as Jungian

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223 Ibid., xiii.
224 Ibid., 22.
225 Lachman writes, “Presumably, there is still just as much time left as has gone by. Of course with life one doesn’t know the endpoint, so the timing of the middle is an estimate. Whether one thinks midlife signifies that life is half over or half is still remaining could lead to different outcomes, as optimism research suggests.” “Development in Midlife,” 310.
226 Ibid.
psychologist Kathleen Brehony puts it, “if we are ever going to become who we are in the deepest recesses of our being we have got to begin now.” Rosemarie Carfagna, author of *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality*, agrees:

Midlife puts what is essential at the forefront of our consciousness, whether or not we are inclined to deal with it. The quality of our relationships, the true value of our accomplishments, our faults and our regrets – all of these matters immediately concern us. We want to resolve them while there is still time.

According to Harvey L. Sterns and Margaret Hellie Huyck, one of the most common themes in literature relating to midlife is “that midlife spurs the reassessment of one’s whole life.” Some people, whether due to temperament or circumstances, are more reflective than others, but a sense of the importance of reviewing and reappraising the past, thinking about one’s values, talents and the limits of one’s achievements, and contemplating the worth and attainability of earlier dreams, appears to be a characteristic of midlife experience – “at least in contemporary Western culture.”

It is not easy to assess how effectively one has lived out one’s values or fulfilled the goals one had earlier in life, to reflect on whether earlier aspirations and ideals were realistic, or to let go of hopes and dreams which are now unattainable or no longer seem desirable. Unrequited hope can be “a big deal” in midlife, as one spiritual director explained to me:

> When you are younger you are still kind of moving with the hopes; you have this vision of what your life will look like. When you are older it’s a matter of acceptance of what your life is and has been. But in that middle period there’s that mingling of hope and also dread that hopes won’t be realized.

It can take courage to face what Mary d’Apice describes as the “discrepancy between what we had hoped to be at this stage of life and what we have become,” and to modify or let go of dreams that have not yet been fulfilled or have not worked out in the way that we may have expected. This can be particularly challenging if it is necessary for

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228 Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 93.
229 Sterns and Huyck, “The Role of Work in Midlife,” 466.
231 Interview with author, San Francisco, 19 June 2015.
relinquishment of dreams to occur in more than one domain simultaneously. Key areas that often demand significant adjustments for people in their forties and fifties are career, health and physical well-being, and relationships.

Reflection upon the meaning and value of work, and its place among other priorities in life, plays a significant part in many people’s midlife experience. In midlife, it is not uncommon for people to question the value of their work, to look back at what they have achieved and to reflect upon whether what they have done, or are currently doing, is worthwhile. Whether a person is working full-time or part-time, is paid or unpaid, uncertainty about the worth of one’s work, especially if one has been doing it for some time, can be unsettling. This issue can be of particular significance for men in midlife, who, when finding themselves questioning the value of work that had formerly engaged them, or experiencing anxiety about their career for a number of other reasons, are, as one priest told me, “somewhat relieved” to find that this experience is shared by others. He said, “I am able to say to them, ‘The last ten men who have come to see me have all said the same thing.’ Men tend to be isolated.”¹²³ One male interviewee, who made a significant career shift in his mid-forties, described his experience as follows:

You think, “Gosh, I should have achieved more by now.”... My own experience of midlife has to some extent been around that – looking back over the years of tertiary study, of service in a diverse range of spheres and thinking, “What does it all mean, really? What does it count for? And do I keep doing it?”¹²⁴

While some people in midlife are concerned about these things, others may be reaching the peak of their careers and enjoying a period of financial stability and personal fulfilment. In their forties and fifties, many people find that they are able to use existing skills and talents in new ways, or develop gifts which had formerly been undetected or undervalued by stepping into new roles within or beyond the organisations they work for. Opportunities to exercise leadership and to pass on values and knowledge gained through experience in the workplace can also prove to be extremely energising for people in midlife. At this stage of life, too, it is common for women whose primary work has been in the home return to paid employment, or increase their hours of work outside the home, as the demands of childcare decrease. For them, the opportunity to mix with colleagues and to engage in new activities, drawing on skills and expertise they have gained in a wide range of situations, can be both stimulating and satisfying. As will

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¹²³ Interview with author, Christchurch, 11 November 2015.
¹²⁴ Interview with author, Christchurch, 30 November 2015.
be seen in later chapters, all of these themes emerged in interviews with participants in this project.

Physical limitations may start to encroach upon people's awareness in their forties and fifties, and, in popular literature relating to midlife this theme often receives considerable attention. In midlife the belief that the body will always behave in predictable, well-regulated and desirable ways is likely to be shaken. Many adults (particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds) find that health concerns increase in middle age.²³⁵ It is demonstrable that the effort devoted to health increases with age as people recognise and seek to address risk factors associated with chronic illnesses, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and excess weight.²³⁶ In midlife, physical signs of aging are also apparent in ways that are not directly linked to health; adjustment to these is more challenging for some people than for others. Negative attitudes towards the loss of youthful good looks are culturally reinforced and may perhaps be less pronounced in New Zealand than in some other countries,²³⁷ but the global beauty industry thrives because many middle-aged people are willing to exert considerable effort and expense to maintain a degree of physical attractiveness which may have been central to their identity in earlier adulthood.²³⁸ 

Women in midlife, of course, experience a number of physiological changes as they approach and go through menopause. Although, according to Lachman, “there is no evidence for a universal experience of distress associated with menopause” and “symptoms such as depression, irritability, weight gain, insomnia, and memory loss do not seem to be directly related to menopause,”²³⁹ for some women the “change of life” involves significant physical and emotional challenges. Feeling isolated or ill-informed can intensify the difficulties individuals experience as they grapple with these problems, but what may formerly have been considered a taboo subject (and is still considered as

²³⁶ Lachman, “Development in Midlife,” 324.
²³⁷ As was explained in Chapter One, 12, there is evidence that cultures that place a high value on their elderly may respond to signs of aging differently from those in some Western countries. New Zealand participants in this project commented on physical changes affecting their work and fitness but cosmetic signs of aging were rarely mentioned.
²³⁹ Lachman, “Development in Midlife,” 325.
such in some countries)\textsuperscript{240} receives thoughtful attention in the New Zealand media\textsuperscript{241} and is the subject of open discussion among women of a certain age. Even so, the loss of fertility at menopause marks the end of the possibility of parenthood, which may have remained a cherished dream for some women, regardless of marital status.

Modification of dreams is also evident within relationships at midlife, as people reflect upon the quality of their relationships, the things that have shaped those relationships, and their hopes and desires as they look to the future. Singleness in midlife is a state that is embraced by some people, but for other single people approaching middle age the increasing likelihood that they may not marry or have children can be a source of grief. A significant gender imbalance affects New Zealanders in midlife – there are currently over 50,000 more single women than men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine – and “the man drought” touches women within the church as well as those outside it.\textsuperscript{242} In fact, as the church is an establishment that upholds the sanctity of marriage and frequently honours the family as a “God-ordained institution,”\textsuperscript{243} single Christians can face particular challenges. One spiritual director who has supported a number of unmarried directees observed, “People who are not embedded in families have a very hard time.”\textsuperscript{244} People who are married or in long-term relationships also experience grief if their relationships fall short of short of the ideals or expectations they had upon entering them. According to Statistics New Zealand, approximately one third of marriages in New Zealand end in divorce. While this is not exclusively a midlife issue, marriages can be vulnerable during this stage of life. Excluding civil unions, the median


\textsuperscript{241} For example, a seven-part series exploring the symptoms, treatment and the science of menopause, including some of the controversy around hormone replacement therapy and using natural remedies, was aired on New Zealand’s public radio station, Radio New Zealand, during the latter half of 2015. “The Hormone Rollercoaster,” Radio New Zealand, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/thiswayup/collections/the-hormone-rollercoaster> (2 January 2016).


age at divorce in 2014 was 46.8 years for men and 44.2 years for women.\textsuperscript{245} Relationships between parents and children can be a further source of anxiety or stress for adults in midlife, as adolescents or young adults develop and exercise greater independence, and as elderly parents or in-laws become more dependent. It is not unusual for people in midlife to question the efficacy of their parenting, or to feel inadequate in offering their aging parents the help they feel is needed or deserved.\textsuperscript{246} The poignancy of role-reversals can be felt keenly at this stage of life.

Dealing with regrets, accepting responsibility for actions and choices which have had an impact on others as well as oneself, and acknowledging the influence that others’ actions have had upon one’s life are also important aspects of reorientation at midlife. In \textit{The Psychology of Christian Character Formation}, Joanna Collicutt dedicates a chapter to these issues. Firmly placing human forgiveness within the framework of God’s reconciling, healing and transformative work, she acknowledges that dealing with the harm caused to us by others can be very difficult, because of the risks, costs, and sheer complexity of the task. One of the costs of choosing to let go of long-held grievances, which pertains to midlife experience, is that these may have become “part of my story and my identity.”\textsuperscript{247} The process of dealing with hurts experienced in the first half of life, and opening oneself to the healing grace of God, therefore often requires “the help of friends and advisors inside and outside the church.”\textsuperscript{248} Some churches hold services at which prayer for healing is offered. Other forms of prayer ministry, sometimes in conjunction with individual counselling, are also offered in some churches. The support of other people may be also needed as individuals accept guilt and responsibility for harm they have caused others. At its best, the church endeavours to preach and model the good news of God’s merciful forgiveness; those who struggle to accept that they are forgiven may experience the love of God through the patient care of humble Christians whose lives are marked by grace. Within mainstream denominations, church services often include words of assurance of forgiveness. In addition, formal services of


\textsuperscript{246} Myers and Harper, “Midlife Concerns and Caregiving Experiences,” 123-142.


\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 208.
reconciliation occasionally occur in some denominations\textsuperscript{249} and the sacrament of reconciliation is offered on a regular basis in Catholic churches. Churchgoers and clergy who were interviewed for this project identified some of these ministries as being of particular value to Christians in midlife.

**Perspective, wisdom and freedom**

The process of review and reappraisal at midlife can help people to gain fresh perspective on their experiences, both past and present. According to David Karp, Professor of Sociology at Boston College, once they reach their fifties individuals start to speak of seeing their lives in a “more holistic way.”\textsuperscript{250} In a study conducted in 1988, Karp’s seventy-two research subjects, professional men and women aged between fifty and sixty, felt that they had become much less caught up in the details of everyday life, and were more concerned with the “larger picture.” One man said, “I have to put it together in an integrated, synthesized way. And I don’t feel that I have to change the world any more. I feel like I have to see what the pieces mean.”\textsuperscript{251} Others in Karp’s study reported being “less irritated by things that would have disturbed them earlier,” “more laid back about life,” and spending “less time worrying about things.”\textsuperscript{252} Karp’s research was conducted several decades ago, but middle-aged participants in the present project described very similar changes in perspective. These comments highlight two of the blessings that may be part of midlife experience – increased wisdom and freedom.

Psychologists Carolyn Aldwin and Michael Levenson describe the place of stress, uncertainty, change and loss in the abandonment of unrealistic or even damaging assumptions about the world, and the “fundamental self-reflection” which may arise, as “the basis of the development of wisdom.”\textsuperscript{253} Psychologists define and measure wisdom in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{254} J. E. Birren and L. M. Fisher describe wisdom as the integration of cognitive development (of which “perspicacity” based on “seeing through illusions” is

\textsuperscript{249} “Reconciliation of a Penitent” is a pastoral liturgy included within the prayer book of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, 750-753.


\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{254} Oliver Robinson summarises a number of models of wisdom, including the “Berlin wisdom paradigm,” Sternberg’s “Balance theory of wisdom,” and Ardelt’s “Three dimensional wisdom scale,” in *Development Through Adulthood*, 214-228.
one component], emotional balance “based on self-knowledge,” and motivation.\textsuperscript{255} Others believe wisdom also includes “a moral and ethical aspect” which may incorporate “integrity, compassion and generosity.”\textsuperscript{256} Monika Ardelt, from the University of Florida, suggests that wisdom includes “affective wisdom” based on compassion for the plight of others, as well as “cognitive wisdom” (understanding, including the ability to comprehend significance and meaning) and “reflective wisdom” (which includes the ability to look at situations from many different perspectives, as well as diminished self-centredness).\textsuperscript{257} Finding appropriate methods to measure wisdom is a challenge for researchers, but, as this representative sample of definitions suggests, it seems reasonable to assume that there is a link between age, life-experience and wisdom. Biblically, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov 9:10). The benefit of life experience, including experiences of loss, can be that, by midlife, knowledge of one’s own limitations fosters both a more compassionate response to other people and greater reliance on God.

Myers and Harper observe, “As children reach adulthood and the demands of parenting diminish, persons in late midlife may experience a greater sense of freedom relative to their time, and goals once delayed as secondary to parenting and careers may now acquire new meaning.”\textsuperscript{258} Some people may also have greater financial security than they had earlier in life. More choices may equate to a sense of increased freedom. But the freedom that some people describe finding in midlife is only partially attributable to external factors. When people in midlife describe feeling less concerned about others’ expectations, less fearful of the unknown, and more accepting of their own and others’ weaknesses, they are identifying significant shifts in their beliefs and values and in their relationships with others. Some are also conscious of the connection between these shifts and their faith in God. Within a review of Barbara Bradley Hagerty’s book, \textit{Life Reimagined: The Science and Opportunity of Midlife}, Ingrid Barratt shares something of her own experience:

\begin{quote}
If I had a midlife crisis, this was probably it: the realization that my place in the world would always be pretty average. But as I walked through this
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{256} Aldwin and Levenson, “Stress, Coping and Health at Midlife,” 208.
\textsuperscript{258} Myers and Harper, “Midlife Concerns and Caregiving Experiences,” 126.
change of perspective, it became a blessing. Jesus would love me and walk with me through my normal, average life. I didn’t need to prove myself to God or anyone. All I needed to do was be faithful with the responsibilities that God put in front of me. No more and no less. With this knowledge comes a great freedom – from needing to prove myself, from the shackles of expectation. And, in fact, I realised there is no such thing as an average life. It turns out that the responsibilities God has put in front of me are quite enough.\textsuperscript{259}

Barratt identifies several positive aspects of review and reorientation at midlife, in the light of Christian faith. Awareness of one’s own gifts and limitations, a decreasing desire to prove oneself to others, a sense of purpose in fulfilling ordinary responsibilities, and acceptance of life as it is, are some of the rich gifts that bring greater freedom in this life stage. Belief in God’s “steadfast love” (Lam 3:22) and presence in all circumstances, learned from experience, can bring an additional measure of contentment (Phil 4:11-12). A significant number of interviewees, from each of the three participant groups in this project, spoke about these topics.

**Formation within the church**

It is evident that many of the issues that arise at midlife, and the “internal chaos”\textsuperscript{260} that some middle-aged people experience, are factors that can contribute to personal development and spiritual growth. What has received less emphasis in the discussion of development that has occurred within this chapter is that, as many writers acknowledge, development does not occur in isolation. Drawing on a range of Biblical examples and analogies, Joanna Collicutt argues, “Formation is corporate.” She notes, though, “We live in a highly individualist society. ... It is common to hear people talking of ‘my’ or ‘his’ formation, but references to ‘our’ or ‘their’ are rarely heard.”\textsuperscript{261} James Nelson, Professor of Psychology at Valparaiso University, Indiana, observes that religion can play an important role in helping people to negotiate significant turning points at midlife, partly because the support of a religious community can be so constructive:

> The support of a religious faith and a community may help us to mourn our losses, seek transformation and move on, as we prepare for the second half of our journey. This transformation could include a shift in time perspective, taking the “long view” on life, or becoming more involved in the present

\textsuperscript{259} Ingrid Barratt, “Taking the Crisis out of Midlife,” War Cry Magazine Issue 6646, 9 July 2016, 6.

\textsuperscript{260} Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, 37.

\textsuperscript{261} Collicutt, The Psychology of Christian Character Formation, 8-9.
moment. ... It could also lead to a reinterpretation of some life events and changes in our images of self and God.\textsuperscript{262}

Janet Ruffing, writing about “narrative meaning making,” argues that a person’s “spiritual identity” is “inherently relational.” It is “co-authored, co-constructed by theists in their relationship with God.” Ruffing suggests, moreover, that we create meaning, not only in the stories we tell ourselves or the stories we tell God in prayer, or even by listening to God who enables us to grow beyond “our self-enclosed ego narrative,” but “in relationship to others with whom we share our spiritual journeys and whose lives endow ours with the meaningfulness that results from living intimately with others, contributing to their lives and in serving others in large and small ways.”\textsuperscript{263} Fowler considers “the formation of persons” to be a core part of the church’s role.\textsuperscript{264} Part of the church’s role is also to encourage individuals to grasp the “communal implications of growing closer to God.”\textsuperscript{265}

Before considering participants’ responses to the question of how effectively the church within New Zealand is supporting people who are navigating the challenges and transitions of midlife, engaging in the “tasks of midlife,” seeking to grow in faith and understanding of God, and developing in desire and capacity to serve others within and beyond the church, it is worth noting three further points about the place of community in midlife development. Each of these has implications for the church and for those within the church who hope to provide meaningful care to Christians in midlife.

First, no matter how much agreement may be reached on the significance of specific midlife “tasks,” in practice every person deals with particular and unique issues, at different times. Psychologists Ursula Staudinger and Susan Bluck emphasise the importance of taking a “contextualist view” in considering midlife development. Individuals enter midlife with different capacities and backgrounds, and “while stage theories that describe how people normatively progress through adulthood have merit, the individual life circumstances of each adult also influence development, resulting in individual trajectories through midlife.”\textsuperscript{266} A number of factors are identified by Staudinger and Bluck as significant in influencing a person’s capacity for achieving

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{264}James W. Fowler, \textit{Faith Development and Pastoral Care}, 20.
\bibitem{265}Sue Pickering makes this comment about spiritual direction, which is a ministry within the church. \textit{Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction} (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), 4.
\bibitem{266}Staudinger and Bluck, “A View of Midlife Development from Life-Span Theory,” 15.
\end{thebibliography}
generativity, including health, education, the person’s immediate environment (such as workplace or home), the interrelation of different environments within which a person operates, and cultural values. Accepting the diversity and complexity of people’s situations and experiences in midlife – as in every part of life – is essential if a non-judgemental and supportive stance is to be taken in offering pastoral care and meaningful spiritual guidance. Lists of developmental tasks in midlife may also create the erroneous impression that development invariably occurs in an orderly or sequential fashion. More often than not, multiple issues arise simultaneously, overlap, recur, and are not necessarily clearly resolved. As Studzinski observes, “The transformational process is never finished.”

Second, some Christians may consider that taking time for reflection and reappraisal at midlife is somewhat self-indulgent. While it is true that, as Joanna Collicutt points out, “an excessively self-conscious attitude to formation can be one of the things that gets in the way of God,” it is clear that the diverse questions and issues that arise for many people in midlife can be interpreted as invitations not only to personal development but also to growth in faith. Self-knowledge and spiritual development are closely linked, as many Christian writers acknowledge. Thomas à Kempis declared that, “A humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning.” Collicutt agrees. She writes, “Self-awareness is a key part of Christian character formation; Jesus’ charge of hypocrisy directed at the religious leaders of his day is essentially an accusation of poor self-awareness – a lack of insight into their own behaviour and motives.” For most Christians, deepening self-knowledge brings increased consciousness of personal limitations and more genuine appreciation of the grace of God’s loving response to human frailty and need. Honest, prayerful self-reflection leads not to self-absorption but to gratitude, compassion, and a more sincere desire to serve God and other people. As has already been noted, more effective engagement with the needs of others is frequently an outcome of the successful accomplishment of various midlife tasks.

267 Studzinski, Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development, 49.
268 Fowler, Stages of Faith, xiii.
271 Collicutt, The Psychology of Christian Character Formation, 45.
Churchgoers in midlife may benefit from hearing these things articulated in Christian circles.

Finally, the process of formation is usually slow and demands perseverance (2 Pet 1:3-8). This point needs to be emphasised in Western cultures that frequently fail to acknowledge the importance of inner work but insist on “defining goals and moving swiftly towards them,” as Kathleen Brehony observes.\(^{272}\) For a middle-aged person reflecting on significant questions, re-evaluating values, or searching for meaning and integration, the sense that some sort of resolution should be reached rapidly is unhelpful, and may in fact encourage the responses of resistance described earlier. The Biblical images of journey, of rootedness and fruitfulness, and of the seasons, remind those grappling with midlife challenges, and those within the church who have the opportunity to support them, to exercise patience. In the spiritual life, there is a goal – to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29) – but the journey itself is to be savoured.

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\(^{272}\) Brehony, *Awakening at Midlife*, 59. Brehony’s reference here is to the North American context, but I believe it is also applicable to New Zealand culture.
Chapter Three: Research Methods

This chapter explains decisions made regarding research design and describes the methods used to obtain data relating to the needs and experiences of churchgoers in midlife.

Rationale

As has already been stated, it is the purpose of this project to explore the experiences and needs of Christians in midlife, to investigate how well these needs are being addressed within the church, and to suggest a range of possible responses to the issues raised. Identifying needs, beyond those that are evident on a surface level, demands listening closely to people’s accounts of their experiences. A questionnaire or survey might elicit some information, but deeper understanding of the issues that affect people requires that they can freely share their stories. Given the nature of this topic, which explores attitudes and beliefs as well as actions and events, it is essential that the chosen research method also allows participants space to reflect on their experiences and explain what they have drawn from them. The underlying assumption of qualitative research is that "there are different possible and legitimate understandings"\(^{273}\) of the subject being explored and "the qualitative interview provides a method of gaining in-depth information about people’s knowledge, beliefs and interpretation of the world."\(^{274}\)

In addition, qualitative interviews allow opportunities to ensure that the participants fully understand what is being asked of them, and interviewers can ask specific questions pertaining to the experiences that individuals recount. For these reasons, qualitative interviews were chosen as the most effective means of gathering useful data for this project.

Qualitative interviews range from standardized open-ended interviews (sometimes conducted by multiple interviewers) to unstructured narrative interviews. While it is common to draw a distinction between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews, as Svend Brinkman observes, this distinction "should be thought of as a


\(^{274}\) Ibid., 51.
continuum ranging from relatively structured to relatively unstructured formats.” The most widespread form of interviews used within the social sciences is the semi-structured interview, which is based on a small number of open-ended questions. This format enables participants to talk about key areas of interest to the interviewer whilst allowing them scope to elaborate on aspects which they themselves consider to be of interest and importance. Brinkman notes, “Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee.” The flexibility of this research strategy makes it an appropriate choice in exploring the experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values of Christians in midlife, and the perspectives of clergy and spiritual directors.

Robert Miller and John Brewer state, “Social research is a dynamic process that often involves an intrusion into people’s lives and therefore largely depends on the establishment of a successful relationship between the researcher and respondent. ... Central to this relationship is ethical responsibility.” Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of Otago Ethics Committee in April 2015. A copy of the consent form that each participant signed prior to the start of each interview is included in Appendix Two.

**Participants**

Data was gathered through qualitative semi-structured interviews with forty participants from three categories: churchgoers in midlife, clergy, and spiritual directors. Payne and Payne note that qualitative research methods utilise “non-representative, small samples of people, rather than working from large representative samples to identify the broad sweep of national patterns.” As “the who of ‘who are picked’ inevitably plays into the what of ‘what is discovered’,” it is important to describe in some detail how participants were selected and recruited, and why participants from these groups were chosen.

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276 Ibid., 286.
279 Ibid., 210.
**Participant groups included in this project**

1. Twenty churchgoers between the ages of forty and sixty, drawn from Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches within New Zealand

2. Ten ordained clergy from Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches within New Zealand

3. Ten qualified spiritual directors currently working with Christian clients in midlife

**Recruitment methods**

A mixture of methods was used to recruit participants. Approximately half of the midlife participants who were interviewed were known by me (some slightly and some well) and were invited to participate because they contributed to the diversity of age, gender, denominational affiliation, marital status, familial stage, and ethnicity that was sought. In addition, I was acquainted with some members of the clergy and several spiritual directors. Spiritual directors and two academic supervisors suggested further interviewees, for each of the three participant categories, who fitted the demographic requirements of the research. Six of the ministers who were interviewed nominated an individual from within their parishes who might also be willing to participate, two suggested other clergy, and two midlife interviewees (spontaneously) mentioned people whose perspectives they considered could be of value to the project. “Snowball sampling” of this nature is a recognised technique for finding research subjects, especially when members of a target population are sought.280 Charts summarising demographic information relating to participants are included at the start of Chapters Four, Six and Seven.

Each potential interviewee was emailed with an invitation to participate in the project. This initial email included an attached “Information for Participants” statement, which provided a succinct explanation of the purpose of the research and what would be required of those who chose to be involved. See Appendix One. The acceptance rate was high; most people who were approached evinced interest in the project and were willing to give up time to be involved in it. While this may partly be explained by the fact that some interviewees were acquaintances of the interviewer, or were chosen on the basis of others’ recommendations, a number of participants stated that the subject itself intrigued them and seemed important to them. Only one person in midlife who was

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approached did not wish to participate in the project. A number of spiritual directors declined to be interviewed. Four of the spiritual directors stated that they did not fit the demographic requirements of the research; two currently had no directees in midlife, and two others felt they did not have appropriate qualifications or sufficient experience. One further spiritual director also declined, without stating a reason. By mutual agreement I chose not to interview a man in midlife who was a paid staff member at his church as I had already interviewed three others who held similar roles. Three other people who were invited to participate in the project did not respond to email requests in time to be included.

Participants were recruited from within Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin, partly in order that anonymity for participants could be preserved, partly so that any significant regional differences could be ascertained, and partly because the priority placed on conducting face-to-face interviews dictated that a limited number of accessible locations be chosen. Regard for the anonymity of the subjects means that the cities individuals came from are not identified in the demographic tables which summarise details about interviewees. One point that should be noted is that all of the interviewees from Christchurch had been affected by a series of major earthquakes in the Canterbury region, the first of which occurred on September 4th 2010. Dealing with long-term stress has become part of the “new normal” for all people in Christchurch,281 but the impact of the earthquakes on middle-aged Christchurch residents has been particularly significant because many of the people in this age group bear responsibility for vulnerable family members, both younger and older than themselves.282 Comments about the influence of the earthquakes upon research results are included in Chapter Eight.

281 According to the April 2014 results from the Canterbury Wellbeing Index, developed by CERA, “The majority (76%) of greater Christchurch residents have experienced stress at least sometimes in the past 12 months that has had a negative effect on them. Just over one in five (22%) indicate they have experienced stress always or most of the time during this period. This result has been very consistent since September 2012.” CERA Wellbeing Survey April 2014 Report, <http://cera.govt.nz/sites/default/files/common/cera-wellbeing-survey-april-2014-report.pdf> (17 August 2015), 34.

282 Marc Greenhill, “Quake Stress Creates the ‘New Vulnerable’,” The Christchurch Press, 19 March 2014. One on-line reader noted that the pressures facing those in Christchurch are multiplied for those in midlife because of the multiple responsibilities often borne by them: “Often people in this age group are also dealing with being advocates/go-betweens for elderly parents as well. Trying to explain to your frail parent why her house can not be fixed and that she must go into care, moving house for your father, dealing with their paperwork and bureaucracy on top of your own woes - I have seen friends and colleagues break down over this.” <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/9842518/Quake-stress-creates-the-new-vulnerable> (21 January, 2015). Interviews with participants revealed that such stories could be told many times over.
Midlife participants

Ascertaining the needs of churchgoers in midlife obviously demanded that the voice of those in midlife needed to be heard. The participation of twenty adults in midlife was required in order to meet a number of criteria. Subjects in the midlife category ranged from the ages of forty to sixty and priority was placed on covering that full age range and on including approximately equal numbers of men and women within the sample. Another key priority was to ensure that there was a roughly even spread of interviewees from Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches. As experiences within the midlife years are extremely diverse, every endeavour was also made to include midlife participants who represented various stages and types of familial life; participants included those who were single (including one person who had made religious vows), married, divorced, widowed, had children living at home, children who had left home, and people without children. Some attempt was also made to include participants of different ethnicities.

Within the category of midlife churchgoers, diversity of church experience and theological perspective was sought. Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches encompass a range of theology and practice. Midlife churchgoers who were interviewed included those who described themselves or their faith communities as liberal, evangelical, contemporary, charismatic, and contemplative. Some individuals who were interviewed felt most comfortable worshipping in very traditional liturgical contexts, whereas others were accustomed to relatively informal services, some of which occurred in environments other than church buildings. Some participants worshipped in more than one context, for a range of reasons. A number of interviewees attended more than one type of service within their own parish, while others occasionally or regularly attended more than one church. The parishes that participants came from also varied greatly in size; Sunday attendances ranged from around thirty to over a thousand.

Consideration was given to the possible inclusion of more than three denominations, but given the diversity that can be found within the denominations selected, and the limited number of participants who could be interviewed, this possibility was rejected. The probability that outcomes from the research were more likely to be useful to particular churches or parishes if the findings were not too diffuse was another factor in restricting the participants in the midlife category to those attending Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican churches. These three “mainstream” or “mainline” churches share a great deal
in common as well as having obvious differences in theology and ecclesiology. I considered it likely that comparisons between the experiences of midlife churchgoers in these contexts would throw up data which was of interest and relevance to all three.

**Clergy**

Ordained clergy, whose vocation invites constant reflection on the needs of those within their parishes, were considered likely to have useful insights and expertise drawn from their work as well as from personal experience. I anticipated that there would be greater similarities of perspective among the clergy than among those in the midlife category, and that interviews with ten clergy would therefore be sufficient to provide an interesting and useful picture of ways parishes are responding to the needs of those in midlife. Age was not a factor that was considered in the selection of clergy, but it turned out that all but one of the ordained clergy who were interviewed was between the ages of fifty-two and fifty-eight. The other minister interviewed was sixty-two. Clergy were invited to reflect on their own experience of midlife as well as speaking about their perceptions of the needs of midlife parishioners.

Clergy were selected from a range of church sizes and types. The four ministers from Presbyterian churches came from two parishes worshipping in traditional church buildings and two currently worshipping in less conventional venues. The Anglican clergy came from four parishes of varying sizes, each of which offered multiple church services, including weekday services. Notable diversity of liturgy and worship styles was offered within and across their parishes. Both Catholic priests who were interviewed were responsible for large parishes with associated schools. A third Catholic priest was interviewed in his capacity as a spiritual director; he was also invited to reflect on matters relating to the experience of midlife churchgoers within the context of parish life.283

**Spiritual directors**

In the context of this project, spiritual directors were considered to be “key informants,” those whose “social positions in a research setting give them specialist knowledge about other people, processes or happenings that is more extensive, detailed or privileged

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283 In addition, I interviewed two further members of the clergy who fell outside the demographic parameters I had set for this project, one being from a different denomination, and one who was not working in a parish role. Although their comments are not quoted in the data chapters that follow, their insights have certainly informed my understanding.
than ordinary people, and who are therefore particularly valuable sources of information to a researcher.” 284 Spiritual directors work one-to-one with directees, often over extended periods of time, and directees often include those who are in midlife. It seemed probable to me that experienced spiritual directors would have considerable understanding of the issues that concern Christians in midlife, as well as insights into the kinds of support or spiritual practices that are found to be helpful by people within that age range. I considered it likely that there would be a degree of similarity of perspective among spiritual directors which would mean that a sample size of ten would be sufficient to provide a representative range of insights and observations about issues affecting Christians in midlife.

Spiritual directors who were representative of different strands in spiritual direction training in New Zealand over the past few years were invited to participate in this project. In New Zealand, spiritual direction training is currently offered through an ecumenical programme provided by Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), and through programmes grounded in Ignatian spirituality. A recently-introduced course, *Te Wairua Mahi*: Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition has replaced the Arrupé Programme, an Ignatian formation programme offered through Australia. In the recent past spiritual direction training has also been offered in New Zealand through the “Spirituality, Energy, Encounter, Direction” programme (SEED), which was a precursor to the Arrupé Programme, and some of the directors who were interviewed had received training through the SEED programme. Several of the spiritual directors who were interviewed had also trained in spiritual direction through courses offered in a range of locations overseas, often in addition to engaging in training within New Zealand. I hoped that selecting spiritual directors whose training had occurred in different contexts and traditions would add to the breadth of data gathered.

The choice of spiritual directors was not limited to those from Presbyterian, Catholic or Anglican churches (the denominations chosen for the other two categories) for two reasons. First, those advertising themselves as directors sometimes indicate the type of training, qualifications, or experience they have had in spiritual direction, and their interests or emphases in the services they offer, but explicit reference to denomination is rare. Spiritual directors who are members of the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors Aotearoa New Zealand are not identified by denomination on the association’s

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website, although some may be identified as ordained clergy (Reverend or Father) or consecrated to the religious life (Sister). Second, regardless of their own denominational affiliations, it is common for spiritual directors to work with people from a wide range of church backgrounds, and some directors also see clients who have no church affiliation. The “undergirding commitment” of the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors Aotearoa New Zealand is to “an inclusiveness that is ecumenical, theological, and covers gender, sexual orientation, and language; to respectful and ethical practice; to contemplative spirituality; to an openness and hospitality in personal life; and to a willingness to journey into the mystery of life.” All of the spiritual directors interviewed were of New Zealand European ethnicity.

**Limitations of the sample**

One limitation of the sample arose from the recruitment methods used. I was acquainted with approximately half of the midlife participants and with some of the spiritual directors and clergy. Some of these people were well known to me or were connected to people well known by me, whereas others were acquaintances about whom I knew little other than their gender, church affiliation, marital status and approximate age. Recruitment of people I had met had a number of significant advantages, as reflective Christians from a wide range of church types could be identified and included and requirements relating to diversity of age, gender and familial status could be accommodated. Interviewing acquaintances (as well as people personally recommended by clergy and supervisors) also assisted in establishing rapport and trust between the researcher and respondent, which contributed to the openness of participants and the depth of the interviews. However it is probable that this method of selection restricted the diversity of the sample in some ways. For example, a high proportion of those who were interviewed possessed tertiary qualifications. The potential impact of this form of recruitment on results was considered and is acknowledged in discussion of the results in Chapter Eight.

Academic supervisors, spiritual directors and clergy also suggested potential interviewees for the project. As Miller and Brewer observe, “most snowball samples will be biased” because initially accessed respondents make subjective choices about the people they recommend the interviewer approaches. Clergy tended to nominate people

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who were actively involved in church life, rather than those who were less closely aligned with their church communities. This limitation was, to some extent, balanced by my ability to approach acquaintances who were considered likely to broaden the diversity of the sample and potentially provide contrasting perspectives. However, within this project the stories of Christians who might consider themselves to be “on the margins” of church are better represented in the insights of spiritual directors who work with them than in the interviews held with midlife churchgoers themselves.

Second, despite some effort being made to include a range of ethnicities among the interviewees, those from non-European backgrounds are under-represented because priority was placed on other forms of diversity. Participants from Maori/Polynesian, Polynesian, Asian, and South African backgrounds were included, but 35 out of the 40 participants identified as “New Zealand European” (or, equivalently, Pakeha). While it would have been desirable to include more participants from other ethnic groups within the sample, other forms of diversity – such as age, gender, church affiliation and familial background – were of greater relevance in exploring the key questions this project seeks to address. Again, the impact of these choices is discussed in Chapter Eight.

Some slight imbalances may be noted in the selection of clergy who were interviewed. First, six members of the clergy who participated in this research were male and four female. This is partly attributable to the recommendations of possible interviewees made by academic supervisors and other clergy, and partly attributable to the fact that in the Roman Catholic church all priests are men. Second, more Presbyterian and Anglican clergy were interviewed than Catholic priests. Only two of the ten clergy interviewed in this category were Catholic. This imbalance was rectified by the fact that a third diocesan priest from a Catholic parish was interviewed in his capacity as a spiritual director, and in addition to answering questions which related to the ministry of spiritual direction he was invited to comment on the experience of midlife churchgoers within the parish context. The perspectives of two Catholic religious sisters were also sought, one of whom was interviewed as a midlife churchgoer, and one who was a spiritual director.

Finally, greater socioeconomic diversity within the sample would almost certainly have raised further interesting questions for exploration. The emphasis on other forms of

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287 It is possible that ministers and academic supervisors may also have been inclined to nominate people whose academic backgrounds were similar to their own, but this was certainly not always the case.
diversity, which have already been identified, meant that, within the sample size, it was not possible to introduce further criteria for inclusion. All of the participants in the project were in some form of paid employment, which was not surprising given the low rate of unemployment in New Zealand at the time the interviews were conducted.\(^{288}\) The extent of participants’ paid employment ranged from irregular hours of part-time work to full-time work. While most participants had some paid employment at the time they were interviewed, two had only recently returned to work, one had just handed in her resignation from work, and one was in the process of reducing work hours significantly in order to engage in postgraduate studies. Two interviewees mentioned the financial impact of the Christchurch earthquakes, and others mentioned disruption to their working lives which had caused financial hardship in the recent past.

**How interviews were conducted**

As Durand and Chantler note, effective qualitative interviews require the interviewer to establish “a relaxed interchange in which interviewees feel able to talk without being judged and have the space to tell their story.”\(^{289}\) All interviews were conducted face-to-face. While the possibility that some interviews might need to occur via Skype was allowed for when ethics approval was applied for, the ability to establish and build rapport was enhanced by meeting personally with participants. Given that interviewees were being asked to talk about personal experiences and beliefs, this was important. One consequence of conducting all interviews in person was that, for pragmatic reasons (time and expense), interviewees were chosen from three cities – Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin – rather than from a greater number or wider range of locations. A second consequence of the decision to conduct interviews face-to-face was that it was not possible to interview several of the people that supervisors and spiritual directors suggested could provide valuable insights.

In order to make it as easy, efficient, and as comfortable as possible for those involved, each participant was given a choice of locations for the interview. Most of those in Christchurch were asked if they would like to meet in the researcher’s home or their own home, or in a café or library, or in their workplace. Those outside Christchurch

\(^{288}\) The New Zealand unemployment rate across the first three months of 2016, during which period the majority of the participants were interviewed, was 5.7\%. New Zealand Unemployment Rate, [http://www.tradingeconomics.com/new-zealand/unemployment-rate](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/new-zealand/unemployment-rate) (23 May 2016).

were offered the latter three choices. Thirteen of the participants chose to be interviewed in their workplaces (many clergy chose this option), twelve invited the interviewer to their homes, eight were interviewed in cafés or libraries, and five came to the researcher’s home. One participant was interviewed in another person’s home.

Each participant was interviewed once. The two shortest interviews (both of which were interrupted several times) produced approximately forty minutes of recorded data each, and the longest recording was 108 minutes. The majority of interviews took between fifty and seventy-five minutes. Most interviewees were asked if they would like to be sent a copy of the questions that would be posed during the interview, but not all participants wished to peruse them. There was no expectation that participants should prepare for the interview, as spontaneous responses were considered to be of equal value to responses that had been given prior thought, but some who had received the key questions before the interview made written notes which they referred to during the interview. If they had done so this was noted in the write-ups of each interview, and, in cases where prior reflection clearly contributed to the type of response given, was also mentioned in the data chapters.

Some participants made interesting and relevant comments after the interview was officially over and the digital recorder had been turned off. As Svend Brinkman observes, “utterances that ‘spill beyond the structure’ are often important and are even sometimes the key to understanding the interviewee’s answers to the structured questions.” In several such cases interviewees were asked if they would be prepared to repeat their comments for a second short digital recording. In a handful of instances, following the interview, participants sent a follow-up email or text message including further details about something they had mentioned, such as the name of a book or author, or added something that they omitted to say in the interview which they considered to be of importance. Some interviewees also took the time to provide tours of church facilities or to share other resources with me once the interview was officially over.

The questions posed

Each of the three groups of participants was asked three or four open-ended questions. There were overlaps between the questions asked, but as the particular perspectives of the three groups were also desired, the questions naturally differed. As is usual in semi-

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structured interviews, the interviews contained a set of specific topics but participants were allowed plenty of freedom to "digress." The format allowed respondents "to develop their answers in their own terms and at their own length and depth."\textsuperscript{291} The specific questions that were asked are included in each of the data chapters that follow, and also in Appendix Three.

Those in midlife were asked to describe the challenges and opportunities they felt had arisen for them in midlife, any shifts in values, beliefs or values they considered to be of importance, and were also asked to comment on the support they received or might like to receive from their parishes or the wider Christian community. Midlife interviewees were also asked if they attended spiritual direction, and, if so, what value they derived from this ministry.

Clergy who were interviewed were asked to talk about their own experience of midlife prior to reflecting on the needs of parishioners in midlife and commenting on aspects of congregational and/or denominational life that provide support for people in this age group. They were asked to identify issues that they thought midlife parishioners were facing, to describe what was already happening within their churches that was helping those parishioners, and then to consider other ways in which midlife issues could be addressed, either at congregational or denominational level.

Spiritual directors were considered likely to have encountered and reflected upon common issues among directees in midlife. They were asked to comment on the spiritual needs of those in midlife that they considered to be of greatest significance, and to describe any practices or support provided by churches, or provided elsewhere, that people in midlife seem to find useful. They were also asked what people in midlife found useful about attending spiritual direction.

Interviews generally started with questions that the participants were likely to be able to answer relatively easily, such as, "Would you like to tell me a bit about your parish, and your involvement there?" Aspects that seemed to be of particular importance to the interviewee were followed up with further prompts. Participants’ responses determined the direction of the interview and the order and manner in which the key questions were posed. After a number of interviews had been conducted, participants were encouraged to develop points that were similar to the comments of other interviewees.

\textsuperscript{291} Miller and Brewer, \textit{The A-Z of Social Research}, 167.
(the importance of small groups in offering pastoral support within the church, for example) and responses which were unique to that particular interviewee were probed (the meaningful connection with God one man experienced while engaged in road-cycling, for example). Interviewees were given plenty of time and space to share their opinions and to “tell their story.”

As each interview drew to a close the participant was asked, “Is there anything you have thought of during the interview, or had thought of prior to the interview, that we haven’t covered or you would like to add?” Rich data frequently emerged from responses to this final question, as participants paused to reflect on the things that had been raised and discussed.

**Data collection and analysis**

Each interview was recorded as an MP3 file and transferred to computer. Within a few days of each interview comprehensive written notes were made from each recording, including lengthy verbatim quotations. In the process of making these notes, key themes that stood out were noted in bullet points on the first page of that interview’s written record. Some marginal comments, or “notes to self,” were also made in italics, noting links with other interviewee’s comments, points of uniqueness in the participant’s perspective, or questions for further exploration or thought. The written notes from each interview formed the basis of the analysis and reflection that followed.

According to Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, “Qualitative data analysis ... is not fundamentally a mechanical or a technical process; it is a process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing.” In fact, data analysis is a “dynamic and creative process” which researchers may go about in quite different ways, although “certain distinct activities” are usually included within it. Taylor and Bogdan suggest that three core activities in qualitative data analysis are identification of themes and developing concepts and propositions, coding of the data and refining one’s understanding of the subject matter, and attempting to discount findings. In practice, the first steps in making sense of data involve developing intimate familiarity with the data, looking for emerging themes, tracking hunches, and constructing classification schemes. The researcher

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294 Ibid., 141.
forms theoretical propositions, develops charts and diagrams to highlight patterns in the data, then steps back from the data to discern and to reflect on what is being learned.\textsuperscript{295} A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles also believe that data analysis typically includes three linked sub-processes, which they describe as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.\textsuperscript{296} They have derived what they describe as “a set of tactics for generating meaning,” which include clustering by conceptual grouping, noting patterns and themes, counting, making contrasts and comparisons, and making conceptual/theoretical coherence.\textsuperscript{297}

Within this project, open-ended comments and questions, made as “notes to self” on each interview record, formed the first part of the analytical process. At this point, one aim was to note obvious parallels and contrasts with comments made by other interviewees. For example, comments such as, “X also mentioned the importance of leaving churches open for individuals to be able to find places to reflect and pray,” or “Y does not see any point in attending spiritual direction. Contrast with Z, who declared spiritual direction to be vital,” while largely descriptive, were part of the process of exploring connections within the data. Secondly, notes on the interviews included questions, or points for consideration, that the participants’ responses raised. For example, following a comment made by one man who expressed great appreciation of the multiple support systems available in his parish, and in his church denomination as a whole, the “note to self” includes reference to the outgoing nature of the interviewee; I wondered whether shy or reticent churchgoers would find it as easy to access support even when it is available within their parishes. In subsequent interviews this was a question I was able to reflect on further.

Some other questions that emerged during the analysis of the data seemed likely to be beyond the scope of the thesis, but were worth noting as themes of potential interest that clergy or parishioners might wish to think about. For example, a “note to self” which followed a participant’s comment about accessing books from a nearby theological college’s library was, “Maybe there’s a place for promoting access to bigger, shared libraries, as well as having smaller on-site libraries in churches?” A second example of a theme that seemed worthy of further exploration, but beyond the scope of the project,

\textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 142-148.
\textsuperscript{297} Ibid.
arose when an interviewee commented on how difficult it is for middle-aged people to enter the church as new Christians because they lack knowledge and understanding of how things usually operate in parishes and can therefore find it hard to know how to get involved and to become part of the community. This was an issue that I had never considered before, which I noted in writing and also told the interviewee. (His response was to laugh and say, “Second doctorate!”) These early observations did not change the core questions asked in later interviews but they provide clear examples of the way in which, in qualitative research, as Taylor and Bogdan put it, “data collection and analysis go hand in hand.”

According to Michael Quinn Patton, while “rushing to premature conclusions should be avoided” it is appropriate to record analytical insights while data is still being collected. He writes, “Recording and tracking analytical insights that occur during data collection are part of fieldwork and the beginning of qualitative analysis. ...Repressing analytical insights may mean losing them forever, for there’s no guarantee that they’ll return.” Making “notes to self” while recording write-ups of interviews was a significant and helpful step in the process of data analysis.

Huberman and Miles emphasise the place of displays in analysis, noting that “valid analysis is immensely aided by data displays that are focused enough to permit viewing of a full data set in one location and are systematically arranged to answer the research questions at hand.” The second step in making sense of the data from the interviews with midlife participants was to group core concepts under headings on A2-sized charts, along with page references relating to comments made in particular interviews. The aim in organising data in this way was to see patterns: to identify major topics, minor topics, and unique topics, points of commonality and points of difference, ambiguities and paradoxes. Some of the original headings included, “Work – for women” and “Work – for men,” “Small groups – faith development,” “Small groups – community building,” “Pastoral care – positive,” “Pastoral care – negative.” As interview data was read and re-read, categories were added and adapted. The consciousness that, no matter what coding or categorizing methods are used, “silences” are inevitably introduced when themes are categorized and data is framed in a particular way meant that the number of thematic categories chosen was initially large – there were twenty-four categories.

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298 Taylor and Bogdan, “Working with Data: Data Analysis in Qualitative Research,” 141.
299 Michael Quinn Patton, Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage, 2002), 436.
300 Huberman and Miles, “Data Management and Analysis Methods,” 432.
identified within the data collected from the midlife churchgoers’ interviews – and reduced as ideas were consolidated and greater clarity about key issues emerged.

Comments from interviews with clergy and with spiritual directors were organised using large mind-maps. In the case of the clergy, the first summarised their perspectives on midlife experience, the second summarised ways in which their parishes were addressing midlife churchgoers’ needs, and the third focused on the challenges and gaps they felt existed in meeting the needs of midlife parishioners. Results from the spiritual directors’ interviews were summarised on two large mind-maps. One summarised the spiritual directors’ comments about what they perceived to be the most significant needs of Christians in midlife. The second summarised spiritual directors’ understanding of midlife directees’ experiences of church, and also recorded comments made by the spiritual directors about the ministry of spiritual direction itself and its usefulness for people in midlife.

The thematic categories that have been used within the chapters that follow emerged from long-term reflection on the data from all three groups of participants. During the writing process it became apparent that data gathered from the spiritual directors that pertained to the specific benefits of spiritual direction for midlife churchgoers lay a little outside the scope of the present project, and would need to be omitted. In certain other cases, interesting questions for future research arose, and these are noted from time to time in the chapters that follow. It is, after all, one of the “iron laws” of evaluation of research that, “Analysis finally makes clear what would have been most important to study, if only we had known beforehand.”

Further reflection on the research process is included at the beginning of Chapter Eight.

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302 Patton, Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, 431, citing Halcolm’s “Iron Laws of Evaluation of Research.”
Chapter Four: Midlife Interviews – Challenges, Opportunities and Changes

People at midlife don’t necessarily have all their ducks in a row.
– Debbie (Catholic, 51)

Interviews were conducted with twenty churchgoers aged between forty-one and sixty. Participants were invited to talk about their experience of midlife, including particular challenges and opportunities they had encountered. They were encouraged to mention changes they had experienced and observed in their circumstances, values, desires, beliefs and understanding of themselves and of God. They were also asked to describe their church and their participation in church, and to talk about ways in which the church had provided support to them in midlife. In addition, they were given the opportunity to suggest ways in which further support could be offered to people in midlife and to clergy and congregations as they endeavour to meet the needs of midlife parishioners.

The interviews were open-ended but were structured around the following four key questions:

1. Describe your involvement in church, including the roles and responsibilities you hold. How do you feel about your involvement?

2. What are some of the challenges and opportunities you are experiencing in this stage of life? How effectively is the church supporting you as you deal with these?

3. Do you attend spiritual direction? If yes, can you provide examples of ways in which spiritual direction is, or has been, helpful to you?

4. What further support or opportunities do you think could be offered (i) to Christians in midlife, and (ii) to assist clergy and congregations to meet the needs of parishioners in midlife?

Demographic details of the midlife participants in this project are summarised in the following table. All names used are pseudonyms.
Table 1 Demographics of participants in midlife

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Familial status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ-born Cook Island Maori</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
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<td>47</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with one child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raewyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Remarried with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with one child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Samoan</td>
<td>Divorced with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with adult child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Religious Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with adult children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Widowed with adult children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Married with adult children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chapter explores responses midlife churchgoers gave to questions regarding the challenges and opportunities that had been part of their midlife experience, and comments they made about their personal development and their faith at midlife. Given the range of ages and differing familial circumstances of the participants who contributed to this project it was not surprising that a wide variety of experiences and perspectives were shared. The experiences and aspirations of the youngest interviewee, Ian, a newly-married forty-one year old man, and the oldest interviewee, Judith, a woman of sixty who had just celebrated her fortieth wedding anniversary, obviously differed in many significant ways. Phil, a man of fifty-three who has enjoyed a stable marriage for nearly three decades, articulated quite different pastoral needs from Talia, a female solo parent of the same age who, in midlife, is still finding her feet after divorcing in her forties. Both Linda, mother of five children, and Michelle, a religious sister, are fifty-eight years old. Although some of their comments about the church and their responsibilities within their respective denominations were similar, their life experiences have obviously been quite different. The selection of quotations from the interviews that are included within this chapter is intended to reflect something of the diversity and complexity of midlife experience because, in terms of addressing the needs of Christians in midlife, diversity is, in itself, a significant challenge for the church. It can be difficult for clergy and congregations to identify (let alone address) issues affecting parishioners in their forties and fifties, as, in this age group, individuals’ experiences and circumstances are so variable.

As far as the "challenges and opportunities of midlife" were concerned, similarities between participants’ perspectives transcended their particular church affiliations; differences in their viewpoints were often linked to their familial circumstances. For example, irrespective of denomination, midlife interviewees’ with children at home were focused upon the welfare of their children and the adequacy of their parenting. The importance of work, not only in terms of financial reward but also as a context within which meaning and fulfilment could be found, and care for others, both within the home and in other contexts, were recurring themes in most interviews. Participants also spoke about their faith. While some midlife interviewees described changes in values, beliefs and spiritual practices that had occurred in midlife, many also spoke of having a sense of continuity and stability in their faith journey. Regardless of denomination, interviewees described ways in which their faith in God related to their life experiences, and, in varying degrees, expressed some commitment to participating in church services and
other parish activities. Presbyterians, Anglicans and Catholics from a wide range shared similar stories about their involvement in church. Sunday services, small group participation, and opportunities for leadership, service and personal growth all loomed large in their accounts of what church meant to them. Many other similarities of experience and viewpoint between midlife participants from different church traditions will be evident in the quotations from the interviews that follow, particularly in Chapter Five, where individuals’ denominational affiliations are stated repeatedly, and their experiences of church are explored in some detail.

Comments from the interviews that have been included within this chapter are intended to highlight themes and issues that have pastoral implications for the church. Other important topics have received less attention. For example, more space has been afforded to stories people told regarding support they did (or did not) receive from the church when they were facing personal challenges than has been given to their accounts of the pleasure and fulfilment they experience when engaging in leisure-time pursuits, despite the fact that the latter theme is undoubtedly of significance to people in midlife. These choices are a matter of focus, not a reflection of the importance of the experiences that receive less scrutiny.

The findings from the interviews with midlife churchgoers are presented here in four sections, across two chapters. This chapter explores:

1. Challenges and opportunities in midlife
2. Personal and spiritual development in midlife

The data presented in Chapter Five incorporates:

3. Midlife churchgoers’ experiences of church
4. Suggestions, questions and proposals raised by midlife interviewees

These categories provide a structure within which it is possible to summarise a significant amount of data, but it will be obvious that, in “real life,” neat distinctions of this nature do not exist. Challenging midlife issues and experiences are often met by a pastoral response from the church, increasing or decreasing external pressures and demands on time cause individuals to re-examine the ways in which they engage in parish life, and so on. Almost every quotation from the interviews that has been included could have been placed within more than one section of these two chapters.
The challenges and opportunities of midlife

Participants were invited to talk about challenges and opportunities that they had experienced in midlife. Margie Lachman and others involved in psychological and sociological studies of various facets of midlife suggest that the “central issues” of midlife centre around “generativity, caring and concern for others in the work and family spheres.” However, at the same time as dealing with these responsibilities, people in midlife are also addressing “their own needs for meaningful work (paid or unpaid), health, and well-being. The need to balance multiple roles and manage the conflicts that arise is a reality that is characteristic of middle age, regardless of one’s specific lifestyle or circumstances.” The New Zealand churchgoers who contributed to the present project spoke openly about all of these issues and described a number of challenges and opportunities connected with them.

Although challenges and opportunities may at first seem to be readily distinguishable from one another it was evident from participants’ remarks that many life experiences are not so easy to categorise. The final departure of children from home, for example, may simultaneously generate a sense of loss and of liberation. An experience of stress or lack of fulfilment at work may prove to be a catalyst for positive change. Caring for a frail parent may be both richly rewarding and very hard. The challenges and opportunities of midlife are often inseparable from one another.

Work

Harvey L. Sterns and Margaret Hellie Huyck, researchers in the field of Life-Span Developmental Psychology, believe that “one of the most intriguing issues in adult development and aging is the importance of work in people’s lives.” Work certainly held an important place in the lives of those interviewed for this project. All but one of the midlife participants talked about their work – some at length, some in passing – describing a range of experiences of work and attitudes towards it. Interviewees were engaged in a range of employment types. The interviewees’ hours of paid work ranged from five hours per week to full-time work. One person worked on a casual basis with varying hours. Two participants were self-employed, one of whom was in the process of

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establishing a business, the other of whom had been self-employed for six years. Two women who had part-time paid employment considered that their primary work was care of children at home.

A number of the midlife interviewees reflected upon the meaning and value of work. While accepting the financial necessity of work, several midlife interviewees commented on the fact that financial reward no longer provided sufficient motivation in itself to work in roles they found unfulfilling or stressful. A number of people explicitly talked about stress associated with their work. Some expressed anxiety about their employment, either because of present challenges or anticipated demands. Others described a period of uncertainty or anxiety about work which had now been resolved. It was also evident that some participants were relishing the opportunities that work afforded them at this stage of life, either because they now had greater influence and autonomy, or because they were enjoying the stimulation of engaging in new roles after a significant period of unpaid employment in the home. Several people spoke of the connection between their work and their faith. The men who were interviewed were particularly expressive about the fulfilment they found in sharing their professional skills with others at work and beyond the workplace, in a range of voluntary roles.

Stagnation, stress, and numerous other factors can motivate individuals to question aspects of their work and its place in their lives. Some interviewees described shifts in their attitudes towards work that had occurred in their forties. Simon (48) spoke about his role in a large state-owned organisation, where he has worked throughout his adult life. He has recently gained a renewed sense of appreciation about his work and the opportunities his role affords him to serve society and to exercise and develop his own skills and abilities. But this renewed sense of enthusiasm about his work followed a period of uncertainty and restlessness, during which he questioned the value of what he was doing and his willingness to continue in his career, as he explained:

At times ... I have thought, what if I were to leave, what would I do? You know, I do have, and have had, reservations about what life holds for me. Is this ... all that my life's going to be? Or, ah, is there something else? I had that for a long time. [Simon pauses to reflect.] And there's a certain amount of

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306 In this chapter, each interviewee is identified by a pseudonym followed by their age. In the next chapter, which focuses on interviewees’ experiences of church, individuals’ denominational affiliation is added.

307 Throughout the quotations from interviews, ellipsis points are used to indicate the omission from speech or writing of a word or words that are superfluous or able to be understood from contextual clues. Pauses are indicated in words.
comfort knowing that as long as I choose to stay in my job I’ll get paid every fortnight and I’ll live a comfortable lifestyle, but is that, yeah, is there something else I want to achieve? Yeah, I have thought like that for a long time, but as time rolls by, I think the older you get, there’s also a sense that I’m too old to get into anything new now. [He laughs.] You know, I’ve left my run too late to try something else; I’ll just have to resign myself to the fact that this is it.

Simon’s reservations and concerns about his work have recently been dispelled by the opportunity for change and growth within the organisation in which he holds a position of seniority:

Just lately I’ve … tried something new in my occupation, gone to a different role, and it’s given me a whole new sense of energy, really. … And I don’t think I need anything else. I think this is actually a really good job. … I think I feel quite settled now with the choice that I’ve made.

Like Simon, Keith (47) has reaped the benefits of working for an organisation that has been able to offer him considerable variety and the chance to develop new skills and strengths, while retaining positive relationships with colleagues:

I’ve been in the same company for um, fifteen years, but because of the dynamics of the company – I work for an electricity company – there’s so many different areas. So within that company I’ve actually probably done [he pauses and counts aloud] seven different departments. So every time you sort of get a bit bored you just move on to another department, which is actually quite nice. So you still get in with the same people and be learning a bit more.

Both Simon and Keith expressed a desire that their work be both stimulating and worthwhile, and these themes also emerged in a number of other participants’ reflections about work. This desire is not exclusive to midlife, of course. As New Zealand authors Alistair MacKenzie and Wayne Kirkland note, “We need to be engaged in creative and purposeful activities. It is fundamental to who we are.” However, at midlife the sense that time is no longer unlimited may make review of one’s work seem more urgent. Making time to reflect on work can be very fruitful, even if resulting changes are “barely perceptible” to others, as Barbara Bradley Hagerty observes. Summarising a key message from a speech given in 2012 by a retired Harvard Business School professor, Howard Stevenson, Hagerty writes, “No matter how successful you

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are, you need to regularly pause and cast a cool, analytical eye on your career. At midlife, especially, it may be time to recalibrate.”

According to Sterns and Huyck, in midlife “one of the common refrains is the desire to balance work and other commitments more successfully.” Both male and female participants in this project expressed the desire for better work/life balance. The men who were interviewed mostly had fulltime employment while most of the women with children had taken extended periods out of the paid workforce, or were working part-time, to accommodate the needs of children. Murray (44) and Gail (41) both spoke about the competing demands of work and parenting. Murray felt, “Balance is very important as you get older. You do need balance. Balance to fit your kids in. Make sure your kids are the most important thing; your family’s the most important thing. Then ... work doesn’t rule you.” Gail has two children who are now both at primary school. Their schooling has allowed Gail to return to work on a casual basis, which she has felt some responsibility to do in order to contribute financially to the home. She described the challenge it is to balance work and family responsibilities. While glad to be working again, she does not want her identity to be too caught up with her work, as she felt it may have been prior to becoming a stay-at-home mum. She explained:

I’m not like career driven. I’m not like I want to get to the top of the ladder, because I don’t, because I think there is a cost associated with that and the cost can be my health, or my family, or my marriage or ... and I think that’s the change from when you first start in the workforce. There’s a myth out there that as a woman you can do anything, you can have it all, and I don’t think that’s true, that you can have it all at the same time. ...You can have one thing, and then you can have another thing, but that whole image of everyone juggling all these [sic] kind of stuff - I don’t think it’s healthy. And I think something gets dropped. You only need a tiny change and everything’s blown out of the water. So it’s the challenge of doing what I need to do, to earn what I need to earn, still being available to be here for the kids when they need it, and being engaged with them because you want to be, you get fulfilment with that.

Phil (53), who is a full-time secondary school teacher, also talked about the demands of work with respect to health and family life. He felt that his children had sometimes been affected by the commitment he had made to his work. He also spoke frankly about some of the personal challenges he has experienced in his chosen career. He told me that he struggled to be as productive and committed, and said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if I make

310 Ibid., 323.
311 Sterns and Huyck, “The Role of Work in Midlife,” 469.
a career change in the next couple of years, actually.” He explained, “Working in a stressful working environment is not conducive to one’s mental health. I have found it mentally more tough than I have physically more tough.” Alluding to my own background as a high school teacher, Phil said:

Partly, also, Anne, you just get resentful of working long hours, don’t you, as a teacher. And, you know ... you get physically tired. It’s a very very physically demanding occupation. Physically and mentally. You know, you’re on the go, you’re just constantly managing people. And, you know, there are other jobs that seem so much more appealing at this age, aren’t there? [He laughs.]

Clearly, in some occupations, physical and mental challenges can start to impinge upon individuals’ capacity to work, or their enjoyment of work, at midlife. Murray (44) is an electrician. Murray spoke with a great deal of enthusiasm about his job at many points throughout his interview, describing the fulfilment that being able to use his qualifications and experience in many varied places, including in voluntary capacities, affords him. For Murray, “the money's never really been an aspect of the job.” However, he also expressed concerns about the stress and the physical demands of his role:

I've been thinking about maybe I'm in the wrong job. And I'm trying to think where else I could be. Am I in the right place? It does question ya. Specially 'cause the stresses of what I do – I do servicing, electrical servicing – you never know, I don’t know what I’m doing from day to day. Every morning I go in and there’s job sheets get put in front of me. I don’t know where I’m going, couldn't tell you what I was doing, couldn't tell you how long I was going to be there.

Like Phil, Murray also acknowledged some concern about his future work prospects due to the physical demands of his occupation. Although he found many aspects of his work rewarding, and believed that what he did was appreciated and valued by others, Murray felt that aging was likely to affect his ability to continue to do it:

As I get older I think I need to find something different, because my body’s going to wear out, you know. And you are looking at that. ... I know that as I get older, my hands, if your hands don’t work you can’t do electrical work.

Sustainability of work, including the ability to tolerate and cope with the physical and emotional demands of particular roles, can be a significant concern for some people in middle age. But many participants in this project also described finding their work stimulating and satisfying, and, at midlife, were glad to have opportunities to use their gifts and life experiences in new ways.
At the time of their interviews Debbie and Sally had recently started new jobs after a significant period of time during which they focused on caring for family members. Each described being in paid employment in very positive terms. Debbie (51) loves her job. She said, “It’s a big change, but it’s one that I’m really ready for and excited about, and that’s a really good part of my journey. I’m really enjoying that.” Working outside the home has also allowed Debbie to gain what she considers to be a better perspective on her voluntary commitments in the church and elsewhere. She says that her “head-space” on those issues, and “a lot of other things,” has changed. “My focus is different now, and my time is limited.” Sally (49), in speaking about her new job, acknowledged her delight in being able to use gifts and skills she has acquired in other roles:

I’ve always believed that you pick up bits and pieces through different jobs, and through different scenarios you find yourself in, and they’ll always come in useful later on down the track. And I kind of feel that in this job I’m in now I’m getting to use everything, really.

Malcolm (52) told me that his education and work-experience allowed him to be “well prepared” for the extraordinary situation in which he has found himself. After a change of career direction in his thirties, Malcolm worked for a large corporation for thirteen years before starting his own business in central Christchurch, early in 2010, at the age of forty-six. For Malcolm, the decision to start his own business “came back to self-determination – having a bit more control of your destiny.” Due to the nature and location of Malcolm’s business, the major earthquakes in Canterbury, which occurred in 2010 and 2011, created a lot of work for his company and extended his sphere of influence within the city. He described the relationship between his work and his Christian faith:

I’m doing things that I feel I should be doing, even at work. I think there’s a ... spiritual aspect to work as well, which um might sound a bit strange ... but there is. Work affects people and affects how people interact and relate to each other, and downstream of that is their welfare and um I think it’s just not being divorced from a sense of some higher purpose as well, rather than just doing your work for your work. ... I do have a sense of something bigger at play, and I’m just part of that, however that works out.

Malcolm went on to say that he looks at things through the “prism” of Christianity, but he finds that difficult to explain. When I submitted that quite a few people do talk about the fulfilment they find in using their gifts at work and feeling that they are doing things
that are connected with their spirituality, Malcolm agreed. “It’s part of who I am. I’m not just a spiritual person when I go to church.”

The connection between work and Christian spirituality is something Nina (43) also addressed. She spent some of her interview telling me about a course she had participated in, and enjoyed, entitled “God at Work.” This paper was all about Christians in the workplace. Nina was interested in a key idea raised in the course, which is how the church can affirm the value of people’s work. She talked about a range of ways that this might occur, such as the minister affirming different groups of people, from “up the front” – for example, at the beginning of the year inviting teachers to come up to be prayed for – or by having the small groups within the church praying for a particular group of workers, week by week. The lecturer had also suggested that people from similar work backgrounds could arrange to meet and talk about the issues of faith and work that relate to their own field. Nina thought that this would be a great idea, “because it’s affirming of all of us, it’s supportive of all of us, once we go back out into the workplace, and it also raises the, you know, value of this group of people.” Nina felt that it was very important to connect what happens on Sundays with what happens on Mondays, whether people are in paid employment, voluntary work, or at home. Given the dominant place of work in many people’s lives – which was so evident in the comments made by the midlife participants in this project – the complexity and variety of people’s work experiences, and the desire of many midlife Christians to integrate their faith and life in meaningful ways, these suggestions are well worth further consideration.

With respect to the role of work, Sterns and Huyck consider that “themes of midlife” include “recognizing the limits of career progress, deciding to change jobs and/or careers, rebalancing work and family, further investing or withdrawing from work, and planning for retirement. Self-development and meaning may play an important role.” All of these themes arose in interviews with midlife churchgoers or in the interviews with members of the clergy. Many interviewees spoke about their gifts and values as they addressed the topic of employment. In most instances links between faith and work

312 In 2016 Carey Baptist College advertised a course entitled “Theology at Work” which is described as follows: “How do we live Christianly from Monday to Saturday, in locations other than home or church? This course explores a theology of work, work ethics, career choice, the notion of laity and the way in which 'church' becomes a far wider concept when it encounters the marketplace.” <http://carey.ac.nz/course/theology-at-work/> (16 November 2016).
313 Sterns and Huyck, “The Role of Work in Midlife,” 479.
were made rather obliquely. Some midlife participants identified the “spiritual aspect” of work as something they thought about but did not believe was addressed at church. Jonathan Malesic, former professor of Theology at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, describes the issue of work as “a theological demilitarized zone” because “clergy and laity tend not to discuss it.” Malesic believes that “this mutually acceptable silence is a great pastoral failure” and “a squandered opportunity.” Historically, the “theology of work” has been the subject of close scrutiny within the church, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. Given the wealth of material available, and the centrality of work in many people’s lives, there is clearly scope for the church to discuss connections between work and faith more openly, especially with midlife parishioners who may already be reflecting on these issues. These issues will be explored further in Chapter Eight.

**Family**

In addition to speaking about their roles and experiences in the workplace, many of the midlife participants in this project talked about the experience of caring for children and/or for parents. Fifteen of the midlife participants were currently married and living with their spouse, and five had either never been married or were divorced or widowed. Regardless of their marital status, all but one of the midlife participants mentioned family members during their interview. This was unsurprising, given that, as Lachman notes, “midlife adults are at the height of assuming responsibility for others and midlife is typically the time of greatest influence and most frequent intergenerational contact.”

1. **Children**

Some of the midlife interviewees with children at home had young children who were still very dependent upon them. Midlife participants with school-aged children at home, and one sixty year old participant who reflected on her earlier experiences of parenting, described the busyness of caring for children, and the challenges inherent in accommodating and prioritising their family’s needs (often over their own). Midlife interviewees with young children frequently spoke about parenting in conjunction with their family’s church involvement, and their comments about that subject are included

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315 Ibid.

in the next chapter. Several interviewees described their desire to transmit Christian values to their children, and one articulated explicitly the responsibility she felt to be a role model to her children as far as Christian faith and practice was concerned. Other interviewees had older children. Participants with teenagers shared their sense of the complexity of parenting as their children moved toward adulthood, but they also expressed satisfaction and pride in their children’s accomplishments and increasing self-reliance. Those who had experienced the transition to having an “empty nest,” and those who were anticipating it, considered it to be a significant period of readjustment but also described it as a stage of life that presented new and desirable opportunities. Eight of the twenty midlife interviewees stated that they now had greater freedom to explore their own interests than had formerly been the case. Some participants had also experienced the phenomenon recently dubbed “the cluttered nest” as adult children of “the boomerang generation” returned to live at home. There was a difference of nineteen years between the oldest and youngest participant with children in this project; the fact that the people who were interviewed had a wide variety of experiences and needs relating to their parental roles was to be expected.

Andrew (44) has two children, the older of whom has reached her teens. Andrew identified as a challenge of midlife “the various stages of parenthood,” saying, “The problems we have are just like I guess what any parent of teenagers would be having, and that’s just there’s no manual for it.” He described having “some areas of self-doubt” as a parent, wondering, as he put it, “whether I have done enough, whether I am doing enough, whether I should be doing more ... whether I’m doing it right.” Andrew appreciated the opportunity to attend a short workshop on parenting that was offered in his Anglican parish. A community-based worker came to share expertise from working with teenagers, including signs to look for and what issues to talk about with teenagers. Andrew said, “I found that kind of helpful. But that was very few and far between. It was meaningful, yes.”

Judith (60) has five adult children, who, since leaving home, have returned, in varying combinations. She described some of the challenges of marriage and parenting that had been part of her earlier midlife journey. Judith felt that when her children were young she had trouble working out who she was other than a wife and mother:

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I was enabling everybody else to do everything – and that is what I thought a good mother did, anyway – and then there was nothing left for me. You know what I mean? I mean, where was I in it? I wasn’t exactly resentful, but I knew I didn’t have a whole lot of time to have a whole lot of things for myself, or whatever. And in fact, even getting time to read a book, or to pray, you know, was wonderful, when it actually happened.

Later in the interview Judith reflected on significant shifts in her marriage in recent years, including her deepening appreciation of and love for her husband, “in the nitty-gritty of life.” She said:

We both had a real commitment to marriage, and we meant it when we said our vows. And then, I guess, you spend forty years trying to work it out. ... Once the children had all left ... there is a new sense of, kind of, well, we are creating this life together.

Sally (49) also reflected on shifts in her marriage that have occurred as her children have grown older. Sally has four children, the youngest of whom is fourteen years old. She described the busyness and financial pressures that their family has experienced over the past few years, before commenting on recent changes in family dynamics. Sally told me that, despite the fact that three of the children still live with them, there are more and more times that only she and her husband are at home. Although that is “kind of weird – and that did take a bit of getting used to” she considers it also to be “quite nice”:

It’s a change I’ve welcomed. I am quite looking forward to getting my own time back, because, to be honest, sometimes you feel guilty. You feel like, actually if the kids are home I should be doing something with them. But if they’re not there, it’s like you’re free to just like read a book or do a jigsaw, or do whatever.

Sally now feels less worried about her children. She is pleased to see them growing in independence. She said, “It’s like, well, I’ve done what I can for you now, and now you’re on your journey.” When asked if that adjustment was difficult for her to make, Sally described her reaction to seeing her sons growing up and developing their own opinions as a process of learning to stand back “and bite my tongue, more than anything.” She added, “You’re not so in their world any more. They’re off doing other things that you don’t know about. ...You’ve just got to think, hopefully you’ve done enough and they’ll be fine.”

Sally then noted that this stage of life allows more opportunities for personal reflection:
I guess with middle age you do end up with more time to yourself, and you are exploring, like, what is it that I want ... whether it’s learning to claw yourself back from being a mother, or a wife, or a daughter, or whatever, as far as spiritual growth goes. ... When the kids are younger, you are so busy and life is so frantic you don’t have that time, or you don’t make the time, and now (even though I’m working in a full-time job) I probably do have more time to be thinking about that.

Clearly, between the ages of forty and sixty, the amount of time and attention that people are able to dedicate to personal or spiritual development differs widely, and the age of dependent children is one significant factor in determining what is possible and desirable for many Christians. The multiple commitments that absorb the energy of many people in midlife also affect the ability and readiness of individuals to participate in and contribute to various aspects of church life, and the ways in which they are most willing to do so. These points will be explored further in Chapters Five and Six.

2. The Empty Nest

Sociologists Norella M. Putney and Vern L. Bengtson, observe that “a normatively prescribed midlife transition for parents is the successful launching of children from the parental home into responsible adulthood.”\(^{318}\) In addition to Judith and Sally, several other midlife participants spoke about this period of transition. Most interviewees considered this transition to be a positive part of their midlife experience, but one that was not without its challenges.

Debbie (51) observed that for people who have had children it “can be a big adjustment” when children leave home. She told me that she included herself as well as others she had talked to when saying that this event can raise feelings for women such as, “What is my purpose? ... I’ve been a mum for how many years, and all of a sudden nobody wants me. I’m not needed.” Awareness of the potential challenges of this transition was a motivating factor behind Debbie’s choice to seek employment as her youngest son approached the end of his schooling. She told me that she had said to her husband, “Potentially I’m going to feel a little bit lost.” But Debbie also described having a sense of freedom now that her children have reached adulthood. She explained that when she and her second husband married they already had three children, so they were parents right from the start. They are now getting to spend time together alone more often than they have done before. She said, “There's an enjoyment there, because we haven’t had that. Not much. So I’m really enjoying this stage of the journey.” A number of other

participants, including several members of the clergy, also described their experience children leaving home “and all that that brings”\textsuperscript{319} as being largely positive.

The departure of children from home is, nevertheless, a significant transition, and it is one that affects both men and women in midlife. Grant (55) and his wife married young and had a son early in their marriage. Their son has been living away from home for about a decade. Grant told me that once his son left home questions arose for them, like “Well, you know, what do we do now?” You know, “What’s the next stage?” Grant talked about hobbies and recreational activities he and his wife were now engaged in, and then reflected on his experience of church as a midlife parishioner who no longer has children at home. He described it as “really good” that, in his parish, there’s a lot of effort put into children and teenagers, and that there’s an environment that kids want to come to. However, he also noted:

There’s that gap in the middle. And then there’s the looking out for the oldies, and making sure things are going OK for them. So you do end up with that patch in the middle, where you sorta – if you’re not established in a ministry, or working in an area where you feel gifted – then you can … drift round a bit. I think personal life’s like that as well.

The potential to “drift” in midlife, which Grant commented upon, rarely appears to be acknowledged or addressed within the church, but it is described in research relating to midlife. Myers and Harper note that “as children reach adulthood and the demands of parenting diminish, persons in late midlife may experience a greater sense of freedom relative to their time, and goals once delayed as secondary to parenting and careers may now acquire new meaning.”\textsuperscript{320} At this stage of life some people may also have greater discretionary income than was the case when children were living at home.\textsuperscript{321} Myers and Harper suggest that, “This new sense of free time combined with prospects of

\textsuperscript{319} Patricia (Anglican priest, 58) used the word “celebration” as she described the process of watching her children move into adult life and making adult choices. She felt that this was “generally a very positive time.” Russell (Anglican priest, 56) described seeing his children now “launched into life.” He said, in a tone of slight surprise, “In some ways that feels quite satisfying.”


\textsuperscript{321} This situation may be changing in New Zealand, as escalating house prices are delaying children’s departure from home and, in some cases, middle aged parents are continuing to support offspring financially, either by accommodating them at home, or by assisting them as they invest in property. Early in 2015 results from a survey conducted by real estate agency Barfoot & Thompson, asking 1000 Auckland homeowners about their first house purchase, were published. The survey found that “47 per cent of those who had bought in the past five years received family help. Fewer than a third of buyers before 2010 had the backing of relatives, while only 13 per cent in the 1970s got a familial hand up.” Maria Slade, “Bank of Mum and Dad Now a Home Truth,” 8 February 2015, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/lifestyle/home-property/65913238/bank-of-mum-and-dad-now-a-home-truth> (16 November 2016).
retirement creates demands for learning to use leisure time effectively.”

Greater flexibility and choice about the use of time and resources in later midlife is an issue which has ramifications not only for individuals but also for the church. While greater flexibility of time may allow some people to become more actively involved in ministries within and beyond the church, and create space for personal reflection and prayer, it may also mean that some churchgoers in midlife become less willing to be tied to fixed commitments. More will be said about this in Chapter Five.

3. Care for parents

Papalia, Olds and Feldman describe one of the significant transitions of midlife like this: “One day a son or daughter looks at a mother or father and sees an old person. The middle-aged child realizes that he or she rather than the parent must now be the pillar of strength.” Due to the increased longevity of men and women in Western societies it is common for people entering midlife to have at least one remaining parent. The needs of elderly individuals and the capacity of family members to support them differ. According to Putney and Bengston, “At midlife, the need to care for an elderly parent may coincide with the launching of one’s own children, or caring for children still in the nest, or continuing responsibility for adult children who have returned to the nest, an increasingly common occurrence.” Only one interviewee explicitly identified the pressure of caring for parents and children simultaneously as being a major challenge in midlife, although at least two others mentioned having this experience. Six others described their experience of providing practical long-term support for parents without speaking about the impact of this on other relationships within their families. Recent research asserts that there is “considerable debate” about “the extent of caregiver burden experienced by the sandwich generation, and indeed over the validity of the phenomenon itself,” but interviews with midlife participants, and also with clergy, revealed that care of parents, children and grandchildren, even when not occurring

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322 Myers and Harper, “Midlife Concerns and Caregiving,” 126.
324 “Longer lives have meant a dramatic increase in the numbers of midlife adults who have surviving parents. An increasing proportion of those parents will survive to very old ages, although not without serious impairments.” Ibid.
326 Ibid.
simultaneously, remains a significant aspect of midlife experience for many New Zealanders.327

Linda (58) acknowledged how difficult she found it to balance the responsibilities of her paid employment with the needs of her elderly mother, her two adult children at home, her commitment to look after a grandchild one day each week, and keeping in touch with friends and with those within the church for whom she has pastoral responsibility. At the time of the most destructive of Christchurch’s earthquakes, in February 2011, the multiple pressures of Linda’s familial and work responsibilities were compounded by the need to respond to traumatic events experienced by members of her extended family and by the numerous losses affecting people within her church and throughout the city. Her adult children, who could no longer live in their own accommodation, returned to live at home. Linda described trying to juggle caregiving roles for so many people at the time of the earthquakes as “a very intense experience.” She became tearful when telling me that at that time she had had to say to others, “I can’t care for an elderly person, and my family and my job.” Although that period of crisis has passed, Linda perceives that the Christchurch earthquakes have had far-reaching effects for families and for individuals, which the church should continue to be mindful of in catering for adults in midlife:

You’ve lost your income, or you’ve lost the retirement you thought you were going to have. You’ve lost the culture and all those beautiful things, the heritage. ... Your family dynamics have now changed. How do my adult children get into the property market or rental or what is [sic] the wisest choices for them? What are the new issues that have come, or are part of midlife?

Even if one discounts the impacts of the Christchurch earthquakes, the “new issues” that Linda identified are arising with increasing frequency for many people in middle age. Sociologists Putney and Bengston note that intergenerational relationships, and living arrangements, have changed. In the past, “it was the needs of elderly parents that prompted a co-residential arrangement with midlife children,” but now the elderly are more likely to choose to live independently and “young adult children are the ones in

327 In New Zealand, there is a rise in the number of older people who are supported by the state, whether in hospitals or rest homes, or by home-based services, rather than being cared for solely by family members. “New Zealand Families Today,” a briefing prepared for the Families’ Commission by the Ministry of Social Development, 2004, 6, <https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/nz-families-today/nz-families-today.pdf> (21 June 2016). The few participants in this project who mentioned accessing these forms of eldercare continued to feel a deep sense of responsibility for their parents’ wellbeing.
need of support by midlife parents. More than ever, midlife parents are a safety net for their children, and their grandchildren.”

Given the geographical spread of many families today, it was unsurprising that forty percent of the midlife interviewees mentioned their location, or the location of their parents, as a factor which affected their ability to offer their parents practical support. The distance of parents from adult children was also mentioned as a challenge for those with young families, for the opposite reason; two midlife participants spoke about the desirability of having “grandparenting type” figures within the church to offer practical support and guidance, given the absence or distance of their own parents. The church has the potential to provide significant intergenerational support in such situations, as midlife participants and clergy observed. Comments on this topic are included in Chapters Five, Six and Eight. Andrew (44) told me about his mother, who, after his father’s death, emigrated from South Africa to live nearer to his family:

I am quite glad my mother has chosen to come to New Zealand. ... Having her close by means that I can support her. Her health is declining, as she gets older, as she is going for procedures and operations, scans and things, so just being there for her at this stage of life is important. Having her local has just removed that worry.

In contrast, Alison (59) said that she had been travelling back and forth to visit her mother in a rest home, 140 kilometres away from her own home, every other weekend, until her mother died in 2015. Alison found close friends within the church to be a great source of support throughout this time.

For several participants in this project, the death of a parent occurred after a period of ill health in which the midlife interviewee took some responsibility for providing practical and emotional support. Debbie (51) has lost both her parents and her father-in-law as well. She told me, “Before the losing of them is the caring of them, and the whole role reversal and the journey that that takes you on. That was very rewarding but really challenging.” After her mother’s death Debbie’s father’s health declined, so he moved in with Debbie and her family, living with them for eighteen months before entering full-time care for the eight months before he died. “So we had him living with us, and then having him in care. So just that feeling of, you know, needing to still care, whether they

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328 Putney and Bengtson, “Families, Intergenerational Relationships, and Kinkeeping in Midlife,” 560. “Prolonged parenthood – when children remain home longer than expected, or don’t leave, or return to the “empty nest” not because of their parents’ needs but because of their own economic needs – has become a significant challenge in intergenerational relations at midlife.” Ibid., 535.
are with you or not, that sort of thing. So that was a big change.” I asked Debbie if her church community had been supportive. She said, “People were loving with food, and support and practical stuff – that was wonderful,” then added:

I don't know. Not a lot could be done. You know, when Dad was sick and he was in and out of hospital and it was doing my head in – you know, I was just worried – words were the only comfort. There was nothing that could be done. It was just a journey that we all had to go through. ...The whole parent illness and death thing ... it was pretty hard. Hard, hard, hard. Yeah. It's just how it is, I guess.

This is a journey that many people in midlife go through. Adjusting to the dependence of parents, who were once looked to for support, can be a painful transition. Making decisions about appropriate care, and implementing them, can also be very difficult.

Myers and Harper observe that, “The level of support for and facilitation of the caregiver role by other family members, friends, the workplace, social and religious organizations, and governmental agencies can affect the individual’s stress related to and satisfaction with caregiving.” In her forties, Karen (52) lived with her widowed mother for six years prior to her mother’s death. Karen was unable to identify specific ways in which the church had supported her around the time her mother died, but acknowledged that a factor that contributed to the church’s lack of attentiveness to her situation was that their parish had been seeking a new vicar at the time, and the new vicar was unaware of her circumstances and history. She realised that if she had asked for a pastoral visit someone from the church would have come, but said, “You don’t always want to be requesting it.” Some people, regardless of age, can find it difficult to ask for help. Midlife parishioners may appear to be in less need of support than people of other ages. The combination of these two factors can prevent some people in midlife from accessing pastoral care, even if they would appreciate it. Some church members are aware of the needs of middle-aged caregivers within their congregations, and do endeavour to lend a listening ear – which, as Debbie pointed out, may be one of the most useful supports that can be offered – to caregivers who are experiencing distress or grief.

In contrast to Karen’s experience, Murray (44), who described himself as having been in his Anglican parish almost all his life, found the church, and members of the clergy in particular, a significant source of support during his father’s final illness and following his father’s death. Murray admitted that offering the physical and emotional support to

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his father that he wished to provide during the nine months of his final illness became too much for him. “I actually took on too much. It overwhelmed me at the end.” He told me how hard it was to watch his father go “from doing everything to doing nothing,”

but continued:

The support from the parish minister and everybody else was great at the time. That was a big thing. And I really appreciated what was being done. ...

To me that was really important. I valued what was done. Mum valued what was done.

Despite the wonderful support that Murray and his family received from church members, after his father’s death Murray was diagnosed with chronic fatigue and ended up having several months off work.

Myers and Harper describe caregiving at midlife as “a singularly complex and multifaceted phenomenon.” While caregiving has “both positive and negative consequences, responses of caregivers are primarily explained in terms of stress, burden, and negative comorbid physical and mental health outcomes.”

Myers and Harper observe that there can be considerable anxiety surrounding both the possibility and the reality of caregiving before, during and after the caregiving experiences. In addition, caregiving can be socially isolating, may continue for a significant period of time, and may have long-term financial implications. It can also be difficult for people in midlife to manage other midlife challenges while dealing with issues relating to the caregiving role. They conclude, “Midlife caregivers need both social-emotional and instrumental support to deal first with issues of midlife, second with issues of caregiving, and finally with the special issues related to caregiving during the midlife period and managing the later life consequences of assuming the caregiver role.”

Each of the participants in this research who had the opportunity to provide care for elderly family members counted it a privilege to do so, but the burden of concern they carried was also evident. As life-expectancy increases, and the period of time that middle-aged people may feel a sense of responsibility and concern for older family members is extended, the need for parishes and church agencies to attend to the needs of midlife caregivers, as well as those for whom they care, will also increase. These are significant issues, which will be explored further in Chapters Five, Six and Eight.

330 Ibid., 132.
331 Ibid., 138.
**Bereavement**

While life expectancy is increasing, and many people remain in good health well beyond the “threescore and ten” (Psalm 90:10 KJV) considered in earlier eras to be a reasonable life span, a predictable aspect of midlife experience is the loss of one or both parents. It is “perhaps the most normative stressful life event of midlife,”\(^3\) according to Carolyn Aldwin and Michael Levenson. Aldwin and Levenson note that the death of the first parent may lead to middle-aged offspring having to assume greater responsibility “not only for their own lives, but for the remaining parent,” but the loss of the second parent is an even more significant event: “While relatively little hard data exist, it is likely that losing the buffer of the parent generation leads to a shift in identity and perhaps in values and behaviors.”\(^4\) As Alison (59) observed, part of the significance of losing both parents in midlife is that ‘then you realise, ‘we’re it’.” In addition to those already mentioned, several more midlife interviewees spoke about their experiences of bereavement. As well as describing the loss of parents, two mentioned the death of a sibling, and one spoke about the loss of a spouse. Several described the place of their Christian faith in responding to these events.

Judith (60) shared two experiences of bereavement. When Judith was forty, her eldest sister died suddenly, in an accident. Judith told me that this shook her sense of identity as she felt that her sister was an intrinsic part of who she was, and an integral part of her childhood and past. The fact that there was no chance to say goodbye was also something Judith found very hard. Her sister’s death, unlike the death of older relatives before, made Judith realise that “we are all vulnerable.” It happened out of the blue. She said, “That was a big thing for me to deal with.” At the age of fifty-three Judith joined the Catholic Church, after many years of active involvement in a Protestant denomination. She says that she observed a different attitude towards death among Catholic people:

> Suddenly death was part of life, I realised. A widow would come to mass two days after her husband had died. *[She sounds surprised.]* To me it had been this unexpected event that shouldn’t be there, and almost to be feared – and death is out of the ordinary. That’s how it had been. And now it was part of life.

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\(^4\) Ibid., 195. American spelling retained from the original.
Judith explained that she had always found consolation from her faith in times of bereavement, but Catholics even pray for the dead (something which she added took a bit of getting her head around) “and I realised that that line between life and death is such a tiny thin one.” Having a sense of the communion of saints gave her an understanding of death that was “pretty helpful” when her mother died. “It doesn’t take away any of the grief, but I think that for me death is in a healthier perspective.”

Phil (53) has come from a big family with thirteen aunties and uncles. He told me, “When you’re in a big family you are always going to funerals. So it does make you think about your own life and your own spirituality, really.” Phil’s father died quite suddenly at the age of fifty-four, from a brain haemorrhage, when Phil was twenty-three. Phil’s sister died of cancer when she was forty-seven. Phil said:

I’ve had quite a lot of early death in my family and that’s always made me think about, you know, the afterlife, and what Christianity says about that, and what I needed to sort out for myself in terms of where we’re all headed and how we, you know, connect in death, and things like that.

He then explained how a number of losses in his life were influential in his decision to make a commitment to the Catholic Church, at the age of fifty. Later in the interview he added:

If there’s one thing you want to be, it’s buried in the Catholic Church. ‘Cause ... there’s this, you know, comfort in death ... the sense of comfort in death that Catholic churches seem to have. ... There’s this sort of normalcy about death that I like. ‘Cause it’s going to happen to us all.

For many people, awareness that death is something that is “going to happen to us all” intensifies in midlife. Jungian psychologist, Kathleen Brehony, dedicates a chapter of her book, *Awakening at Midlife*, to “Losses and Confronting Death.” She considers that “it is this new awareness of death that differentiates the midlife transition from every other transition that is experienced throughout life.”\(^{334}\) Brehony argues that a significant challenge of midlife is that “we are being asked to hold the tension of the opposites, to be in the dialectic of living fully while knowing that death and loss are inevitable.”\(^{335}\) For Christians, the church can (and often does) provide space for significant questions about life and death to be explored, and churchgoers frequently find the church to be a place of

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\(^{335}\) Ibid., 110.
nurture and loving care at times of bereavement. Further support for this assertion will be offered in Chapters Five and Six, in comments shared by midlife interviewees and by clergy.

**Other significant midlife challenges or opportunities**

A number of other major life events were part of the experience of individuals who were interviewed. Most of the following experiences were described by individual interviewees only – the exception being experiences of stress and grief generated by the Christchurch earthquakes – but they are worth noting because the individuals concerned considered them to be a significant part of their midlife journey. It is also possible that other participants may have experienced similar challenges but did not choose to talk about them. These events included the diagnosis and treatment of a life-threatening illness, adjusting to a spouse’s permanently altered health status, supporting a close friend with a terminal illness, divorce, and bankruptcy. One midlife interviewee spoke about significant marriage difficulties that had been worked through. The majority of participants from Christchurch described experiences of loss or trauma following the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes and aftershocks, which have affected, and are still affecting, their experience of midlife. More positively, some significant transitions for individuals included getting married (two of the midlife interviewees were married at the age of 40), gaining new qualifications, changing jobs, and making the decision to move from one suburb or city to another. Several of those in midlife, including some clergy and spiritual directors, had made the decision to move from one Christian denomination to another. These latter changes, desired and chosen by the participants, were considered by individuals to be opportunities for growth.

It would seem from much that is written about midlife, including articles that appear regularly in mainstream media, that some of the dominant issues facing those in middle age include concern about signs of aging, anxiety about declining physical abilities, and, for women, distress about coping with various symptoms of menopause. With the exception of comments made about the physical demands of certain occupations, none of these things was mentioned by the midlife participants in this project.\textsuperscript{336} It is impossible to know whether the absence of comment on these issues was due to the questions the participants were asked, their perceptions of what the interviewer (as a

\textsuperscript{336} Some of the members of the clergy and some spiritual directors, who were in later midlife, did mention menopause and declining physical abilities.
student of theology) might wish to hear, the personal nature of some of these topics, or simply that the individuals who were interviewed did not consider these issues to be a particularly important part of their midlife experience. Given the openness of the interviewees on a number of diverse and equally sensitive issues their silence on these matters would suggest that, if they had thought about them, they did not consider them to be as significant as the other challenges of midlife they chose to raise.

**Personal and spiritual development in midlife**

As they reflected on the challenges and opportunities of midlife, participants were invited to describe something of their “inner journey,” considering ways in which their views, values and faith had developed. As their comments about midlife challenges and opportunities revealed, many participants were conscious of some period of evaluation and reflection that was connected with the stage of life they had reached. As one participant put it, “You get to a stage when you think, ‘Well, what actually gives my life meaning? ... Why am I doing what I’m doing?’” These sentiments were echoed in many of the interviews with people in midlife and also in interviews with the clergy and spiritual directors. This section commences with comments from participants whose questions and uncertainties were very much at the forefront of their minds. One of these participants used the term “crisis,” somewhat tentatively, to describe her current experience. However, many of the midlife participants who described a sense of disequilibrium did so having reached a point of some clarity and acceptance about situations they had formerly found perplexing or unsettling.

Although most midlife interviewees readily described some challenges that midlife presented, they were also quick to point out the blessings and benefits of middle age. Many perceived midlife to be a time in which life lessons could be absorbed and applied in positive ways, even if some of those lessons were derived from difficult situations. James Fowler notes, “One of the peculiar dimensions of the experience of midlife and beyond is the strange mixture of continuity and sameness with one’s own earlier and younger self, combined with the unmistakable and powerful signals that one has entered quite different seasons.” Interviewees’ reflections on significant inner shifts were made alongside observations that much had remained the same. Ten felt that their faith and values were essentially stable – and brought stability to their lives – although such

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statements were often qualified in some way. Overlaps between participants’ comments about faith development and the observations they made about their church experiences will become apparent in the next chapter.

Karen (Anglican, 52) described a period of “dramatic upheaval” in her mid-thirties when she gave up a successful career, embarked on tertiary study, then worked overseas in a completely different role for several years. She felt that time was a significant period of reassessment and revaluation of what she was doing and where she was going. Now in her early fifties, she has noticed:

The same thing’s happening again – but not quite – but you know, sort of another questioning and, I don’t know how you describe it, time of rethinking things, and changes, and reassessing things. So I don’t know. Maybe I’m having, maybe I’ve had, two midlife crises or transitions or whatever you call them. And um, and it’s not quite in the same way. It’s just, maybe, I don’t know, taking stock and thinking [she laughs and adopts the voice of a very elderly person], “Where have all the years gone? How did I get here?” ... It’s weird, it’s hard to describe, I guess. Like I am kind of reassessing things or, um, processing things. I just find it hard to describe what’s actually happening.

Karen described this reassessment as relating to “the whole of life” as she looked at her career and relationships and her faith. She said, “It’s kind of a weird sensation, too. ... I don’t know. It’s confusing at times, yeah.” Later in her interview Karen described some changes that she had observed in her faith. She felt that in her twenties, she was “certain about things” and had “strong opinions about this, that, and the other – this is right, and that’s wrong.” Now, she observed, “There are a lot of things that I’m less certain about. And that’s OK. ... Probably in terms of faith the important things are still as clear and I’m confident about them. But there’s a lot of greyness round the edges.”

Raewyn (Presbyterian, 47) had a sense of development in her faith but she also found this difficult to describe. A significant aspect of Raewyn’s spiritual journey in midlife has been participating in a prayer group which includes healing ministry. She alluded to this several times during her interview, and the following comments seemed to be connected to her thoughts about what she had learned through her participation in that ministry:

Sometimes I think in my forties I have sort of changed a lot in my approach to Christianity. ... [She speaks somewhat hesitantly as she thinks this through.] Friends that I have made ... have sort of opened my eyes up to see Christianity in a different way, really. I don’t know, um, just being more open to, well, possibilities, really. That it’s not just, has to be like this, you know.
This is how Christianity is. ... It’s hard to express, really. ... Maybe that’s a midlife thing. I don’t know. Or it’s just being exposed to different things. ... Over the last few years I have just come to realise that the whole Christianity thing has become more ... I think there is so much more than I understand.

In contrast to Raewyn, Andrew (Anglican, 44) felt that his faith had remained “rock-steady,” supported by the stability of the institutional church. Andrew has had a strong faith since his mid-twenties, and he told me:

That has kept me on firm solid ground. So while, I guess, the issues of day-to-day life come and go, and overwhelm me from time to time, falling back on what I know to be true and rock-steady has always been good. Nothing has come along to actually shake that faith and confidence I have, so far. [He laughs.] So that’s been good. So, no, I wouldn’t say my faith is any shallower or any deeper. It’s just been fairly solid, I think.

Andrew did acknowledge that at midlife “there are certain issues and crises that start coming up.” He mentioned that these might be related to finances, work or family, and observed, “It’s the stage where people do start worrying about issues and things.” Andrew added:

The church is a very slow-moving engine. [He laughs.] And so, you know, while we may have our ups and downs, you can always know that um, yeah, the church services, and the faith, and the principles, and everything it entails, it’s going to be solid. It’s a solid foundation.

Like Andrew, Richard (48) talked about his Catholic faith in terms of stability and continuity. Richard felt that he had always had an “adult” approach to the church. He said that he always liked priests and teachers who did not present faith simplistically; he liked to think “up” and be stretched. Richard told me that he had always had a sense of being involved in something that was “not only world wide, but we trace very strongly back to Jesus and the Last Supper.” He described his faith as being “very deep rooted. It’s never changed.” Richard then qualified the statement that his faith has remained unchanged. He told me that adulthood has brought him a greater understanding of the weaknesses of all people. Richard told me that he has realised that people struggle with lots of things but still feels that we are “called to something beyond us.” Self-reflection and the willingness to change are integral to that process:

In order to respond to the call we do have to think about who we are and how we live our lives, and what changes we might need to make. “God loves me as I am” isn’t enough. It’s good to know that God accepts us as we are – everyone needs to know it – but to follow Jesus means making changes.
Malcolm (52) had a Catholic upbringing but had little to do with the church after his teens. He now attends an Anglican church. When asked about shifts in his beliefs and values, Malcolm did not feel that he had changed dramatically, but he described significant gradual shifts that have occurred in his adult life. He said:

I’m just carrying values that I have always had that were instilled in me when I was young. … I think maybe you are just aware of those things in a different way as you, you know, go through your life. And perhaps there are different levels of importance that you attach to them at different stages of your life.

Malcolm still considered himself a Christian when he was away from the church for thirty years. He felt he may have been expressing Christian values in a secular way but they were still important to him. When asked if he could explain a little more about the way some of his values and priorities have changed, Malcolm said:

I think, you know, when you're younger, maybe in your twenties, thirties and perhaps even forties, you're just busy living your life – well, that's my experience. ... I guess in my forties, actually, and now my fifties, um, I am more conscious of the spiritual aspect of life, and what that might mean, and what that might mean for me, what that might mean for me and my work and, you know, in other environments, rather than just me personally. [He pauses.] But it's just an awareness. It's not necessarily an activity, if that makes sense.

Michelle (58) is a Catholic sister in a religious order. She described her midlife experience as “quite exciting, really, as well as challenging.” In telling me about elements of her inner journey which she considered to be important, she said:

You get to a stage when you think, “Well, what actually gives my life meaning?” You know, I guess prior to that you just lived your life and did all the things you did, but without necessarily reflecting too much on it. ... I got to a stage where I really thought, “Well, why am I doing what I’m doing?” You know, “Is this actually giving me energy, giving me life, giving me ... you know, am I fulfilling the dreams that I had, or something like that? ... What is important in my life?”

Michelle was in her late thirties when she professed her vows as a religious sister. She believed that the questions she had been grappling with helped her to say yes to that call, after some time of resisting it. Michelle notices that she now has more certainty about what she really does believe is important to her. She said, “It's a time when I have stopped and listened more deeply to myself.” Michelle described herself as having become “more introspective” and more drawn to taking time away, “just to stop ... and
get myself back on track, really.” After further reflection about personal changes in midlife Michelle added:

Maybe I have previously taken more note of external authority, whereas I think now it’s more internal … now my own authority, I’m really trusting that more, not having to rely on feedback from others or, you know, I think I’m getting more OK around who I am and not having to please others too much. I don’t always have to be given affirmation, although it’s nice to get it.

A number of midlife interviewees described feeling much more relaxed in midlife about matters that might have been sources of real anxiety in the past. In some cases, as in Michelle’s, people described being less concerned about the opinions of others. Mary d’Apice, author of Noon to Nightfall: A Journey Through Midlife and Ageing, observes that this shift is quite common in midlife. She writes, “As we uncover inner strengths and resources, we become less bound by the expectations of others, the ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ of childhood and the approval of the outside world. We reach a new freedom and security in our own values and opinions.” 338 Lachman identifies “better emotional regulation,” “increased wisdom and practical intelligence,” and “a strong sense of mastery,” 339 as further qualities associated with development in this life stage. Almost half of the interviewees described having greater self-confidence, less anxiety, or a deeper sense of contentment than they had experienced earlier in life. Approximately half of the participants also spoke of ways in which they felt they had been able to build on lessons drawn from past experiences. Many also talked about the responsibility they now felt to share their wisdom and experience with others for whom they had become role models, and they expressed gratitude that opportunities to support others in this way had multiplied.

Talia (Presbyterian, 53), whose forties were turbulent, believed that God had been looking after her, despite the fact that she had gone through “the good, the bad and the ugly.” She felt she had taken for granted many beautiful things that God had led her to, but now thinks that she has now grown up a lot. Talia went on to explain that she had learned a lot from her mistakes, failures, and life experiences. She expressed the belief that whatever will occur in the next chapter of her life will be better, saying, “I have learned not to repeat what I have done.” Other participants also felt that they had learned from both negative and positive life experiences. Keith (47) told me, “I just think

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that you do learn a lot about life from the things that you’ve done.” One significant thing Keith felt he had learned was to be more comfortable making “howlers,” knowing that things like that don’t really matter, and others will have forgotten them ten minutes later. When I asked if that was something that he thought was a natural part of his temperament, he said, “No, definitely not.” In the past he would have been greatly concerned about howlers he had made, months later. Now he thinks, “At the end of the day, who really cares?” When I observed that it seems to be characteristic of midlife that people become a little less concerned about other’s opinions, and more comfortable living with their own strengths and flaws, Keith agreed. He said, “There’s so many things out there, and you’ve only tried an nth of them. So you try another thing, and you might find that’s another strength which you could add to your bow, and if it doesn’t work, then ... just try something else. It doesn’t matter.”

Alison (59) described a similar sense of reduced anxiety about the future. She ascribed this, at least in part, to experience of God’s faithfulness:

> I used to be anxious about finances and the future ... and I’m not any more. I guess that’s the advantage of getting to a certain age. You can track back and you can see, despite my ridiculous behaviour, despite my walking away from God, despite all of that, the constant – God never gives up. Never, ever, ever.

Ian (41), the youngest participant in this project, also reflected on the lessons of previous decades which he hopes to be able to apply now and in the future. Like Alison, Ian made an explicit link between “building on experience” and being “a person of faith”:

> I guess there’s a sense to me, in midlife, that you’re building on experience, of seeing how experiences you’ve picked up, and skills you’ve picked up, are now being used and built on. That, to me, is the sense of midlife. It’s the benefit of getting a certain amount of time under your belt, to be able to look back and see a few of the dots, and that could be, if you’re a person of faith like myself, attributing God to connecting some of those dots in skills, experience, to be able to use those things where I am today, [quite a long pause] but still having a few skills and experiences that haven’t quite found their place. ... I guess that’s why I’d call it early midlife because ... there’s still a few bits and pieces that you’re looking to come together.

Myers and Harper state, “Persons in midlife often experience a general mellowing in response to life events, understanding that things tend to work out given sufficient time, combined with a renewed sense of meaning concerning the importance of various life
events.” Comments made by participants interviewed for this project uphold this observation.

Although many interviewees described having faced significant challenges in midlife, several also conveyed a sense of deep contentment about their midlife experience. Those who felt that at midlife they had achieved a degree of financial stability, and were enjoying good health, satisfying work and leisure opportunities, and positive relationships within their families, expressed real gratitude for the situations in which they found themselves. Among the interviewees selected for this project those who were most openly expressive about their contentment and gratitude were men, but, as has already been noted in earlier examples relating to work and changing family commitments, some women also felt themselves to be in a very satisfying phase of life.

Keith (47) is married and has a son of primary school age. He reflected on the blessings of his current situation and the changes he has observed in his priorities and values. First, he told me that he would struggle to describe the difficulties of midlife, because “it’s all been quite positive for me.” He went on to explain this statement, starting by describing a balance between stability and flexibility in midlife:

‘Cause when you are in midlife generally your debts are low, because you’ve paid off cars and houses, and so, um, you’ve got that little bit extra. ... And we’ve got time that we can go and do things. ... It’s a great age, to be honest, I must admit! ... If I, when I was eighteen or nineteen, thought I was going to be in this position, I think I'd be quite satisfied. ... I have everything which I need.

Keith explained a significant shift in his values that he believes has occurred in midlife. He said that in the first half of his life he was pretty focused on becoming financially secure, but now he has little interest in making money. “Just volunteering time is a bit more of a stimulant to me than, you know, actually earning lots of money. Which is, yeah, I didn’t ever really think I’d be like that,” he admitted. The pleasure and satisfaction he gains from volunteering his time and skills, both in the service of the church and in other parts of the community, was a recurring theme in Keith’s interview. When I made the observation that this appeared to be a very happy and stable period for him, he replied:

It’s one of those things you can’t really sort of explain ... to someone who’s young, but when you sort of get there, you know, you wake up in the morning and you make yourself a cup of coffee and sit on the back deck and, you

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know, overlook the veggie garden and sort of think, you know, “How lucky am I?”

At the end of the interview, Keith summarised his attitude towards midlife, saying, “I think a lot of people do tend to look on midlife as a big ‘ick’ [he made a disgusted noise, not readily recorded in writing] but, as I say, I like it.” According to Barbara Bradley Hagerty, those who “thrive” in midlife “shift their energy and attention from seeking happiness to finding meaning, from achieving success to cherishing people and paying attention to moments.” The picture of Keith sitting contentedly with a cup of coffee on his back deck, overlooking his veggie garden and appreciating all that his life holds, is certainly one of someone “thriving” in midlife.

Simon (48) also reflected on his increased contentment at midlife, saying, “I’m approaching fifty but I think I’m now reasonably happy with my life. It’s funny, it’s taken me a long time to reach that point in my life.” When asked about how his sense of contentment connects with his faith, Simon said:

I think too often we forget about the little things in life that we need to be grateful for. ... Through the earlier part of your life you, um, you worry about bringing up your kids and making sure they get a good education, paying the mortgage, paying the bills, planning for your retirement. ... We’re living reasonably comfortably and that’s not a focus, not an issue, so it gives you time to reflect on those other things – the enjoyment and pleasures that life can bring you. Yeah, all those other things, which we’re really grateful for, that God’s created and given us the opportunity to experience. ... Going for a bike ride, going for a walk up the hill, all of God’s creations ... I think middle age is quite a happy place for me.

Simon went on to reflect on the responsibility he now feels to offer leadership and guidance to younger people. Generativity – variously described as mentoring, being a role model, sharing life experience, and so on – was mentioned by at least five other midlife interviewees, as they described their roles and responsibilities at church or within their families and workplaces. (A number of clergy, who were in their fifties, also spoke with great enthusiasm about the opportunities they found they now had to help those younger than themselves.) Simon said:

I suppose you’ve had forty-eight years of life, and along the way you’ve learnt a lot of things, and experienced a lot of things. And I guess you’ve developed a certain amount of wisdom through that, through life’s experiences. So you’re

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341 Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 44.
... looked up to from younger people because of your life experiences and your knowledge that you’ve gained.

Phil (53) spoke of the satisfaction and fulfilment he and his wife get from being able to act as mentors in a pre-marriage course offered in their Catholic diocese. It demands a significant time commitment but Phil feels very glad to be able to contribute to the lives of the people who are attending. “You’re actually doing something really amazing.” He believes that a lot of the people who attend the marriage course would otherwise never have thought about some of the things they talk about there. “They always end up getting something out of it.” Phil is glad that the young couples they have worked with also feel that they have someone they can come and talk to later on, too. He said, “As we go on, we become that couple that were mentors to us, you know, when we were younger. ... We’re going to be them, in ten or twenty years, or a bit longer. It’s so cool.” Pastoral theologian, Donald Capps, notes, “Real generativity reflects an altruistic concern for the care and nurture of others, but also involves the mature adult’s need to be needed.”342 Phil’s genuine enthusiasm about his mentoring role perfectly illustrates both.

At several points during her interview, Alison (58) described the encouragement and support offered to her by significant mentors. At present an elderly couple in her Presbyterian parish provide ongoing prayer support and counsel when she seeks it, which she greatly appreciates. Alison also perceives herself as someone who is now able to act as a mentor to others. After the interview she emailed me to say, “I reflected that the key people in my life at pivotal moments were all Christians in the 40-60 bracket! And I feel my last ten years have been about God using me to be that person in others’ lives.” Debbie (51) summed up other midlife participants’ comments when she remarked on the balance that is desired by people in midlife. “We need people we look to and respect and admire, and those who we encourage.” As will be seen in the following chapters, this theme rose repeatedly in the interviews with members of the clergy and with the spiritual directors, as well as in interviews with other midlife churchgoers. The church is clearly one context in which mutual support of this nature can be shared. Whether it can do so more effectively and proactively will be explored in Chapter Eight.

Summary

Interviews with churchgoers aged between forty and sixty confirmed that midlife is a period of complexity. It is clear that many New Zealanders who fall within this age range are, among other things, juggling the conflicting demands of work and family life, caring for those who are younger and/or those who are older than themselves, coping with significant personal transitions, reflecting on the meaning of their lives, and, in some cases, adjusting to the departure of children from home or to the death of loved ones. Some interviewees in later midlife were adjusting to having more flexibility of time and resources than they had ever had before. The desire for “balance” in these and other aspects of life emerged as a recurring motif in the interviews. Midlife participants experienced some tension in finding a constructive balance between work and other responsibilities, stability and novelty, continuity and change, and being looked up to and looking up to others, among other dichotomies. Individuals also acknowledged that busyness, stress, anxiety about the future, awareness of personal limitations (including physical limitations), and increasing consciousness of the inevitability of death, were, or had been, part of their experience of midlife.

Given the prevalence of these themes, both in the interviews and also in much of the literature relating to midlife, it is noteworthy that so many of the midlife participants who contributed to this project expressed contentment and gratitude as they reflected on their midlife experience. Those who described themselves as being happier, less anxious about the future, and more grateful for their circumstances, also described significant challenges which they had faced or were still facing; it was not that one group of interviewees was contented while another group was struggling. Experiences of coping well with past challenges and learning from them, readjustment of goals and priorities – clarifying what’s “really important” – and trust in God’s faithfulness, contributed to many midlife interviewees’ appreciation of their present circumstances. They had learned that there were many aspects of life over which they had little control, but they were able to “derive meaning from what they had,” rather than focusing on “what they lacked or had not achieved.”

Several themes which have significant ramifications for clergy and congregations emerged from the interviews with those in midlife. The place and meaning of work in

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midlife experience, shifting dynamics within marriages and families, care of caregivers, consolation for the bereaved, and opportunities to build strong intergenerational relationships that harness the wisdom and skills of people of all ages, are a few of these. Chapters Five and Six explore and illustrate how parishes are helping churchgoers to respond to these and other midlife issues.
Chapter Five: Midlife Interviews – Experiences of Church

*How can church[es] help people out if they don’t know what people need?*
– Talia (Presbyterian, 53)

Midlife churchgoers were asked to describe their parishes, their participation in various aspects of church life, and how they felt about their church involvement. They were also invited to describe ways that the church was providing support to them in their midlife journey, and asked to offer suggestions about further forms of support that could be extended to people in midlife. Almost all of those who were interviewed were involved in some aspect of parish life in addition to attending services of worship. Regardless of denomination, there were striking similarities among interviewees’ responses about the aspects of church they most valued; lessons can certainly be drawn from the observations midlife interviewees made about the ways that clergy and fellow parishioners were supporting them in their spiritual development and in navigating some of the challenges they were facing during this life stage. Churchgoers’ opinions about forms of pastoral support that might usefully be offered were more diverse.

Given the methods used to select participants, it is not surprising that almost all of the churchgoers interviewed for this project described having some sense of “belonging” in their parishes, although several people described feeling slightly less connected to church than they had at earlier stages of life, and a few acknowledged that aspects of parish life were difficult for them. Almost half of the midlife churchgoers who were interviewed said that they appreciated the support of other parishioners who were in a similar stage of life, and who could understand and identify with their current experiences. Even more – sixteen out of twenty participants – stated that they valued the intergenerational nature of the church, and appreciated opportunities to mix with and learn from Christians of other ages. Several female participants described cherished friendships with older women in their parishes who had time to listen to them and who could offer fresh perspectives on questions they had or situations they faced, and to whom they, in turn, could offer support. Male and female interviewees both spoke about the place of small groups in nurturing their faith and deepening their relationships, regardless of whether those groups gathered formally or informally or for overtly spiritual or purely social purposes. Many interviewees had a sense of genuine fellowship with other parishioners, whether this was experienced in congregational gatherings or in small group contexts.
In this chapter, midlife participants’ comments about their experiences of church are divided into six sections. The first section examines interviewees’ experiences of pastoral care. Next, their observations about church services are presented. These are grouped under a number of subheadings as participants spoke about diverse aspects of the services they attended, such as music, homilies or sermons, sacraments, and children’s ministries. Third, participants’ comments about small groups within the church are recorded. These comments are divided into two parts, according to gender, as there were some notable differences, as well as similarities, in women and men’s perspectives and experiences of small groups within the church. The fourth section examines midlife churchgoers’ experiences of service within the church, in a range of roles. In the fifth section, interviewees’ experiences of church as a place of prayerful reflection are explored. Suggestions made by participants about support or opportunities clergy and congregations could consider providing or promoting for Christians in midlife are presented in the final section of the chapter.

Midlife churchgoers’ experiences of pastoral care

Midlife churchgoers had differing experiences of pastoral care within their communities, as was illustrated by some of the comments recorded in the previous chapter. Their experiences reflected the priorities and skills of clergy and other individuals in positions of influence, and the effectiveness of pastoral care structures within particular parishes, as well as individuals’ willingness and ability to seek support when desired. Many of those interviewed felt that the church offered very effective care at times of crisis, but several participants expressed the view that secondary levels of need, particularly of people in midlife, can easily be overlooked. Only five of the twenty midlife interviewees described specific occasions when clergy or pastoral workers offered them pastoral support. Five others explicitly stated that in their parishes the needs of those in midlife are generally overlooked. One Anglican interviewee, Karen (52), told me that in her parish there is little awareness of the needs of midlife churchgoers: “Like there’s not much going on [in midlife]. So you just leave people to their own devices.” A number of other participants from each of the denominations represented in this project expressed similar opinions about the limited pastoral care offered to people in midlife. Raewyn (47), who worships in a Presbyterian parish, said, “People of my age are more sort of doing things to help others, or to be involved. I don’t think we expect support.” Whether or not pastoral support is expected, it was clear from midlife participants’ comments
that there are certainly times when it is needed, and other times when it would simply be appreciated. Churchgoers in midlife, even those who appear to be doing quite well, do need to receive support from others, for, as Margie Lachman observes, “The absence of support or the experience of strain can wreak havoc on middle-aged adults, leading to stress and illness.”

Several interviewees were deeply appreciative of the pastoral care the church had extended to them, and to their families, at times of real difficulty. Phil (Catholic, 53) expressed sincere gratitude for the pastoral care he received from clergy and from fellow parishioners during some of the significant challenges he has faced in midlife. Phil had major heart surgery at the age of forty-five. His medical diagnosis was unexpected, and he found himself “panicking” when given only one week’s notice of his operation. He and his wife went to mass one night that week. The priest, who had had a similar operation, spoke personally to Phil and offered him reassurance:

> Being there and just sort of feeling that sort of shared experience – on so many levels – on a spiritual level, on practical level, of a guy who had been through everything I was about to go through, you know, it just made me feel, it just made me deal with things a whole lot better.

After the operation Phil received a lot of on-going support from the priest and from lay people within the parish. Just going to mass, people came up to Phil and asked how he was getting on and said it was great to see him. “Tons and tons of people were friendly and helpful.” Reflecting further on this experience, Phil made the following observation:

> In parishes you get a cross-section of people, who’ve all been through stuff, so you know about the stories of the older and the younger and you see it happening all around you. And you know that you’re going to have support. And I always felt that. You can’t not, really, when people know that you’re in strife. They always rally round you. And it’s gorgeous that they can do that. But they do. They really do.

The fact that so many fellow parishioners were willing to make the time to ask Phil how he was, and shared their personal experiences with him, was clearly something that he found very helpful, yet it seems probable that many of the individuals who spoke to him would have been unaware that their words and actions meant so much to him, and few would have considered their comments to constitute “pastoral care.” In supporting people in midlife, however, it is evident that lending a listening ear or speaking a few

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words of encouragement can be exactly what is most needed and appreciated. When parishes provide informal contexts in which such conversations can occur, midlife churchgoers (and parishioners of other ages, of course) certainly benefit. Many Christians find that small groups within the church are environments within which pastoral support of this nature may be found; aspects of small group involvement are explored in some detail in the third section of this chapter.

Talia (Presbyterian, 53) described the pastoral care she had received from a minister, and from members of a parish, when she chose to return to the church when she was in her forties. Talia had reached a point in her life when she was facing multiple challenges which were threatening to overwhelm her. Feeling “absolutely down,” she started to think back to her family in Samoa, and that reminded her of her values. She realised that she needed help and she felt that the only place she would get help was through the church and through prayer:

I was going through life crisis and I thought, “I need to go back. There’s no other place for me to find the good people.” I think my association with people got me into trouble. My associations with the wrong people led me ... to hurt myself. And that’s how I got hurt, ’cause I was with the wrong crowd. So that’s why I decided I needed to go back to God. So I came to church. I decided to go to church.

Talia went on to describe going to her local Presbyterian church and being warmly greeted by the minister and finding the whole congregation very friendly. The minister was extremely welcoming on that first Sunday, so she made an appointment to see him in his office that same week, to share her problems. “He listened to every word” in confidence, and prayed for her. And he visited her again at home that week. Talia said, “That was kind of the start of the light in my life again. ... I was starting to look at the positive things, rather than all these negatives, negatives, negatives. And to put everything behind me. ... That was a point of hope.” Talia continues to attend the parish she turned to at that time of need, and is now well integrated into the congregation. Having received support at a pivotal time in her life, she now feels, “I’m a family member there. ... It’s that sense of belonging to my church that makes me, that keeps me, as a Presbyterian.”

When reflecting on pastoral care in her Anglican parish, Nina (43) felt that her church does quite well in supporting people in crisis – she gave an example of a needy family in her parish that received wonderful wrap-around care from the church community – but
she expressed concern about the lack of support for people who are dealing with less obvious issues:

But there are also the others that are out there that don’t have huge significant issues, like the death of a spouse or someone who’s got a really serious illness, but it could be someone whose son is going through a troubling, a troubled, time, and they don’t know what to do … that don’t get much support. But they are in midlife and they’ve got a young person who’s struggling, where do they get support unless there are friendships that they’ve built? … It’s more that group that I kind of … [She trails off, but her silence implies her concern for the people who may not receive much support.]

When I asked, “These might be significant needs, but not necessarily acknowledged needs?” Nina agreed, and suggested that perhaps clergy need to think about “how we cover those people, in some way.”

Nina had given this issue careful consideration. During her interview she itemised what she considered to be some of the most significant pastoral needs of people in midlife. She observed that many people in midlife are coping with a lot of change, and she also identified multiple responsibilities that may be held by people in this life stage. Nina noted that people in middle age are often looking after teenagers and elderly folk at the same time, and, she pointed out, these people are often in senior roles at work as well:

So there’s quite a lot of pressure that they’re having to juggle. And I suspect that a lot of our families … are probably struggling in some areas. … The quieter families may not get as much support as they might not say, “We need some help.” But someone saying, “How’s it going?” or just popping over to have a visit, blah, blah, blah, that would come out.

Nina felt that establishing a formal pastoral care structure at her church would help these pastoral conversations to occur. She said, “It just seems to be pushed aside all the time. … And it’s been an issue for many years. And I just don’t understand that. And I don’t think the informal – just through the kumara wireless345 – is really always effective.” Nina then remarked on what she called “the yo-yoing between individual responsibility and corporate response.” She acknowledged that “there’s stuff that individuals can do” to find their own support from someone else, including from people outside the church, but she felt that there was a need for a “coordinated approach” within the church so that lay-people have an idea about what to do when they hear of issues coming up, and can tap other people on the shoulder to help, too.

345 “Through the kumara wireless” is a colloquial expression with some equivalence to the phrase “on the grape vine.” (In New Zealand sweet potatoes are called kumara.)
Nina described some additional challenges faced by multicultural congregations, such as her own, as different cultural groups have different practices and different ways of viewing the Christian life. For example, some cultures focus more on the immediate family, whereas others have a more extended-family approach to events. Nina thought that perhaps a diverse pastoral care team of some sort could help with those differences, or “just an awareness, actually, that some people do things differently” could be helpful. She went on to explain that in some cultures the family would expect the minister, not an assistant minister or a pastoral worker, to pray with the sick, for example. “There are some things like that, that are just different, and we need to be mindful of.” Other midlife interviewees also identified diversity as something that is desirable within pastoral teams. Grant (Presbyterian, 55) commented on the need to have people of different ages offering pastoral care. He suggested that a younger person with a young family might appreciate the encouragement or support of “someone who is almost like a parent figure,” or, alternatively, “someone in a similar situation to themselves who can ... identify a lot more with what they are going through.” And Grant felt that “the same applies to middle age as well”:

To try and explain issues of middle age to someone who has a young family – there is probably, might be, a bit of a disconnect there. So I think the support to the clergy is to have a wide pool of people and ages and marital status, experience, and that, to be able to call on, to draw on, to get support themselves. To be part of teams.

Interviewees from every denomination agreed that, given the diverse and numerous needs of people in every congregation, including people in midlife, pastoral care should not be left to ministers or a few church leaders but be exercised by everyone within a parish. It is unreasonable, and undesirable, to expect clergy to be able to meet the needs of all parishioners, as Grant pointed out. He said, “Some churches, ‘You’re getting paid to do the job – you sort it out,’ type thing, which is terrible because it puts a \textit{massive} strain on, you know, one or two leaders in the church.” Andrew (Anglican, 44) said that he saw pastoral care as happening “between people in the congregation. I don’t think it’s necessary for the minister to have to come along and wave a magic wand.” He felt that as the minister is juggling funerals, weddings, sermon preparation and some visitations and so on, the congregation should give them time to do that. He said, “We should be doing the rest of the care as a congregation, a group of believers.” Nina (Anglican, 43) questioned whether clergy themselves are getting the support and help that they need, especially as “most of them are probably in midlife themselves.” She wondered, "Do they
get spiritual direction? Do they go on retreats? Have they got friends that they can talk with, or a counsellor that they can see, before they lead the rest of us?” Many clergy in midlife are indeed dealing with issues which are similar to those facing their midlife parishioners, as a number of the priests and ministers’ comments, recorded in Chapter Six, reveal.

In reflecting on the needs of midlife parishioners in her parish, Karen (Anglican, 52) began by saying, “I am not sure if our church leadership is even aware of it [midlife] or even thinks of it as an area of need or support or concern or whatever. Which is interesting actually because [name], the vicar, must be a similar age to me.” There are younger families and elderly folk in Karen’s congregation but fewer people in the middle. However, Karen noted that the parish certainly includes some middle-aged couples with older children. She said, “There’s actually probably quite a lot of people coping with different changes. You know, looking after elderly parents, or kids leaving home, and that kind of thing. But it’s not really an area that’s acknowledged or dealt with at all.” I asked Karen what form pastoral support for people in midlife might take. What would be practical and helpful? She paused before replying:

I guess it’s hard to know. I guess even just finding out what people are dealing with. ’Cause I am sure there is a lot going on. ... Finding an opportunity to meet and just sort of talking with people about what they’re dealing with, what challenges they’re facing. Or maybe, maybe they’re expecting people to sort of say, put their hand up. ... A lot of people wouldn’t. They just get on with things. Well, I wouldn’t! I wouldn’t make an appointment to see [the vicar] and go in and say, “I’m dealing with all this stuff.” ... I’m sure if I went to somebody and said, you know, “I’d appreciate a visit”... somebody would come, but you don’t always want to be requesting it. You know, you want somebody to notice or, or you know, have an arrangement where you go around certain people so that everybody gets something once a year. They make contact, say, and say, “Let’s catch up for something-or-other.”

Karen’s comments reflect Nina’s observations about “the yo-yoing between individual responsibility and corporate response.” The difficulty in finding an appropriate balance between offering pastoral support to midlife parishioners and waiting for them to ask for it was mentioned by a number of midlife participants and also by clergy.

Karen was not alone in identifying “lack of awareness” and “lack of structure” as key obstacles to effective pastoral care for people in midlife. She said, “It’s only say if you went through, say, you lost a family member or you went through some particular crisis
that maybe that's when some attention would be given. But kind of dealing with day-to-day stuff ...” She trailed off, then added:

I guess partly it's there's only so many resources and you can't hit everything and so you target it in certain areas. And ours is very much directed to the kids and the youth and the young families’ support. Which is fine, because you need people coming in, otherwise the church just gets older and older and dies.

Parishes frequently reflect on their priorities and the use of their resources, partly because most work within narrow financial constraints to achieve their objectives. As Karen (and other participants) acknowledged, it is perfectly appropriate to prioritise the needs of certain groups over others. However, it appears almost certain that within many parishes in New Zealand the needs of midlife churchgoers are rarely considered in discussions about pastoral care. It is one thing to make choices about resourcing (not only of money, but also of time) when needs of all parishioners are given proper consideration. It is another to base such decisions on assumptions about the wellbeing of a cohort within the church without consulting them about what sorts of support they might value.

People in midlife are able to harness many personal resources and to draw on wisdom and strengths gained through life experience. However, it is clear from the comments made by midlife interviewees that, regardless of their ability to cope with the challenges of this life stage, they appreciate the support of other people within the church. Clergy and spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project also noted that if the pastoral and spiritual needs of people in midlife are not well understood, and church members are not accompanied by other Christians as they negotiate some of the challenges of this life stage, people in this age group may become disengaged from church. Participants’ comments suggest that a crucial component in offering pastoral care to churchgoers in midlife (and, by extension, to people of other ages) is for clergy and lay people to make time to ask others how they are and what they need, and then to listen attentively to their answers before responding. “Titiro, whakarongo, korero”346 – Look, listen, then speak.

346 A whakatauki (Maori proverb).
Midlife churchgoers’ experience of church services

It has already been noted that only a minority of middle-aged New Zealanders attend church. It may therefore be assumed that those who choose to attend church services with any degree of regularity do so out of a sense that church attendance is meaningful and worthwhile. The conviction that “it is right to offer thanks and praise”347 – that coming together to worship, pray, and to be open to God’s word and presence is a right and proper thing to do – is likely to be a primary motivation for many churchgoers, of any age, although few participants spoke directly about the reasons they chose to make churchgoing a priority. Rather, most talked about the encouragement and spiritual nourishment they derived from one or more elements of the services they attended. Significant connections with clergy, church leaders, or other members of the congregation, thoughtful sermons or homilies, music, and clearly structured liturgy, were repeatedly mentioned as being helpful. As one Presbyterian interviewee, Grant (55), put it, at the heart of what many people appreciate about their churches is “good teaching, good worship, and good fellowship amongst the people.” In addition, those participants whose churches had a strong sacramental tradition described receiving the Eucharist as central to their faith, and bringing tangible comfort. People from every denomination, and from across the theological spectrum, also expressed gratitude for opportunities the church provided for them to reflect and to pray, both during services and at other times.

Belonging to a community of faith

Most of the midlife churchgoers interviewed for this project commented on meaningful connections they had with other parishioners, and with clergy. The ability to establish and build close relationships did not appear to be directly related to parish size, although people from smaller churches frequently described having a sense of being part of a church “family” and were able to give examples of ways in which a strong sense of community was fostered and lived out. Participants from larger parishes perceived that there were both strengths and weaknesses in the size of their churches. The larger parishes were often very well resourced and were able to hold a number of church services of different types, offer a range of small groups, and sometimes ran diverse educational and social programmes. However, the fact that it was possible to offer

services which catered for different needs and preferences led to individual congregations within these parishes being somewhat homogenous in terms of parishioners’ ages and stages of life. Some midlife participants observed that while it was advantageous to be able to spend time with Christians who were experiencing similar challenges to themselves it was a pity that opportunities to build close relationships with older parishioners were reduced. Some midlife interviewees explicitly linked their sense of belonging to the church to their conviction that Christian values were shared by others with whom they worshipped. This was important to them.

Karen (52) is a member of an Anglican parish. She talked to me about why she attends church:

> It’s for the teaching ... and also for, you know, mixing and mingling with people, and the companionship. Well, particularly living alone. I mean I’m with people during the week at work, but I live alone. Even though I’m an introvert I do like to be around people on a Sunday morning and feeling we’re in the same place with the same aim. And ... it’s good to be encouraged and part of a community. It’s for that sense of community. That’s why I do it.

After her interview had concluded, Karen elaborated on this theme. As Karen’s comments have applicability to the many people in New Zealand who live alone – and almost a quarter of New Zealanders live in one-person households348 – I asked if we could re-start the recording so that she could repeat what she had said. She added:

> In daily life there’s not always a huge sense of community. For example, here I am living alone ... and I don’t always see a lot of my neighbours. Yes, you’re out and about with other people but you’re not interacting with them. And so church, church and the sense of community that provides, is a really important part of my life. Shared vision, shared goals, shared values, and a shared sense of identity.

In his interview, Richard (Catholic, 48) also suggested that the church is a place where people who might otherwise feel isolated may find genuine support. Like Karen, Richard lives alone. In his experience the church provides a context within which “unity and connectivity” may be found:

> As the world is becoming a lot more individual the church is offering that sense of unity and connectivity ... which is really important. All of the things

that supposedly connect us more now are really isolating us more. … They’re actually making people much more lonely. So the church is still real, as people do turn up bodily there. And while you can be thinking very individual thoughts while you are there you still are very aware that other people there are primarily doing what you’re doing.

I asked Richard if he was describing not just a sense of participation but of community. He replied, “It’s community and also communion. … Community is immediate, and the communion thing is the whole connecting down the ages and to heaven … so it’s all there. It’s very very rich in that way.”

A sense of “mystery” was expressed in a number of churchgoers’ descriptions of the support that participating in a faith community provides to them in midlife. Phil (53) has only recently become a member of the Catholic Church, although he has attended Catholic services with his wife and children for much of his adult life. Phil described the connection he feels with God and with others when he goes to communion. Similar experiences were mentioned by a number of other midlife interviewees from both Catholic and Anglican churches. Phil said:

For me, as I get older, I find great comfort in going to mass. You know, mass is a time of reflection. … You’re just sort of very much “in the zone”. You know, almost meditative. It’s meditative, you know? … There are times when I go and I am so tired and it doesn’t make any sense … but then you go to communion and that’s the point in the mass where you say, “Well, it don’t really matter what I’ve taken in and what I haven’t taken in, I’m with the team here,” you know. And you feel that connection.

Phil described his experience of receiving communion as “very fulfilling.” He said, “This is the comfort I need in my life. And you know, it’s amazing.” The fact that liturgical practices and lectionary readings are stable and predictable also bolsters Phil’s sense of connection with Christians throughout the world:

The beauty of the Catholic Church, or any church system, is you go to a church service or you go to mass anywhere in the world on any particular day and it’s the same reading. You know, there’s this unity to it all that appeals massively, isn’t there, really?

The unity of the church also “appeals massively” to Michelle (Catholic, 58). Belonging to a church community which regularly gathers together, with shared needs and hopes, is something which provides her with strength in this stage of her life journey:
Just the experience of knowing that we are all there with the same hopes, well, similar hopes, around coming together as a Catholic community, to celebrate Eucharist, to give thanks, to ... pray for the needs of our world, to be nurtured both through the Eucharist, through the word, with each other, that’s really, I think that supports me.

Malcolm (52) explained that he had a Christian upbringing. He was christened in the Catholic Church and he attended a Catholic primary school. But he “shied away from church and religion ... for the next thirty years, really.” He now regularly attends a mid-week Eucharistic service held at an Anglican church, not far from where he works. He told me about his attraction to this service and the community he has found himself part of:

I could just sort of sneak in on a Tuesday evening and I didn't have to front up with a congregation. It was always a small, a smaller gathering. You know, half a dozen to a dozen people. And um, I don't know, it was just easier that way, rather than turning up for a Sunday mass. And that sort of suited me. I found that was enough, really.

Malcolm appreciates the style of worship offered at this service, which is “a more contemplative style of worship. So it’s more silence and, ah, the liturgy’s fairly formal. And I just like the space that that gives you.” The service does not include a homily or sermon, but Malcolm does not miss that, saying he attends for the “ritual of the Eucharist.” The service takes half an hour. “It’s just easy to slot into your week,” said Malcolm, but he emphasised that this was not the only (or primary) reason he chose to go at that time:

It’s a different thing to a Sunday service. I mean I always felt that I could just come in, be there for it, and go. You know, there’s no need for conversation ... you’re in your own space ... it’s not a communal thing. I mean, people are coming together, but it’s a bit more individual. I went to it for a long time and I didn’t even know people’s names ... I saw them week after week, but I didn’t know their names.

Later in the interview Malcolm reflected further on this church experience. His comments revealed that, although he appreciates not being required to engage in conversation, he does have a sense of deep connection with others who attend the midweek service he attends, and he draws strength from their prayerful presence. Describing himself as a fairly “passive participant,” Malcolm said, “I guess I go for spiritual nourishment and I feel I get that.” He elaborated:
When I go there and sit amongst that congregation, um, compared to my work, and all the people I deal with during the week, I just get the sense that there’s real spiritual power there, in these frail people. Real or perceived, I don’t know. But it’s like … you see, they’re very gentle people. And just that whole thing, it just seems like there’s power in it. You know, you get a sense of that, which is almost an oxymoron.

The sense of spiritual nourishment and strength that Malcolm draws from his participation in this contemplative Eucharistic service is similar to that experienced by Judith (60) as she attends mass in her Catholic parish. Judith described as “surprising” the support that she feels she receives from the church “through sensing the devotion to Christ of other people.” She said:

You know when you go to mass and you just see other people filing up reverently, taking communion, all expressing their need for Christ. The foot of the cross being really level, and, like, rich and poor, and together and not-so-together … and young and old, and I just find other people’s devotion to Christ – because it’s not a showy way at all, it’s just this humility – and, um, I find that actually really supportive. … I find that inspires devotion in me, too.

**Church music**

Judith sings in a church choir. In addition to describing the strong connection with other Christians that she feels when receiving communion, she explained the place that involvement in church music plays in worship for her. For Judith, singing in a choir is primarily “something little I can do to make this offering to God, to make other people’s spirits soar, and to also reflect the beauty of God in the music” but in recent years it has also become “the fellowshippy bit” of her church experience. Judith loves “that sense of doing something together.” Two other midlife interviewees were members of church choirs. Richard (Catholic, 48) described the way he experiences God through sacred music. He said, “I have a good sense of the transcendent God through the Church’s music. [I] have that sense of God’s bigness, my smallness, but not in a dismissive way, but in a really good way, to know that I’m not the centre of my own universe.” Like Judith, Richard felt that involvement in choral music contributed to a sense of belonging. He said, “There’s a whole lot of things that you would probably seek in other groups if you didn’t have music. … The people that are drawn into the music, that’s a family within the church.” Murray (Anglican, 44) also loves being involved in music, and the sense of fellowship with others that this gives him. This year, for the first time, Murray has become a cantor at his church. An interim priest had put out a survey to parishioners asking about ministries that people might like to be involved in, or to relinquish, which
enabled Murray to express his interest in this role.\textsuperscript{349} He admitted, “I’m quite shy. I’ve always been able to sing.” Murray really enjoys being able to get together on a Sunday with four or five other very musical people in the church. “We can just do parts – just like that. It’s good fun.”

Three interviewees belonged to church choirs, but almost half of the midlife churchgoers mentioned music as playing an important part in their experience of worship. There was a broad spectrum of tastes in music among the churchgoers who expressed opinions about this aspect of the services they attended. Some midlife churchgoers who were interviewed attended more than one service because they were drawn to the style of music offered. Gail (41), who belongs to a large Anglican parish and attends a service at that church which offers a strong children’s programme, sometimes goes with her family to an evening service at a Pentecostal church. Gail’s preferred style of worship is not offered at the Anglican parish – Gail laughed as she expressed the view that at times the music “sort of feels like a bit of a funeral march” – but she and her husband are committed to the parish because they believe that the church is “good for the kids.” The Pentecostal church they sometimes visit holds an early-evening service on a Sunday, which goes for one hour. A children’s programme is offered concurrently, so Gail and her husband can attend the service and really enter into the style of worship that they most enjoy. Gail admitted that they leave immediately after the service without making personal connections, “which for us is unusual,” but “we get the worship side that we felt we were missing.” Ian (Presbyterian, 41) belongs to what he called “a community church.” He described the Sunday services in their parish as fairly liturgical in structure, with some songs at the start and hymns later in the service, including “a little bit for everybody.” Some parishioners, including Ian, enjoy a more contemporary style of worship, so over the past couple of years Ian has organised some Saturday night praise sessions which are intended to supplement, rather than replace, the Sunday services. They are held only once every few months as some of those who wish to be involved are quite busy with young families. Ian is glad to have been able to facilitate these gatherings and enjoys participating in them.

Some midlife churchgoers appreciate contemporary music and informal styles of worship, whereas others find traditional music and formal liturgies draw them close to God. A number of midlife interviewees exercised flexibility about their involvement in

\textsuperscript{349} The Anglican priest Murray mentioned was also interviewed. She spoke about this survey and its purpose and her comments are recorded in Chapter Six.
services incorporating a range of worship styles. This flexibility and openness to a variety of styles of worship and forms of prayer was commented on by clergy as characteristic of churchgoers in this life stage. The fact that the decades between the ages of forty and sixty can be a period of fruitful spiritual exploration offers possibilities for church leaders to consider.

The church’s teaching – homilies, sermons and the wisdom of clergy

Almost half of the midlife interviewees who contributed to this project stated that sermons or homilies were helpful to them. Participants also expressed respect for members of the clergy whose wisdom, derived from “life experience,” translated into meaningful guidance. Michelle (Catholic, 58) has the opportunity to attend services in a number of parishes because she travels widely as part of her current role within the church. When she is not away, Michelle worships in two quite different contexts. One is a cathedral, which has a very inclusive multicultural congregation. She also attends services held in a chapel in her workplace. Michelle spoke with warmth and appreciation about an elderly priest who officiated at services held there. She told me, “He really just preached the gospel and helped us to really take hold of something so that when we left that mass we would have something to really reflect on during the day. He’d really speak about his own life experience and ... I could relate to that.”

Sally (Catholic, 49) also described, with warm affection, a previous parish priest. He was an elderly man with whom Sally enjoyed having “reasoned conversations” about things (like The Da Vinci Code) and who delivered very thoughtful sermons. Sally told me that she used to email those sermons to her father in another part of New Zealand, and he loved them too. She reflected that that particular priest – whom she felt, being elderly, was aware of most stages of life – would be able to give guidance to someone in any stage of life. Phil (Catholic, 53) had a very similar perspective of the homilies and of a previous parish priest. He said, “The homily means a lot more to me now. ... I guess it came from having a priest that was so good at unpicking the liturgy with his homily where he related it to the real world. And this was a seventy year old man who had such life experience.”

Nina (43) attends an evangelical Anglican church. When asked how the church has helped her to cope with midlife issues, she said, “Probably as an individual – not really.” But she immediately added, “Sermons provide a lot of support.” When considering the needs of midlife churchgoers it is important not to overlook the positive impact that
thoughtful preaching can have. Preachers whose faith, integrity and wisdom are evident to their parishioners can offer great encouragement to those who hear them. Christians in midlife, who are frequently dealing with unfamiliar challenges and grappling with many significant issues, may be particularly receptive to their words.

**Children and families**

A number of midlife interviewees with school-aged children commented on ways that the church catered for their children’s needs. Keith (Catholic, 47) described ways in which his seven year old son is included and involved at church. At his church there is a “children’s liturgy” on Sundays. The children can go out for half an hour and do their own programme, and when they come back into the church the priest interacts with the children in the service. He “gets down amongst them” as they share their pictures and other activities. Keith described it as “precious” to see the children with smiles on their faces, loving that time. Keith and his wife are involved in serving in a number of ways during church services and also during the week. His pride was evident as he told me about the way that his son helps him with activities such as taking up the offering, cleaning the church, putting out things for morning tea, and so on. Keith observed that there can’t be too many people in the church who don’t know their son. He concluded, “It’s a very warm, friendly church.” Murray (Anglican, 44) has teenaged children. In his church, too, children are encouraged to participate in the services and older children have opportunities to be involved in the formal structures of the church and in the organisation of events. His son is currently serving on vestry, and Murray is pleased and proud that his son’s academic skills are being used and developed in that context. His son has also been involved in running social events for the parish. Murray loves the fact that in their church, “Kids are free range – in other words, they have the run of the place, if they want to have the run of the place.” He added, “The worst mistake people make in parishes is telling the kids off for being noisy and stuff like that.” A conviction that their children were welcomed by clergy and other parishioners was a significant factor in contributing to some midlife churchgoers’ attachment to their parishes and was also part of their perception that their own needs were being met.

The connections parents in midlife make with other Christians who have children of a similar age, and who are grappling with similar questions, can enhance their sense of belonging to their church community. Andrew (44) and his wife attend a large Anglican church which holds multiple services on Sundays, one of which offers a very good
children’s programme. He told me that they had chosen to attend that particular service “because of the children.” Then Andrew made some observations about the congregation at the service he attends. He said, “It puts us with other people in the same stage of life who’ve also brought their own children along. So from that aspect it’s beneficial to us because … afterwards around tea and coffee, we can discuss the issues we’re having.” Later, however, Andrew noted that the different services tend to split up the age groups of people and therefore the diversity of the whole parish is not reflected in each congregation. Each congregation tends to be rather homogenous in terms of age. As Andrew put it, “It’s more or less people at exactly the stage of life that we’re at.” Andrew felt that in some ways this was a pity. To mix the congregations the parish has occasionally held church lunches and picnics. He said, “That does work, to some extent.”

A number of the midlife churchgoers suggested that if children were well catered for within a parish their parents generally considered that they, too, were receiving support. For example, when asked to identify ways in which the church was providing support to her in midlife, Raewyn’s response (Presbyterian, 47) was, “There are a lot of opportunities for the family to be involved in the church and to be nurtured by the church, I suppose.” However, the adequacy of the church’s support for parents and caregivers deserves closer scrutiny. Gail (Anglican, 41) said that, when they moved to a new city, she and her husband chose to put their own preferences to one side and sought a church that would meet the needs of their children. Gail said she and her husband felt “mature enough” in their faith that, even if they themselves got little out of their church attendance, “We are not going to fall away; we’ll just sort of endure it.” Later in her interview, Gail described dealing with some significant transitions and challenges in early midlife. These had included moving cities and trying to establish new friends, returning to paid employment and juggling commitments at home and work, and adjusting to some serious health issues that had recently emerged within her immediate family. Despite the evident complexity of her personal circumstances, Gail appeared a little disconcerted when posed with the question, “What further support or opportunities would you like to see the church offer to help you in your faith journey in midlife?” She said:

I don’t know. You kind of think about it in terms of how it’s going to help our kids. You kind of put your own – [dawning realisation] – maybe something for us, rather than for our kids would be quite nice wouldn’t it? [Gail laughs, then pauses for quite some time as she processes the question, before continuing.] You always think “What’s going to be good for the kids?” but you put yourself
on the backburner, so I am not quite sure how to answer that question – something I suppose that’s for the middle aged people rather than those that depend on them?

It is natural for parents to place a high priority on the nurture and care of their children, and support for their families is important. However, unless their own spiritual development is also fostered there will certainly be some midlife churchgoers that are “coming each week who are leaving internally,” as Alan Jamieson observes. These people are present, “but inside the lights are out. Other things keep them coming – their children, friendships, playing in the band etc. Yet they are not engaging in the way they would have previously.”

The point at which children leave home, and parents in middle age become freer to engage in their own pursuits, can be a point at which church attendance becomes a lower priority. One interviewee, Debbie (Catholic, 51), who has always been a regular churchgoer, told me that she had been reflecting on her attitude to the church. She described herself as having become “a lot slacker” once her youngest child had left home. She said, “It’s not that I love the Lord less … but we don’t go every Sunday. And I’m thinking, if I wanted to pin it on something, for me, being a parent … I needed to show a good example.”

Lynne Baab points out that it can be a challenge for faith communities to develop congregational activities that engage midlife adults “for their own sakes, not just for the sake of their children.” Interviews with midlife participants suggested that, while children’s needs are frequently considered and catered for within churches, and middle-aged parents are likely to support one another, parents in midlife may need encouragement to reflect on what could be helpful for their own spiritual development. Churches need to be attentive to these issues.

Conflict within congregations

Worshipping and serving alongside others within the church is not always easy. Approximately a quarter of the midlife churchgoers interviewed for this project mentioned disappointments they had experienced as a result of decisions that had been made or conflicts that had arisen within their parishes. Each of these interviewees

351 Lynne Baab, Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 22.
remained committed to their parishes but their experiences had affected some of their relationships with clergy or fellow parishioners, and in one or two cases had reduced their inclination to be committed to ministries and roles they had formerly held. Some interviewees spoke of the experience of being a member of an overlooked group within their parish or denomination. It is not possible to explore these issues in detail within the context of the current project, but it is important that they are raised. The two examples of interviewees’ experiences of conflict that are included here have been chosen because the interviewees commented on the connection between the events they described and midlife.

Andrew (Anglican, 44) told me that some former members of a small group within the church that he belonged to had pulled away from the church for a period. I asked Andrew if he thought these men reduced their involvement because of external factors – things going on in their life at the time – or loss of belief, or a combination of factors. He considered that there may have been a number of reasons that they left, but emphasised “personality and continuity issues” which related to a change of leadership in the parish. It had not been a smooth period for the church. Andrew said, “The men in my age group do tend to, I don’t know, sulk. They go, ‘I don’t have to put up with this!’ And then they walk. It didn’t take very much for some people to choose to be offended by something.” Andrew perceived that these issues related not only to the men’s stage of life, but also to a specific period in the life of his parish; with encouragement from other group members, the men who had disengaged have since returned.

Nina (Anglican, 43) told me that learning to address conflicts, in the church and in one’s personal life, is a “skill that takes practice” and she has noticed a shift in the way she deals with conflict now that she is in midlife. “I think in midlife you kind of think, ‘Well, I’m old enough now. Let’s just deal with these things.’ As opposed to being afraid and not addressing it, because that can make things even worse.” Although Nina received very little support from other community members or clergy when she experienced conflict with a friend in the church, she did attend a very helpful workshop about forgiveness in the church context, which was held at St John’s Theological College in Auckland and was promoted through her parish. This experience of conflict affected Nina’s faith as well as her relationships with fellow parishioners. She told me:

[It] made me think about my faith and what, who are these people I’ve been with for the last seventeen years – I’ve been friends with, worshipping with, doing a lot of stuff with – and where is, who is God, and is this typical? Is this
actually the real face of church? We have our ups and downs and our conflicts and our celebratory times as well. As opposed to it’s all amazing. Yeah. And that’s probably a maturing as well, I think, in midlife.

The fact that she has recently moved to another suburb, away from her church, has enabled Nina to reflect on her involvement in parish activities. She told me that she has reduced her involvement in church “by quite a bit,” but she still attends Sunday services regularly, leads a small group, and is on other rosters on an occasional basis. Regrettably, conflict within church communities can result in Christians leaving their parishes or leaving the church altogether.352

**Midlife churchgoers’ experiences of small groups**

Many churchgoers who were interviewed for this project felt that being part of a small group within the church was important because these groups provided opportunities to deepen relationships with other parishioners as well as providing spiritual nurture. Fifteen interviewees belonged to some form of small group within their church. A number belonged to traditional home groups, but “small groups” also included church maintenance teams, choirs or music groups, book discussion groups, and other groups that met in connection with specific events or to carry out short-term projects. As will be seen in the quotations from the interviews that follow, small groups provided a context within which a number of midlife participants felt free to share more personal experiences and struggles than they felt was appropriate or possible in other settings. Many interviewees expressed deep appreciation for the pastoral care they received from group leaders and from other members of the groups they attended. A number of midlife attendees also noted that small groups provided them with opportunities to support others, and they valued these opportunities. Women and men expressed many similar views about the importance of small groups, but there were also some interesting differences between their attitudes and experiences. For this reason, their comments have been divided into separate sections.

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352 Christians who have left the established church were not interviewed for this thesis. Alan Jamieson’s book, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: The Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), explores this subject within the New Zealand context.
Women’s perspectives of small groups

Gail (Anglican, 41) has a young family. She told me that belonging to a small group was very important to her both socially and spiritually, although, due to her family and work commitments, it is not always easy for her to attend a small group regularly. She said:

For me, for my faith and my spiritual wellbeing, I think being in a small group is really crucial to that. And the struggle for me is finding the right group and making sure I’m involved and fitting it in around the other responsibilities and bits and things that you’ve got going on.

Gail went on to describe a home group she attends, which is led by a woman about fifteen years older than herself. In the recent past Gail really appreciated the leader’s understanding of the pressures she was under. “It was OK to be sad or upset or struggling. She really helped.” Gail identified the group leader as being someone she could consult because the older woman had been through some life situations, such as raising children, ahead of her. Gail also felt that it was useful being able to talk to someone who was outside her own family. “It’s quite nice to have that difference of opinion.” She concluded, “I felt like she was a mentor to me. She was probably a mentor to everyone else in that group as well.” Small groups clearly provide a context within which opportunities for Christians to be mentored and/or to offer meaningful guidance to others may arise. Participants’ comments about their small group involvement reinforced the importance of opportunities for midlife churchgoers to exercise generative care and also to receive emotional support and spiritual guidance from others.

Debbie (52) attends a Catholic parish which she feels offers little in the way of small group support for people of her age. Debbie observed that small groups in her church are often geared towards people of other ages – such as games’ groups targeted at the elderly and a new mothers’ groups for younger women – but then said that she was not sure that she currently has needs that need to be met in a group context:

When I was a new mother, to be alongside other mums ... You muddle your way through and you say, “Hey, what about this?” That was really, really important. And I think elderly people can be very isolated, so to have groups, games, whatever, is really important. And I wonder if people in midlife often are working, so our time is less. ... It’s not that we don’t need support, because I think we do.
Debbie then qualified her opinion, saying, “I think it benefits us to be sharing our lives with people other than just the chatty surface stuff that I do after church. That, to me, is not sharing my life.” She went on to explain this comment more fully:

I do think we have a need to connect – at all ages. ... You know, all of the questions to do with the big changes in our lives, when you can talk to someone else about it – it helps. ... I think even though people might be busy and might be working and don’t need another meeting ... there’s a need to share our lives. I think I benefit. By giving and receiving.

Debbie meets frequently with other Christians in a group outside her parish. She said, “So I’m getting to share my life on a regular basis. If I didn’t have that, if I was just at the Catholic Church, could I feel a bit isolated? Yeah, probably. ... I recognise that yes, there is nothing there at that stage.”

Judith (Catholic, 60) has participated in a lot of small groups within both Protestant and Catholic parishes throughout her life. She described small groups as “being critical to the Christian life” not only because of the teaching but “more so for fellowship and praying with other people and walking through life together.” She identified one of the groups she had been part of as “quite a midlife group,” although it wasn’t called that. The members who met had children in “that older age group” so they “were all walking together at that same stage of life.” She said, “We didn’t always particularly look at midlife issues or anything, but we were quite aware of the stage of life so that was supportive at one point.” As Judith had been in a number of different small groups, and had mentioned the advantages of meeting with others who were in the same stage of life, I asked what she perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of groups which catered for people of a similar age and groups which are less homogenous. Judith perceived own-age groups as being particularly important for youth. She then acknowledged that groups that are similar are probably “easier.” But Judith also marvelled at the fact that absolutely diverse people are drawn together by God – people that we just wouldn’t mix with or have contact with otherwise – which “deepens your understanding of people and helps you see things from different perspectives.” Diversity within small groups and within congregations was repeatedly mentioned by midlife participants as one of the most positive aspects of their parish involvement.
Over 100 Catholic parishes in New Zealand are part of an established network of small groups called “Passionist Family Groups.” These are intergenerational groups in which the emphasis is on building relationships. Each group is encouraged to get together once a month for a low cost or no cost activity. (Some of these activities are described towards the end of this chapter.) A number of the Catholic participants in this project, including clergy, mentioned Passionist Family Groups. The success of these groups in various parishes is dependent on the level of commitment to them demonstrated by parish priests and congregational leaders, but, where they are operating well, connections between parishioners are forged and enriched. Sally (49) is a foundation member of a Passionist Family Group that was established twenty years ago. She described the group, and the support it provided for her family, as “fantastic.” She explained to me how the groups are formed:

You don’t – or you don’t very often – choose who’s going to be in your group. There’s parish co-ordinators who allocate different families, and what they do is they look at the range of ages and family groups that you've got within a group, and then they kind of place them accordingly. So generally there is a range of young kids, or families, right through to grandparents. ... It’s the contacts that you make. ... I know that if you need anything, you can just call up.

Sally said that the thing she particularly liked about the Passionist Family Groups “is that you do get to know ... the range of ages.” She gave two examples of ways in which having intergenerational support in her group has been helpful to her and to members of her family. When her children were young, she could easily find babysitters because there were teenagers within their Passionist Family Group that her family knew well. Now that her own children are teenagers, the active interest and support of an older couple in the group has meant that her seventeen year old son has gained “real employment,” in a part-time role. She said, “That certainly would never have happened if we hadn’t had that contact through knowing them.”

The church provides a context in which it is possible to establish and nurture meaningful intergenerational relationships. Such opportunities may sometimes be taken for granted by churchgoers, but for many New Zealanders who have no church involvement it can be difficult to form or maintain close intergenerational relationships, even with family members. As more and more people travel and work in countries around the world the geographical distance between family members may be vast. The

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fact that it is increasingly common for grandparents to live in different cities from their adult children and young grandchildren is a source of sadness for some. One Catholic priest observed, “The Passionist Family Group gives the children another set of, or more sets of, the next generation as well. I think we need that. I think young needs the old, the old needs the young.”

Relationships with people in different stages of life provide rich opportunities for middle-aged Christians to give and to receive, to learn and to teach, and to grow in faith and love.

**Men’s perspectives of small groups**

A number of the middle-aged men who were interviewed for this project felt that involvement in a small group within the church was an important support to them in midlife. Men’s perspectives of what constituted a “small group” sometimes differed from women’s. The purposes for which they gathered were also more varied. The groups the men were involved in were not always based on traditional home group models, although several male participants were involved in home groups as well as other ad hoc groups that worked on short-term projects or met for purely social reasons.

Ian (Presbyterian, 41) and Andrew (Anglican, 44) described their participation in traditional small groups, and the importance of those groups to the people involved. Ian has led or co-led a mixed home group for the past six or eight years. When I asked Ian to explain what he appreciates about the group, he said, “I like that fellowship – getting to know people deeper, a real sense of support, personally and spiritually, that chance to pray for each other.” Within this group, Ian was prayed for after a physical injury, and he also received prayer when exploring career and relationships. He said, “I’ve appreciated that support.” Andrew attends a large Anglican parish. The group he is part of meets fortnightly, but he told me that he would be “more than happy” if the group met weekly. Andrew feels that it is important to be part of a small group “to get the relational side of things and personal encouragement in the faith journey.” He said:

> It’s not something you’re going to be able to get from attending the kind of service we go to on a Sunday; there’s too many people, and, with children around, it’s too busy. You can connect more at a social level at that sort of a service, but the deeper stuff has to happen in homes.

Andrew’s group is for men only, which allows them to discuss things that they “probably wouldn’t want to discuss as a mixed group, particularly when it comes to men’s feelings,

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354 Interview with author, Christchurch, 26 April 2016.
things they’re struggling with, problems that they’re having.” The group has also been able to use some materials which have particular applicability to men, including an Australian resource entitled “The Men’s Series.” This DVD series focuses on eleven issues of importance to Christian men, and includes episodes on work, midlife, parenting, health, sex and pornography, money and generosity, depression and anxiety, and mates. The scope of topics discussed within the group and the trusting relationships that he had formed with other members were both appreciated by Andrew.

Grant (Presbyterian, 55) explained to me what he believed were some of the challenges of “men’s ministries” for those in midlife. He said, “When you look at the topic of men’s ministries, it’s quite a thorny issue, in that we can be sort of very difficult to get together in a group. From my perspective it’s more achievable when there’s something else to do.” Although his church holds a men’s breakfast about once a month, and men of all ages are welcome, this is held at a time when Grant is on his way to work. Occasionally his parish holds a men’s movie night, and other activities are sometimes organised, but Grant considered involving men in midlife to be “sort of difficult” because:

Men in that middle-aged area like myself are sort of, you’re doing stuff. You’ve got things that you sort of have been putting off for years because you’ve got kids that you want to get involved in, and that tends to sort of soak up a bit of your time.

Grant went on to describe some of the hobbies that he and his wife are enjoying now that they have no children at home and their time is more flexible. Apart from attending a house group, which meets twice a month, Grant told me that he tends to avoid being involved in things at church that involve an on-going regular commitment on a particular night of the week. Some of his work can only be completed after-hours, and this work can be unpredictable. “So I’m more inclined to be involved with things that are just short and sharp, in the church,” Grant said. He described one such event, an upcoming “neighbours’ weekend” hosted by the church, at which he was going to be working one of the barbecues. He concluded, “That sort of thing, which is just a one or two day occasional commitment, you can slot that in, and, you know, make space for it.”

Grant had been through some significant changes in midlife. I asked him if he felt that the church had been of help to him while these changes were occurring. In response to

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356 This DVD series was one of the few resources specifically relating to midlife that was identified by midlife churchgoers.
this question, Grant said that it had been, and then described the close relationships he has formed with a group of men in the “set-up team” who put out furniture each week before church:

I’ve never been happy to just sort of sit back and soak it in, to arrive just as the service starts and leave when it ends. We’ve liked to, you know, form relationships with the people in the churches, and also, in our own ways, to be involved. So we’ve tried to find somewhere where we can fit in. And working in the set-up team I’ve got to know a bunch of men very well. We always joke about it. It’s like a men’s support group and the church gets set up as a side-effect of it. You know, quite often we have a good twenty minutes or so once we’ve finished set-up, before the next sort of major activity group of people come into the church, when we can just sit round and have a yarn and have a cup of coffee and chill out.

Other middle-aged men who were interviewed also regarded working with others on practical projects as an important means of building friendships with other men. Murray (Anglican, 44) told me a story about repairing and replacing part of his roof, a job which turned out to be much more difficult than he had anticipated. He told me how much it meant to him when a group of six guys from church turned up to lend a hand, when he had only asked two people. Murray was very touched by their generosity. He said:

I didn’t expect that. And that, for me, that was really, um, you know, it was really willing of the other people. Because they gave up their own time. It was a whole day to do one side of the house. ... If people need help, people ask, people turn up.

When I asked Murray if he was involved in a small group within the parish, his response was, “Just the maintenance committee.” Then he added, with enthusiasm:

I had a working bee which I organised. I called it a “bonding evening” and I got a Bond film out. I made everyone do an hour and a half’s gardening around the outside of the place; then we watched a Bond film. And that was the first time I’d tried that, and I actually found it quite entertaining.

This event was only for “blokes.” When I asked him how successful it was, Murray said, “Oh, it worked.” He intends to run more of them.

Finding appropriate and effective ways to support middle-aged men can be difficult, especially as many men in midlife are very busy. Both male and female clergy also commented on this issue, noting that the stress that many men experience in midlife heightens the need for them to find ways to relax and to enjoy time together. Some clergy provided examples of ways that their churches were endeavouring to provide
such opportunities; these are explored in Chapter Six. Small groups within the church, whether those groups are traditional study groups that meet on a regular basis or ad hoc groups that meet to carry out short-term projects, clearly provide one context in which both men and women in midlife may receive and offer care. Midlife interviewees perceived that a very wide range of small groups, with apparently quite different functions, played a central role in their sense of being supported by the church.

**Midlife churchgoers’ involvement in church ministries**

Three quarters of the midlife churchgoers who were interviewed for this project found fulfilment in being able to contribute in some way to activities and ministries within the church, whether behind-the-scenes or in public roles. The fact that such a high percentage of participants were actively involved in aspects of congregational life other than attending church services was probably attributable, in part, to the recruitment methods used, as has already been noted. In addition to leading small groups and contributing to church music, midlife interviewees served on parish councils, carried out practical maintenance projects, were part of formal mentoring or educational programmes, shared leadership of programmes for children, and contributed to Christian ministries beyond the church. One Catholic interviewee, Phil (53), expressed the view that the church is “just so huge” that everyone can find a place to be involved and included. Some of the ministries he identified as being areas Christians in midlife might wish to be engaged in were offering hospitality, working with refugees, supporting those who are “down and out” by working for St Vincent de Paul, singing in choirs, and serving on parish councils or school boards. Phil also identified ministries and activities that he felt were particularly helpful in supporting people in midlife, including groups for men, marriage encounter groups to support people in their marriages (which he noted have a spiritual dimension to them but are also about “retreat” and getting away as a couple), parish picnics and midwinter meals. “There are even Catholic sports’ clubs,” he added. Phil concluded, “Whatever your thing is - you’re kinda involved in.”

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357 Phil made reference to the Joshua Catholic Men’s Fellowship (New Zealand) which exists “to build up and encourage men in their growth and discipleship in the Lord Jesus to help form men of strength, vision, compassion, hope and joy, to be fully alive as husbands, father’s work mates and friends to those whose lives they touch.” <http://joshua.org.nz> (6 March 2016).
A predictable finding from the interviews with churchgoers and with clergy was that the majority of people in midlife have multiple responsibilities and many demands on their time. But many Christians in midlife still value opportunities to “give back” to their church communities, especially when they can identify “their thing” and have the support of others in sharing their skills and experience. By midlife people usually have a fairly well-developed understanding of many of their gifts and strengths and this affects their choices of ministries both within and beyond the church. Approximately a quarter of the midlife churchgoers who participated in this project explained that they had learned to be selective about the ways in which they chose to serve in the church, so that they could effectively spend their time and energy in areas of service for which they felt well equipped.

A number of midlife participants expressed a preference to be involved in practical projects, rather than being members of committees or similar sub-groups within their parishes. Andrew (Anglican, 44) told me that he enjoys working at the back of the church on technical things, and fixing things when necessary. He is on the roster to help out at lunches, and when the church has barbecues and picnics he helps at them. He has also helped with book fairs and church fairs. He said, “I’ll always be there doing bacon butties or loading books in vans.” Andrew told me that he had been “shoulder-tapped” to be on vestry, but had declined both because he knew that it would have been a big time commitment and because he did not feel he had the patience to cope with the decision-making processes. He acknowledged that “it is important that it gets done right” but he didn’t feel any calling to do it. He added, “But I do believe it is important to be involved so I get my name on all sort of rosters.” Keith (Catholic, 47) is a member of the parish council of his church, and is also involved in several practical ministries, including property management. When I commented on his obvious enjoyment in doing so many things for his parish, Keith listed a lot of “up front” activities, such as playing the organ, singing, and getting up in church and talking and reading, then said, “I don’t have those gifts. But my gifts are I like to help people. ... If something needs to be done, let’s just jump in and do it.” By midlife, people are most likely to be committed to roles which they believe match their skills, experiences and interests.

Congregations that seek to enable individuals to exercise their gifts in areas that they find energising and consider to be worthwhile can, directly and indirectly, be supporting parishioners’ spiritual development. Alison (Presbyterian, 59), pointed to the significant
role other people had played in encouraging her to recognise, develop and use her gifts in Christian ministry. She was approaching the age of fifty when members of the clergy encouraged her to pursue theological training at tertiary level, a decision that led to a career change. Later Alison was invited to participate in a programme at church called “StrengthsFinder,”\textsuperscript{358} which she found built her confidence not only in identifying her own gifts but in appreciating the complementary gifts of her colleagues. For Alison, the guidance and support of mentors within the parish has helped her to take some professional and personal risks at midlife. These have strengthened her commitment to the church and played a significant part in her spiritual formation.

Karen’s experience differed from Alison’s in some important respects. When she was in her late forties, Karen (Anglican, 52) was approached and asked to be on vestry. She served for two years and enjoyed it, particularly “being more closely involved.” But after a couple of years she felt that, “In a way I wasn’t able to contribute as much as some other people were.” At the time the areas consuming the attention of vestry were not areas of Karen’s expertise – there was much discussion of buildings, maintenance, finance, fundraising and development – and there were people on the vestry for whom those things were areas of interest and connected with their experiences beyond the parish. Karen was glad to have been able to serve, but was also happy to relinquish the position once her term of appointment elapsed. It seems probable that had her abilities and interests and life-experience been more effectively recognised and utilised, Karen might have found greater fulfilment in offering her time and talents to the church. If the opportunity to participate in leadership had allowed her to exercise her gifts more fully both she and her parish could have benefited.

Many of the midlife participants in this project were serving the church in a range of roles and capacities, and this was not surprising. It was noteworthy that, with the support of clergy, several midlife interviewees had taken the initiative in establishing and assuming leadership of new programmes, having perceived that needs existed which were not yet being met. These “gaps” prompted midlife participants to step forward and contribute to parish life in ways that were fulfilling for them and which had the potential to make a significant difference to others.

Alison’s personal experience led her to do something about addressing a need she found existed in her congregation. Alison (Presbyterian, 59) was widowed in early midlife. Alison received a lot of support from Christian friends at the time of her husband’s death, and continues to value the care offered by individuals within her parish, but she said, “I’ve really struggled. It’s very hard being a widow at forty-one. We don’t fit a demographic. The churches don’t know what to do with you.” Alison gave several examples of the way that widows and single people can be inadvertently neglected. So, a few years ago, she decided to start a group for the older single women in the parish. She invited a counsellor to attend and to help them identify what was difficult about their situation, and what was good, and the people who attended found that very helpful. Various members of the group that Alison established have continued to meet every Sunday after church for lunch at a café, although Alison herself now participates only occasionally as she has other responsibilities within the parish. Alison is now part of her church’s leadership team and she continues to speak up when she feels the needs of people who are not part of family groups are being overlooked.

Ian (Presbyterian, 40) felt that his willingness to take the initiative in introducing programmes and activities within his church is related to his stage of life. He said:

I guess the big thing is when you’re younger you make use of what is suggested to you, or maybe activities or opportunities that the church provides. ... I think as I’ve got a bit older it’s become more about getting to know myself and if there’s an urge there to actually see if I can actually fulfil that, or actually start something which fulfils that.

Ian provided two examples. There wasn’t a home group at his church, and he valued home groups, so he started one. The Saturday night worship sessions he established, which were described earlier in this chapter, emerged from chatting with other people at church and recognising his own need, as well. He reflected on these things:

I see more now that I am a part of a community, and not necessarily to expect the community to provide for me, but how can I get to know myself better, and my needs, so I can actually voice those needs, recognise them in myself, and, if they connect with other people in my church community, then can we create something which then meets our common needs?

A sense of belonging comes from being actively involved, as Talia (Presbyterian, 53), and others, pointed out. Talia said, “The more duties I do at church the more I feel I belong to the church.” But for some midlife churchgoers, maintaining a balance between church
commitments and other responsibilities can be a struggle. Debbie (Catholic, 51) told me, “I love being involved in things. I’m a ‘doing’ person. That’s who I am.” But Debbie is aware that she has tended to over-commit over the years, and that is something that, in midlife, she is trying to “put more in perspective and more in balance.” She acknowledged, “When I’m carrying too much, when I have said yes to too many things, I feel angry towards the other people who didn’t put their hand up. But it’s … not someone else’s fault that I feel resentful. It’s me saying yes too many times.”

Gail (41) has young children. She admitted, “Life’s a bit crazy right now.” As has already been noted, Gail was finding it hard to attend, with any regularity, a women’s group from which she gains considerable support. She went on to explain that she and her husband are unable to be as actively involved in church life as they were at an earlier age. Having been extremely committed to church activities and to serving in a range of roles in a former parish, she and her husband are aware of the risk of burnout and getting their priorities out of balance. Gail said, “No-one’s going to say to you, ‘Stop. You are doing too much. Your life is out of balance. You need to look after your family,’ or all that kind of stuff.” But she considers that her present parish is very good about not putting undue pressure on families. “If we did feel pressure we could feel uncomfortable there and could be thinking, ‘Well, hang on … are the people here really in touch with what life is like?’” When asked how the clergy or congregation could be helped to understand the needs of people in midlife Gail first noted that the focus in the church is on the children and the elderly, because they are the most vulnerable groups, and then said:

> All the ones in the middle are the independent ones that can handle it, that can handle the load. But there’s times when you can’t always handle it, and you need a bit of a break or just need a breather.

The need for some people in midlife to be granted “a breather” from church responsibilities was an issue that the clergy and the spiritual directors who contributed to this project also addressed. The busyness of churchgoers in this stage of life, and its implications for the church and for individuals’ psychological and spiritual development, will be explored in Chapters Six and Seven.
Church as a place of prayerful reflection

The title of a recent Harvard Business Review article declared, “The busier you are, the more you need quiet time.”\(^{359}\) Given that midlife is not only a very busy stage of life for many people, but is also a period during which the desire to pause, review and “recalibrate” increases,\(^{360}\) it is hardly surprising that people’s need for quiet time and space often increases in their forties and fifties. Many of the people in midlife who were interviewed for this project stated that they valued the opportunities for personal reflection and for prayer that the church provides. Nearly half of the midlife churchgoers who were interviewed said that they had participated in contemplative services, vigils, or retreats, and almost all who spoke about them had found them very worthwhile. In addition, eight midlife interviewees stated that they valued the fact that the church is a peaceful, reflective place which allows them space to experience some stillness in the midst of their busy lives.

Richard (Catholic, 48) described the church as a “reflective” place in two senses. First, it is a “thoughtful” place. Richard said, “It’s reflective, and there’s not much reflection in society now – not opportunities for reflection – so the church still provides that. So I think it’s very strong from that point of view.” He went on to explain that, in the midst of the world’s complexities, the wisdom that is offered by the church is bigger than the individuals’ wisdom or insights within it. The church “offers a bigger framework of understanding.” Second, Richard described the church as “reflective” in the sense that it provides “thinking space” for individuals. Richard perceived that the space that is created during masses, when other interruptions and demands are removed, to be very valuable, particularly as people have so little thinking time in their lives now. He noted that outside mass times, too, Catholic churches are almost always open during the day, so people can come in and have some quiet reflective space which can be hard for them to find in other parts of their lives. Richard was one of several midlife interviewees who valued being able to spend quiet time alone in church. He said, “Anybody, for whatever reason, can go into a church that’s open … and just sit there and have a quiet time. … So there’s lots of ways that the church can really help, and does, but are not always understood.”


Keith (Catholic, 47) also described how time alone in church was helpful to him. As has already been mentioned, in his interview Keith spoke with some enthusiasm about a number of practical ways in which he is able to contribute to the life of his parish. Keith is energised by the voluntary roles he has undertaken, one of which is responsibility for church property maintenance. As he was reflecting on his midlife experience, and on the positive outcomes of some decisions he had made when he was younger, I raised the question of how the church is able to assist middle-aged people who may be struggling with regrets or with things that have happened to them earlier in life. Keith responded, “You can sit in the church, and it’s, you know, it’s quiet.” He explained that he and his wife have a key to the church and can go in at any time:

You can go in and sit down, and just, you know, just let it all wash over you and, you know, after a while you sort of feel good about life in general. And then you see there’s a light bulb out and think, “I must fix that on the way out.” [We both laugh.]

Keith’s church is open until about seven o’clock at night, so that people can come in. He reiterated that he found it helpful to sit in the silent church, saying, “It’s actually quite nice. It’s a big church and it can be very, very quiet.” It is possible for churches of all denominations to create opportunities for parishioners and visitors to find silence and space for reflection and prayer. Attentiveness to the fact that silence is sought, valued and needed by so many people might make provision for it a higher priority in some parishes.

A number of midlife participants spoke about contemplative services or vigils that were meaningful to them. Some of those who were most enthusiastic about contemplative practices were very busy individuals who found praying quietly alongside others restorative. Linda (Anglican, 58) holds a paid position in her parish, and also has many responsibilities outside work. She told me about a guided contemplative prayer hour she attends one evening a month at her church. This contemplative hour includes a time of relaxation, a Scripture reading, an imaginative experience, about ten minutes silence when no-one does anything, then about ten to fifteen minutes when people remain in silence but can journal or draw, and then at the end, if people want to, they can share what has happened during the prayer time. Linda gave a huge appreciative sigh as she reached the end of her explanation, and then said, “I have to be really sick to miss that, or out of town.” When asked what she particularly valued about the time, Linda said that she appreciated the candles, the pace, the prayerful preparation that has gone into the
time by the leaders, and the support of others’ presence. She also appreciates the silence. Linda then told me that silence is observed for fifteen minutes prior to another service she attends at her church. She noted that everyone respects the silence, “and that’s a gift.”

Other midlife participants in this project also described the impact that times of silent prayer in their churches had upon them. Phil (Catholic, 53) described his first experience of participating in Eucharistic Adoration. He and his wife went along at four o’clock in the morning for an hour as part of a parish commitment to twenty-four hours of prayer. He said:

> It’s amazing how quickly that time goes when you are just peaceful and quiet and just enjoying a moment in the church, you know, and you sort of have a chance to just really take it in, and, you know, just see it in your own time, in your own world, through your own eyes. It’s beautiful really. That’s a great thing.

Murray (Anglican, 44) attended an Easter Vigil. In the evening there was a short service at their church and the church remained open until midnight. Murray stayed for a couple of hours “praying and thinking.” He said:

> Good time to de-stress, actually. Put your life in perspective again. Because you’re thinking about the loss and what was contributed to you by him placing himself on the cross, and the sacrifice he made. ... A good time to reflect. I couldn’t have done it all night, though.

Murray also told me about a silent retreat he went on at the holiday home of one of the parishioners from his church. “It was a silent retreat. And I went to that. It was open to anybody that wanted to do it. ... A very different experience, actually, being in fellowship and not speaking. ... And actually it taught me a couple of lessons.” After the retreat Murray thought about those lessons, and he was able to apply what he had learned. He was keen to impress upon me that there were practical outcomes from the retreat. He added, “And also when you do a silent retreat your style of worship, instead of being verbal and physical, um, you know, mentally you’re thinking of different ways of doing the same thing. And I think that’s a good aspect.” Murray said he would certainly go on another silent retreat if one were offered.

It was apparent from the comments made by some of the midlife participants in this project, and also by the clergy and spiritual directors who were interviewed, that Christians in midlife are often willing to embrace “different ways of doing the same
thing,” particularly when it comes to engaging in different forms of prayer. Ian (Presbyterian, 40) told me about a number of spiritual practices he is enjoying exploring. Ian said that he has always really valued regular Bible reading time and prayer, but has, in the past, focused on “me and God” and hasn’t put a lot of research into how others spend time in prayer. He described how, in the last few years, the guidance and support of others has assisted him in engaging in some different spiritual practices. When Ian was living overseas he kept a prayer diary for a number of years, which emerged from keeping a diary. He described the diary as moving from a record of events to prayer, to being a “conversation time with God.” Ian described this as “exciting” and “motivating.” In his prayer diary Ian records things he is thankful for and blessings he had experienced. He has continued that practice for a number of years. Ian had also attended a workshop on journalling, run by a local Methodist minister, who introduced the idea that journalling could be more than just writing. It could include pictures and art, as well as words. Over the past year Ian has built on that understanding:

I developed an interest in art, which I did before, but I just never felt the freedom to explore it ... In a diary, where people aren’t necessarily going to see it, I felt liberated to, you know, actually try sharing some of my thoughts and heart and communications with God in sort of a visual way.

Ian has also attended two workshops on Christian meditation, which he found very helpful. He said, “I’ve just in recent years, more, I have come to really value and appreciated input from other people into how I spend my time with God.” Ian provided a further example. Until recently, Ian was not familiar with retreats. He explained that they are not really part of his church tradition. He was invited by a colleague to attend some short retreats, and was amazed at the variety of retreats that are possible, from just a morning retreat at a nice home and garden to something much longer. Ian is glad to have discovered “that you could have a retreat time that could take many different forms,” both structured and unstructured. It was really his first introduction to “quiet time” of this type, outside his own quiet times, and he has appreciated it. His home group now has an annual retreat. Ian said, “I brought that into our parish.” Ian has been glad to share with his peers some of the spiritual disciplines others have shared with him.

Retreats may be offered within parishes or facilitated by spiritual directors or clergy in other venues. They may be guided or self-directed, non-denominational or targeted at a particular church demographic. In addition to Murray and Ian, a number of midlife
interviewees spoke about their experience of Christian retreats. Malcolm (Anglican, 52) mentioned a seven-day retreat he attended a few years ago. He told me that he appreciated retreats and “the removal of all that clutter” that they afforded. Malcolm also considered what he learned there to be helpful. He said that the retreat helped him to understand the different layers we have as human beings. “To be able to touch that is quite amazing.” When I asked Malcolm if he would go on something like that again, he said that he would. In contrast, Grant (Presbyterian, 55) told me that it’s been a very long time since he has been on a retreat – perhaps twenty years or more. He said, with a laugh, “I’ve never been a great retreat person, either. I’d sort of far rather do something else in the weekend.” Although the majority of the interviewees who had attended retreats spoke positively about their experiences, some interviewees (including clergy and spiritual directors) accepted that traditional retreats do not appeal to all people. Alternatives to traditional retreats, incorporating individuals’ hobbies and interests, and weekends away “just doing something fun,” were suggested by quite a number of participants as being of real value to stressed and busy churchgoers of middle age. Some midlife participants attested to finding opportunities for meditation – opportunities to “put aside whizzing thoughts,” as Karen (Anglican, 52) put it – in the context of recreational activities, including cycling and scrapbooking. These were important to them. Further comments about these matters are included in the next two chapters.

Other suggestions made by midlife churchgoers

Finally, interviewees were asked what further support or opportunities they thought could be offered to Christians in midlife or to assist clergy and congregations to meet the needs of parishioners in midlife. Many of the suggestions that participants made – particularly in relation to pastoral care – have been included in other sections of this chapter, but three further themes that were raised by a number of interviewees are noted here.

Social and community-building events

A number of midlife interviewees and clergy identified social events, such as picnics, camps, barbecues, fairs, concerts, and quiz evenings, as being important to churchgoers in midlife, for a range of reasons. Such events, large or small, provide contexts within which people of all ages can talk about what is going on in their lives, learn from others’ experiences, and build solid friendships. Social events also allow people to relax and “de-
stress,” something that interviewees from quake-hit Christchurch were particularly alert to requiring. Several participants commented on the fact that it can be difficult for middle-aged men, in particular, to find or make opportunities to connect with those outside their workplaces and families, and the church can play an important role in facilitating such connections. As a number of clergy commented in some detail about the importance of informal social gatherings for people in midlife this subject will be examined more closely in Chapter Six, and again in Chapter Eight. Here, brief comments from just three midlife participants are included, although many other midlife interviewees also spoke of the value and potential of social events within the church.

The nature of the social activities offered within the church is not as important as the connections built through engagement in them, as Keith (Catholic, 47) explained. He told me about “all sorts of wonderful things” that had been organised by his Passionist Family Group, including picnics and a long bike ride. He concluded, with a laugh, that activities mostly involved “lying under a tree, eating a bag of chips – but that’s all fine!” Keith was committed to his group and believed that the members provided genuine support to one another. Sally (Catholic, 49) belongs to a Passionist Family Group in another parish. Her delight was evident as she spoke about some of the events the group held, which included a “Pie Night” (she noted that this was a particularly popular night that the teenagers were very happy to attend) and a “Men’s Cooking Night” at which men cook together and feed the families that are there. Sally described “the main focus” of the group as “getting together on a regular basis and on being involved in each other’s lives, really.” The purpose of Passionist Family Groups is to facilitate opportunities “to form friendships, have fun, extend acceptance and support, and quite simply and joyfully experience Christian life with others. The emphasis is on allowing everyone to be part of the ‘family’.”

Social events which have a similar purpose are offered in Anglican and Presbyterian churches, and in some Catholic parishes that are not part of the Passionist Family Group network.

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361 According to a report on “Christchurch Dilemmas” on RNZ (Radio New Zealand), 12 August 2016, “Mental illness statistics are continuing to climb in almost every measurable area. The proportion of people reporting that they felt stressed ‘always or most of the time’ doubled from 8 percent in the pre-earthquake to 19 percent in 2015. Last year, police callouts for attempted suicides rose 60 percent from pre-quake levels, the highest in the country.” <http://www.radionz.co.nz/programmes/christchurch-dilemmas/story/201811951/episode-2-christchurch's-mental-health-crisis> (24 October 2016). Between June 2015 and June 2016 the Canterbury region recorded its highest suicide total since records began, with 78 deaths. “Suicide Stats Remain 'Unacceptably High,'” Radio New Zealand, 18 October 2016. <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/315925/suicide-stats-remain-'unacceptably-high'> (24 October 2016).

Murray (Anglican, 44) spoke with enthusiasm about the potential of social events, providing a number of examples of ways in which “more community run things from the parish” might benefit churches and individuals. He then suggested, “The other thing I’d like to see happen in the churches is maybe, every once in while, the different denominations just amalgamate and do something together. ‘Cause I think there’s a whole width of experience there that’s not being used.” Murray advocated setting up a “universal website” with the other churches within an area, so that churches can invite one another to events, and find out what is going on in nearby congregations. Murray emphasised that this should be done, because, at present, “it doesn’t happen at all.” Given that there are so many things that parishes could do to provide better support to churchgoers in midlife (as well as those in other age groups), the suggestion that judicious pooling of time, talents and resources could occur seems particularly constructive.

**Educational opportunities**

Forty percent of the midlife participants suggested that short-term courses or workshops of various types could appeal to midlife churchgoers, and be of value to them. Karen (Anglican, 52) was one of a number of interviewees who said that such events need not be focused on midlife, nor promoted solely to congregational members in midlife, but could explore issues which are of relevance to those in midlife and may also appeal to people of other ages. She suggested, as an example, that something focusing on coping with change would be a useful topic. Karen said it would be helpful to know that “there’s other people going through the same thing, or similar kinds of experiences.” She felt it would be useful for church members coping with various transitions to be offered opportunities to share together and to learn from one another.

Andrew (Anglican, 44) also suggested that workshops relating to issues that are likely to arise in midlife would be appreciated. Noting that, at midlife, “certain issues and crises start coming up,” Andrew felt that the church could offer more workshops “just to give people confidence to get through the issues they are likely to face at this time.” A number of other interviewees also suggested that the church, or combined churches, could offer courses relating to a wide range of aspects of midlife experience, including (but not limited to) marriage, divorce, caring for elderly family members, menopause, mental health, and retirement planning. Some participants noted that Christians in midlife might wish to be better informed about some of these matters, not only in
addressing their own needs but also for the sake of others within their orbit of care. Andrew said:

I would like to see the church facilitate more workshops, whether that’s anything from financial management, time management, not quite life-coaching but parenting or working with marriage issues, um depression, things like that, because the church I’ve found doesn’t normally discuss any of those things. But then should the church do that? I know that when they have had a session where they’ve brought in, you know, an expert, it has been fairly well attended.

Given that many people in midlife have a limited amount of discretionary time, and churches have limited resources, it is sensible to question what sorts of workshops or educational programmes can most effectively be offered within particular parishes, and when it may be more appropriate for clergy, small group leaders, or pastoral workers to point parishioners in the direction of programmes offered elsewhere. Sally (Catholic, 49) felt that courses are most likely to be effective when they are provided in response to specific needs. She said, “Maybe it should come from within ourselves, saying, actually there are a few of us whose children are getting older and leaving home, you know, maybe we do need to get together and get a course running, and talk to the priests.” Sally felt that there would be “better uptake” if programmes such as these were offered within parishes, rather than being offered elsewhere. Choices made by clergy and congregations will reflect the vision and values of parishes as well as the needs of parishioners. Clergy’s comments about these matters are considered in Chapter Six.

People may access a range of programmes outside the church that relate to certain topics that are relevant at midlife, such as bereavement or parenting, but the majority of Christians hope to receive spiritual guidance and theological teaching within the church and Christian institutions such as Bible Colleges. Interviews with churchgoers and clergy, and also with spiritual directors, revealed that it is common for Christians in midlife to wish to deepen their understanding of theology, ecclesiology, or spirituality. Some midlife churchgoers are very willing to commit time and effort to engage in relevant study or to attend events where they can learn more about prayer and explore spiritual disciplines. Several interviewees commented on specific courses that they had attended which had been significant in their faith development at midlife. Some had experienced the benefits of participating in courses through tertiary institutions such as Carey Baptist College, Laidlaw College, or St John’s Theological College, and they were grateful that these had been advertised within their parish or had been drawn to their
attention by clergy. Others mentioned accessing helpful resources in parish or diocesan libraries. However, some participants were unaware of courses or resources available within their locality that may have addressed areas of need or interest.

Several participants spoke about church libraries, some of which were very well resourced, and some of which were not. Resources held by parishes are not always easily accessible to church members. One Anglican interviewee, Andrew (44) told me about the library at his church:

> It’s under lock and key and it’s in the church office somewhere. So, if you want to, you can make an appointment, they can go and open it for you, and they’ll stand behind you while you look. [We both laugh.] … There are plenty of resources there. … But we don’t really have any inventory system to make it visible, outside of someone actually running their finger down a list of titles on the shelf.

At the Anglican church Nina (44) attends, resources are even more difficult to access. During her interview, Nina mentioned a number of Christian books she had found helpful, so I asked her if her parish had a library. Nina’s reply was somewhat startling; she said, “It used to have a library, and then it’s disappeared.” She laughed, and explained that the church has a new building and Nina doesn’t know where the library has gone. Someone culled the old books, but she doesn’t know what happened to them. She said, “What I notice is that we all buy books, and everyone’s got them at home, and we’ve finished with them and they sit there. … Being able to give books to the church, and for others to be able to use them would have been fantastic.” She noted, though, that when the church did have a library people weren’t actively encouraged to use it, and the books weren’t well advertised. “I used it quite a bit, actually, myself,” admitted Nina. “It was so good to have resources there.” Nina was also appreciative of the fact that a previous vicar had encouraged parishioners to access resources from the library at a local theological college. He provided Nina with a letter that endorsed her attendance at the church, and she was issued with a library card. Nina noted that it was good to have access to free books because books can be so expensive.363 For Christians in midlife, who may have limited time to attend courses or events to expand their spiritual horizons, resources such as books, websites, and podcasts can play a significant role in their faith development. Clergy and spiritual directors also discussed this topic.

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363 Books are much more expensive in New Zealand than in some other parts of the world, including the United States of America and the United Kingdom.
Three churchgoers who had different but complementary experiences and attitudes towards faith-building educational programmes were Keith, Sally and Ian. Prior to joining the church, five years ago, Keith (Catholic, 47) and his wife attended a ten-week DVD series about Catholicism that was screened at their local church. Those who went along had many opportunities to ask questions, and each week older parishioners also attended and spoke about their faith. The DVDs appealed to Keith’s desire for a sound understanding of the Catholic faith, and people’s testimonies touched him personally. Both aspects of the course contributed to his decision to become a Catholic. Keith has now seen the series three times and is still getting a lot of different things out of it. He is glad to attend and is excited to be able to speak with others who are exploring the Catholic faith. Engagement in this programme has been a significant part of his faith journey at midlife.

Sally (Catholic, 49) bemoaned her ignorance regarding aspects of her faith. She said that despite being “born and bred a Catholic, basically” she has learned that she is “still so clueless about everything to do with the Catholic Church.” She then explained why she felt Catholics who are currently in midlife might particularly appreciate further education about the church and its practices:

I was born in ’66, so just post Vatican II, and they were throwing out a lot of the old stuff at that point, which we never got taught. And the only reason you realise is because when you go to funerals or the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross all of the oldies ... know the responses. And I’m saying, what do you even say? And there’s one particular part of the Stations of the Cross ... It’s not taught anywhere. You know, I try and listen for it, and I can’t work out what they’re saying. It’s amazing! [She laughs.] And I think, “Where do you learn all this stuff?”

Sally finds it helpful when certain priests conducting funerals or baptisms explain the meaning behind what is being done and said. Opportunities to “pick up little gems” occur in those contexts but Sally thinks that courses explaining certain aspects of Catholicism could be useful, because “sometimes you need a refresher.” Sally’s comments were reinforced by two of the Catholic priests who were interviewed for this project. They told me that some of their parishioners who have been members of the church for some time – predominantly those in midlife – have expressed interest in courses explaining aspects of their faith which they have formerly not had the

opportunity to think about. These priests’ remarks about this issue are presented in Chapter Six.

Ian (Presbyterian, 40) observed that “the wider church” has the opportunity to offer workshops that relate to spiritual development, which could be within denominations or inter-denominational. Such workshops can “help you with a new idea – plant a seed.” Ian told me that he is interested in things that encourage people to experience “not just different ways of being church, because we tend to focus a lot on how to do the Sunday morning church,” but on “exploring the ways you can encourage small groups or individuals to have time with God.” In Ian’s experience a lot of things that are advertised are focused on worship or developing lay leadership, or that sort of thing, rather than personal prayer and spiritual development.

**Spiritual direction and counselling**

Personal prayer and spiritual development are, of course, the stuff of spiritual direction. Formal spiritual direction, like counselling, therapy, and supervision (which have related but different functions), provides opportunities for people to reflect on their lives and to seek to deepen their understanding of God’s work within them and in their circumstances. Seven of the twenty midlife churchgoers who were interviewed had some experience of receiving spiritual direction. Each of these seven people had spoken to a qualified spiritual director either on a short-term basis, when attending a retreat, or over a sustained period. All interviewees who had received spiritual direction felt that it had been beneficial to them, although not all had the opportunity or inclination to be attending spiritual direction on an on-going basis.

Some midlife interviewees and one member of the clergy described spiritual direction as something that can happen within congregations, informally. For example, when asked if she had ever attended spiritual direction, Debbie (Catholic, 51) said that she hadn’t. She told me that she knows people who go to spiritual direction, but she doesn’t understand exactly the purpose of it because she shares everything with her close women friends, on every level of her life, including the spiritual. They share their wisdom and Debbie feels that God speaks through the people in her life. She doesn’t understand the need for “more” that others are seeking by going to spiritual direction. Other midlife participants were also dubious about the value of the practice and its applicability to them. Grant (Presbyterian, 55) said, “It’s not part of my make-up really.” But he knows that he could
go and see the minister, or a member of the pastoral team, or one of the men in the parish that he knows well, if he had something he needed or wanted to talk about.

Linda (Anglican, 58), on the other hand, considered participation in formal spiritual direction to be “vital.” She distinguished between the relationships she had with “sister-type friends” and her experience of spiritual direction. “The soul friends, the sister friends, it is listening to both (not just you sitting doing the whole talking) and being a little bit more discerning and not coming in with your own story.” She added, with enthusiasm, “In spiritual direction you’ve got the floor!” Linda has a paid position in her parish, so she attends both spiritual direction and supervision. Linda feels that spiritual direction provides a place where she can share the “intensity and the depth of the layers” that can happen within four weeks, between visits, and feel totally safe. She asked, “Where else are you open or being vulnerable and safe enough to trust someone with that ‘this is how it really is with me’?” She concluded, “I could not do the job without it.” Many other Christians in public roles, especially within the church, share Linda’s appreciation of the safe space that spiritual direction provides for them to be open about their “stuff,” as Susan Phillips, sociologist and spiritual director, observes. She writes, “Spiritual direction provides a place for people to be honest, which seems to be particularly important for those involved in public ministries.”

Phillips also notes that spiritual direction can be particularly helpful for middle-aged directees. She observes, “The intimate work of spiritual direction also allows experiences of suffering to surface from (at times previously suppressed) memory into conversation with God, a process that is common in midlife when we have greater strength to face what is hard to face.” Raewyn (Presbyterian, 47) attends spiritual direction regularly. I asked her if she could explain, in general terms, how the experience of spiritual direction had been of use to her. She said:

The thing that I have enjoyed has been – this sounds a bit selfish, but – is time to talk with someone about different things, and different thoughts and issues, and to have someone just to give their time up to listen to me is just amazing. I haven’t had that before, so that’s been quite, yeah, precious. [There was a long pause before Raewyn continued.] It’s a bit of an anchor, really. Sometimes I might think, “Am I silly thinking that?” or “Is that dumb?” ... It helps clarify things a bit, talking to someone else, ‘cause I don’t tend to do that. Yeah.

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366 Ibid., 95.
Raewyn felt that her time at spiritual direction, and in a healing prayer group facilitated by her minister, has helped her to consider how experiences as a child can affect how she acts and reacts to things now. She has found it good to try and find the root of her reactions and behaviour so that she can move forward. Raewyn said that she had found “a new sense of intimacy with Jesus, and the whole sense that God [is] can speak to us and is, has been, with us all the way through.”

Richard (Catholic, 48) has attended spiritual direction regularly in the past, but is not doing so at present, partly because he is living in a situation where he has plenty of silence. He said, “If I had a much more noisy world I would need spiritual direction more. Sometimes you do feel a bit consumed by other people, because you are doing things for them. You need to be replenished yourself.” Richard went on to describe a “very basic question” of spiritual direction being, “Where is God in this stuff that’s happening here?” He said, “To me that’s a very good question.” He added that he found the time of spiritual direction and the reflection that happened afterwards, really helpful, “Because it’s hard to see God at times. ... It’s always made clear in spiritual direction it’s not a counselling session. They’re not there to give you any answers. So it’s pretty free like that, and I really like that.”

Judith (Catholic, 60) has received spiritual direction for over twenty years. This has sometimes occurred through letters rather than in face-to-face meetings. Judith had made notes prior to her interview and referred to them in telling me that spiritual direction had been invaluable in helping her to understand an Ignatian approach to discernment, in identifying “consolation” and “desolation” and preventing “emotional derailment” at times – “in a lovely way” – and in “encouraging prayerfulness and hanging on to Christ in the storm.” Spiritual direction helped Judith through some very rocky times in her marriage. Judith also identified some of the forms of Catholic spirituality she was introduced to through spiritual direction as being “life-giving” for her. When asked for suggestions about further support that could be offered to people in midlife, Judith reflected on the role professionals might play in facilitating support groups for people navigating midlife issues. She said, “Probably if there’d been a support group like that, not aimless, but with an actual facilitator, I think I probably might have gone to something like that.” But Judith then said that actually one-to-one spiritual direction was what she had needed more than a group. In addition to receiving spiritual direction Judith went to “a tiny bit of counselling” and probably would have gone to
more if she’d had more money. So, she suggested, “Maybe a fund for counselling? There you go!” Judith laughed as she said this, but then pointed out that counselling, including marriage counselling, can be important, but is not accessible to all. Judith had received some help from a nun, which was free. After thinking about this some more, Judith reiterated that providing some help to access counselling, for people who don’t have money, would be very helpful. “A trust could be set up.”

Cost can certainly be a factor preventing people seeking spiritual direction or counselling, and was an issue that was also mentioned by clergy and spiritual directors. Another difficulty can be that people do not know very much about spiritual direction, let alone how to find a spiritual director or counsellor that they feel is suitable. Nina (43), who attends an evangelical-charismatic Anglican church, raised both of these issues as she described her experience of spiritual direction, which she had attended for a period during her thirties. Nina told me that she felt blessed that she had been able to afford to attend spiritual direction, especially as she had been able to go and speak to an older lady when all the members of their church leadership were male. She was glad that there was an older female that she could talk with, but said, “It kind of saddened me that I had to pay for it.” She added that she would have appreciated having someone available at church to talk to occasionally. Later in her interview Nina told me that she was “so shocked” to mention spiritual direction to people at church, during the past year, and to find that they had never heard of it. “I had just taken it for granted that everyone knew,” she said. Nina observed that when she talked about silent retreats people were quite interested in them, and were curious about what happened there, but when she talked about spiritual direction “the conversation ended shorter!” She laughed.

While some churches do have resident spiritual directors or counsellors, many churches do not. As these services can be of such value to some midlife churchgoers, it is worth considering how obstacles to access may best be overcome.

**Summary**

Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican interviewees between the ages of forty and sixty valued similar aspects of the church services they attended, the congregations they were part of, and the small groups they belonged to. Although participants identified some gaps and limitations in their churches’ support of middle-aged members, thankfulness to
God for the church, and for their own place within it, was very evident within interviewees’ comments. Midlife churchgoers spoke with sincere gratitude about the close relationships they had with members of the clergy and/or some of their fellow parishioners. Appreciation of the diversity to be found within church communities was also striking theme. The fact that connections between church members provided opportunities “to give and to receive” – identified in Chapter Four as being of importance to people in this life stage – was seen to be a source of blessing and fulfilment. A significant number of those interviewed spoke of their willingness to offer their time and talents to contribute to church life and described the satisfaction they found in carrying out certain voluntary roles. Many also spoke about the place for quiet reflection that the church provided, which they felt was particularly necessary and helpful as they juggled many responsibilities.

As midlife interviewees reflected on their involvement in their churches, many commented on the differing circumstances and diverse needs of people of their own age. Interviewees perceived the complexity and diversity of midlife churchgoers’ experiences to present challenges for clergy and congregations. They were philosophical about the fact that their churches might consider that addressing the pastoral and spiritual needs of people in other age groups should take precedence over their own; a number perceived and accepted that those in other age groups, especially young children and the frail elderly, needed more support than those in midlife. The fact that the specific needs of people in this age group were rarely raised or discussed within their churches appeared to be regarded by the midlife churchgoers as “normal.” Many observed that clergy need more support from teams of lay people if the pastoral needs of all parishioners, including those in midlife, were to be met effectively.

Midlife churchgoers from all denominations also expressed a wish to develop in their relationship with God and in understanding of their faith. Some interviewees considered it desirable for churches to offer courses or programmes which could provide theological extension for mature Christians, whereas others had availed themselves of opportunities to participate in theological education beyond their own parishes and denominations. Many midlife churchgoers spoke about the impact of individuals who had offered them timely support and encouragement in their faith journey, either by encouraging them to explore and utilise their gifts or by introducing them to spiritual disciplines and forms of prayer they had formerly not encountered. Interviewees who
were beneficiaries of this kind of mentoring, whether it had occurred informally or in formal contexts such as in spiritual direction, spoke with real energy and enthusiasm about developments in their faith. Some who felt their parishes had left them to “drift” in midlife, on the other hand, had a diminished sense of commitment and connection to their churches. Members of the clergy and spiritual directors also addressed these themes.
Chapter Six: Interviews with Clergy

Church needs to be a place where they don’t feel pressured, but they’ve got something to contribute.

– Sandra (Anglican, 58)

Interviews were conducted with ten members of the clergy, from Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic churches. Early in each interview, priests and ministers were asked to give a description of the parish communities in which they were serving. The table below includes a short statement about each of the churches represented as well as demographic information about members of the clergy who contributed to this project. Although age was not a criterion for inclusion, it transpired that every priest or minister who was interviewed was aged between fifty-two and sixty-two. Each was invited to speak about his or her own experience of midlife, and the challenges and opportunities encountered in this life stage, prior to being asked about perceptions of the experiences and needs of middle-aged parishioners.

The interviews were open-ended but were structured around the following key questions:

1. Would you like to describe your own experience of midlife?

2. How effectively do you feel the church is addressing the needs of midlife attendees? What is already working well in your own parish? What supports your belief that parishioners in midlife are finding these things helpful?

3. Are you aware of needs amongst midlife parishioners that you think are not yet being addressed, or could be addressed more effectively? What has made you aware of these needs within your parish?

4. What further support would you like to see offered (i) to midlife parishioners, and (ii) to assist clergy as you work with people in midlife?

All names used are pseudonyms.
### Table 2 Demographics of the participating clergy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Parish type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Church with charismatic background offering diverse services in more than one venue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Very large suburban parish incorporating two churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sung-ho</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Small multicultural parish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Asian New Zealander</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Large multicultural suburban parish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Small Anglo-Catholic church with an older congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Large suburban church offering a range of service styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Fairly small suburban parish incorporating two churches and a lower socioeconomic housing area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Central city parish with a younger well-educated congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Suburban parish in mid-socioeconomic area, with two combined congregations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Church offering family-friendly non-traditional services in a venue other than a church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the ministers described as Presbyterian in the table above was working in a cooperating parish. It was not until the interview was undertaken that it was discovered that the interviewee identified as Methodist. I have chosen to use the descriptor “Presbyterian” to protect the interviewee’s anonymity. In addition to the ten members of the clergy identified in this table, another Catholic priest was interviewed in his capacity as a spiritual director. Some of Thomas’s comments related to his personal experience of midlife and to pastoral ministry. Where these comments throw further light upon
matters raised by other clergy, they are included within this chapter. Two other ordained ministers – one of whom was serving in a denomination other than the three upon which this research was focused, and the other of whom was not working in a parish – were also interviewed. Their insights have informed this thesis but their comments are not included within this chapter.

Irrespective of denomination, there was considerable agreement among clergy about key issues facing Christians at midlife. Clergy shared similar perspectives on a number of relevant matters, which was not surprising, given their common vocation and the narrow age range within which the interviewees fell. It was also unsurprising that many of the challenges and opportunities of midlife that clergy identified were the same as those described by the midlife churchgoers who participated in this project. Clergy identified key concerns at this stage of life as including the stress and busyness of many people, the pressures experienced by those caring for elderly relatives, children or grandchildren, and the adjustments associated with bereavement and loss. They considered the changing dynamics of intimate relationships in midlife to be of particular significance to many parishioners, and to themselves. Six out of ten clergy commented on the opportunities and the tensions that can emerge in marriages when children become less dependent and couples have more time with each other to rethink and reshape their relationships. In addition, several members of the clergy expressed concern about the loneliness or isolation experienced by some New Zealanders in midlife.

While there was considerable overlap between the ideas raised by midlife participants and in the issues identified by clergy, priests and ministers also emphasised some aspects of midlife experience which received relatively little attention in the interviews with midlife churchgoers. Almost half of the clergy who contributed to this project mentioned physical changes, including health challenges, which they had experienced in midlife. Several priests reflected on the significance of midlife within the life cycle, describing it, among other things, as a time of new gravity, of grappling with significant questions, of reflecting on one's story, and of inner healing. Some shared their own experience and understanding of “midlife crisis.” Many of the clergy who were involved in this project felt that midlife had been a period in which they had been dealing with a huge amount of change in different domains. They commented not only on changes in their circumstances but also on shifts in their priorities, values and beliefs. They
observed that such changes seemed typical of midlife experience. Their comments on some of these themes are explored in the first section of this chapter.

The second section of this chapter focuses more explicitly on the response of the church to the needs of Christians in midlife. All clergy acknowledged that catering for the needs of parishioners in their forties and fifties is a task of some complexity, not only because their needs are so diverse but because the busyness and common preoccupations of people in this life stage can mean that they are unable or unwilling to be as actively involved in their parishes as churchgoers in other age groups. Nevertheless, priests and ministers recognised that care of parishioners in midlife is important, both spiritually and pastorally. All mentioned aspects of services of worship and of parish life that they believed offered meaningful support to midlife parishioners who were grappling with questions of faith or coping with challenging life experiences. They also described a range of ways their parishes were endeavouring to meet the pastoral needs of midlife parishioners. There were many similarities in clergy and churchgoers’ perspectives about these aspects of church life. At the same time, clergy identified pastoral and spiritual needs which they felt were not yet being met effectively within their parishes, and they suggested a number of ways that midlife parishioners’ needs could better be addressed. All ten of the clergy who participated in this project stated that, within the church, midlife issues are rarely discussed. Most expressed a desire to be better equipped to assist parishioners in this life stage.

Findings from the interviews with clergy are presented here in two sections:

1. Reflections on midlife experience
2. Churches’ responses to the needs of midlife parishioners

This structure is intended to bring coherence to the data, but it will be clear that the divisions are artificial; the material in the two sections overlapped significantly. Clergy’s personal reflections about midlife experience were interwoven with observations about parishioners’ needs and the ways in which churches were addressing those needs. These comments, in turn, were closely linked with thoughts about what clergy and congregations could be doing to offer better support to midlife parishioners.
Reflections on midlife experience

The clergy and the midlife interviewees who participated in this project commented on many common themes. In order to avoid needless repetition, the focus within this section is twofold. First, aspects of midlife experience that were identified and discussed in some detail by a number of clergy but did not feature as prominently in the interviews held with midlife churchgoers will be noted and explored. Second, aspects of Christians’ midlife experience that clergy felt had significant pastoral or spiritual implications, including some of the key issues that midlife churchgoers had described in connection with their engagement with church or their faith development, will be examined. The lack of focus on other topics which received close attention in the previous two chapters – such as transitions in family relationships, bereavement, and the place of small groups in supporting midlife parishioners – is intentional, but is not to be attributed to clergy’s lack of interest in those matters.

The inner journey at midlife

Priests and ministers from all denominations described midlife as a period of considerable change. Many of those interviewed had experienced, and were still experiencing, significant changes in their careers, in their families, and in their communities. However, the focus of their reflections was frequently on the interior journey of midlife and the psychological and spiritual changes they had experienced or had observed in others of a similar age. A number of members of the clergy talked about the significance of midlife within the life course. Drawing on their own experiences, and from the experiences of those they had met and ministered amongst, they reflected on the journey of midlife and some of the lessons that they had learned, or felt could be learned, during this life stage. Their reflections, in many instances, illustrated themes identified in Chapters One and Two.

As has already been noted, most recent literature relating to midlife depicts midlife not so much as a period of “crisis” but as “a time of re-evaluation, introspection, and prioritization.”367 James D. Reid and Sherry L. Willis acknowledge, “The growing realization of the inevitability of one’s own mortality may lead to a sense of hopelessness and despair. However, for many individuals the beauty of development during midlife involves an emerging sense of perspective regarding one’s place within

the life cycle.”³⁶⁸ Thomas (Catholic, 54)³⁶⁹ told me that “perspective” is a word that is important to him.³⁷⁰ Deepening awareness of the diminishing amount of time he has left to accomplish goals, and review and revision of those goals, have been significant components of Thomas’s midlife journey:

The way that I experience it [midlife] most at the moment is, you know, when you’re young you always think, “I’ll do that one day. I’ll do that one day.” And in the last few years I’ve found that I won’t do it. I haven’t got time. ... I’m just running out of time.

Both of Thomas’s parents died in their early seventies, and he is aware that if he lives to the age his mother was at her death, he has only fifteen years more left to live. He said, “That’s one of the sobering realities of midlife.” He continued:

As an ordained minister, and a person of faith, I cannot imagine the thought that I’ve only got fifteen years left, possibly, without faith. ... I think one of the things that faith does, for me, probably the most important thing, is that it means that ... it’s not up to me to do everything within the years I’ve got walking on earth, because, firstly, as a Christian it’s not just about me (there’s a whole team of people working on this), and the second thing is, it’s not about achieving. And I think in my early years it was.

Thomas added that he knew the “theory” that “it wasn’t about achieving,” even when he was studying in his thirties, but he lived as if it was. “And now, I s’pose, looking back, there’s enough of what I really put time and energy and anxiety and worry into that’s come to absolutely nothing – and a good amount of it I would look back and say has been counter-productive.” When asked how he felt about that, Thomas described the comfort and hope he draws from “the reality of Jesus present” but admitted, “I feel a bit stupid, I suppose, for not having woken up to it earlier.”

“Some will learn those lessons early” and “some will never learn them,” as Lynne Baab notes,³⁷¹ but it is more common to grapple with these dilemmas in midlife than at an earlier stage. “There is a significance about midlife,” observed Bernard (Catholic, 52):

³⁶⁸ Ibid.
³⁶⁹ Thomas is a Catholic priest who also works as a spiritual director. His name is not included in the data table at the start of this chapter, but is in the list of spiritual directors at the start of Chapter Seven. Due to the fact that all but one of clergy who were interviewed were in their fifties (and the tenth member of the clergy was sixty-two), ages will only be noted the first time each person is quoted in this chapter.
³⁷⁰ Thomas went on to explain more about why, referring to a book he had recently read by Robert J. Wicks, Perspective: The Calm Within the Storm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
³⁷¹ Lynne Baab, Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999, xiv.)
It’s not just a continuum. I have noticed that about myself and the people I work with. I think it’s a time, typically, of re-examination of one’s life. I’m not sure what triggers it. It could just be chronology. You get to a certain age. It’s a really fascinating question. I suppose if you are a family person you tend to have finished the education of your children. To some extent, I’m guessing, that’s what sparks it off in some of the people who come to see me. I don’t have any children but it’s still happened. I think certainly for myself and the people I’ve spoken to it’s a time of deepening but it’s also a time of a new gravity. … It tends to have, certainly for a while anyway, it tends to have a sort of a sombre feel to it. It’s a re-examination. … And it’s disconcerting because you’re not quite sure what’s changed.

As Patricia (Anglican, 58) put it, midlife is a period during which people often seek to “make sense of who they are and what they’re here for.” Patricia observed that, for some, “actually looking at their story” can take “great courage.” It was certainly evident from the comments made by many priests and ministers that they and their parishioners were engaged in this task and in other “tasks of midlife” identified by Havighurst, Vaillant, Studzinski, Baab, and others, which were explored in Chapter Two.

Mary d’Apice suggests that the years of midlife have the potential to be “a time of significant spiritual healing.” According to d’Apice, there is not only a need “to be healed of sinfulness” but “there is a growing awareness of the hurt inflicted by others in the course of life’s journey.”372 Yvonne (Presbyterian, 58) has qualifications and experience in counselling as well as in ordained ministry. In speaking of her inner journey at midlife Yvonne told me, “A lot of my past world has healed. So there’s a sense of strength in that. And the more healing you find, the closer you sense God, I think.” However, she acknowledged that some people can resist reflecting on their past or seeking healing. Bernard agreed that, at midlife, “Healing is the big journey – potentially.” He said:

I think that as humans we are quite good at pushing things to the back. We can’t attend to them for some reason. Children, busyness, career … But even though those things have been pushed into the back somewhere they will come out again. … For many people it comes out at that midlife time, and it needs to be dealt with and attended to.

Paul (Catholic, 53) started his interview with the declaration that “certainly there is such a thing” as midlife crisis. He described an extensive period373 of internal struggle, triggered by bereavement and compounded by the Christchurch earthquakes, which led him to seek support and advice from his bishop and also from a psychologist, whom he

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373 Paul placed the start of this period approximately five years before the interview. He told me he was not sure if he is “completely out of it” yet.
saw three times. Paul admitted that seeking support was a very big thing for him to do. He told the bishop, “I cannot put my finger on it.” He added, “I knew I just needed to bounce it off someone.” As he explained to the psychologist he met with, Paul’s experience of midlife disorientation was: “I’m happy with what I am doing. I still find fulfilment in what I am doing. But somehow it’s like eating the food you like but the taste is not there.” Having found the professional support he received helpful, Paul believed that offering some education about midlife could be useful to parishioners. He noted:

Possibly it’s foreign to acknowledge that such thing as midlife [sic]. Because I myself would say, “Ach, it’s just a joke thing, you know?” Until you’re in it yourself, then you realise, “Hey!” It’s good to be able to think about it. It’s good to be able to acknowledge that it exists. ... It’s just someone being there, I think, that’s helpful. To know that there’s such a thing as midlife when they’re going through a crisis. ... You actually think the world’s falling apart but you don’t know why, and is it just you? ... The reality is, quite a lot of people go through this.

Paul’s belief that some knowledge about what to expect in midlife has the potential to reduce anxiety or bewilderment is borne out by related research. James F. Cobble, Jr., argues that instruction in the area of adult development “can help individuals better understand and prepare for their own development” and thus is a form of “preventative counselling.”

A number of clergy spoke about the significance and complexity of the questions that may arise in midlife. Acceptance that there are “no easy answers” was seen by Liz (Anglican, 55) as being a characteristic of mature faith developed through life experience. Liz reflected on the way that a couple of her parishioners, who are in early midlife, were coping with some particularly difficult life events. She felt that they are in “a stage in their spirituality” where:

They’re not black and white about things. They’ve got considerable life experience and spiritual experience as well. It doesn’t mean it hasn’t been hard. But in some ways I wonder if they’ve had more resources to cope with that. ... They’re more philosophical, sort of, “We can live without the answers.”

Bernard (Catholic) also believed that in midlife “a certain wisdom about life” has accrued. Like Liz, he said, “You do start to realise there are no easy answers.” Bernard felt that losing the “invincible confidence” he had as a young person has brought

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“spiritual opportunities” including “greater empathy, greater sensitivity to others. ... You should become (and I think I’ve become) less hasty in judging others.”

Other clergy also spoke about developing greater empathy and sensitivity, something they related both to their life stage and to their ministry experience. Sandra (Anglican, 58), for example, observed that having recently come through a significant period of upheaval herself has had a positive impact on her pastoral ministry. She said, “I notice with parishioners that ... you’re able to relate to them, and understand, and ... help them through their own stuff.” Russell (Anglican, 56) reflected on his experience in assisting families during times of illness and bereavement, and noted, "I think you bring more insights into your ministry as you get into your fifties. I've found that." Don (Presbyterian, 52) provided a specific example of empathy developed through life experience. He told me that he now endeavours to attend the funerals of midlife parishioners' parents. He said, “Through my own father dying, I have made a point, whenever I can, of going to the funeral of a member’s parent, which, um, it wouldn’t have occurred to me when I was thirty. I think people have found it helpful that I’ve been there.”

Greg (Presbyterian, 62) commented on significant shifts in some of his attitudes during midlife. He described himself as having become “a lot more liberal.” With a laugh, he said, “I’m having to discern whether I have lost my horizon or whether or not I’m starting to get it right.” A significant part of Greg’s journey between the ages of forty and sixty-two has been to grapple with the issue of inclusivity. Greg has worked hard to be more inclusive in his thinking and his language, and to incorporate gender-neutral language as well as Te Reo Maori (Maori language, which he had never learned before) into church services he leads. Greg described the movement in his attitudes towards these things, from head to heart, as “very huge.” Much to the surprise of his adult children, Greg said, he has moved a long way in his thinking about same-sex marriage, to the extent that he now believes he would marry a same sex couple. He said he does not know what has “happened” other than, “There’s so many things when you get to my age that I think you mellow. And I think you actually become reasonable.” He laughed and then added, “Does it mean my first forty years were all wrong? No, because God can, thank goodness, God can make some good out of that.” Greg acknowledged that there would be others within his congregation, in the same age group, whose spirituality is also changing, possibly because their family relationships are changing, or because they
are now the boss of their firm rather than the boy in the firm, or because relationally they have “been there, done that, or doing it again.” He observed, “It all changes our spiritual outlook.”

The interviews with clergy clearly confirmed that midlife has the potential to be a period of significant spiritual growth and transformation. This was illustrated not only in the stories they shared about their own experiences but also in their comments about the needs of churchgoers in midlife. Priests and ministers from every denomination suggested that a desire for “something more” seems to be characteristic of the spiritual journey at midlife – a theme which, as will be seen in Chapter Seven, was also raised and discussed in some detail by the spiritual directors who were interviewed. Seven out of the ten clergy who were interviewed spoke about midlife parishioners’ desire to deepen in faith and theological understanding. Several also mentioned parishioners’ openness to unfamiliar forms of prayer and other spiritual disciplines in midlife. However, it was also very clear from the comments of midlife participants, and from some clergy, that many Christians in midlife also value familiar and well-established spiritual practices and the stability that they offer during times of transition or disequilibrium.

Russell (Anglican) observed that midlifers “want to grow theologically” but the Sunday service doesn’t allow sufficient opportunity for that to happen. He said:

   I think we could do more to get to grips with some topics that people think about – you know, in a proactive way – especially theological topics, around sexuality, for example, around what is marriage, around singleness perhaps. ... There’s a whole lot of stuff that we don’t have time to do in any depth on Sundays, but would be really helpful for people. I think there’s a gap there.

Russell sees that it is part of his job to “get some extension going,” and although he believes his church could do more, it has occasionally offered midweek lectures offering theological teaching, which have been well attended and appreciated. In his church, home groups also offer opportunities for midlife parishioners to explore their faith. Sandra (Anglican) has sole responsibility for a much smaller congregation. Quite a number of her parishioners have found an opportunity to deepen their understanding of Scripture through attendance at an international interdenominational group called the Bible Study Fellowship,\(^{375}\) which is held at another church. Sandra noted that quite a

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\(^{375}\) Bible Study Fellowship, <https://www.bsfinternational.org> (16 May 2016). The website describes the aims of the Bible Study Fellowship, which is an international organisation, and outlines all the courses that are offered.
number of her parishioners who attend this group are in the forty to sixty age group. For those involved, it is not a small commitment; the weekly Bible studies are quite demanding and participants are required to complete quite a bit of homework. Sandra considered that this group was helpful for the members. She noted that members “have found quite a bit of fellowship as well as, you know, input.”

The Catholic priests who were interviewed for this project also commented on the desire of midlife parishioners to develop a better understanding of their faith. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is a course about the essentials of the Catholic faith, which is offered to those who are new to Catholic teachings and are interested in exploring the possibility of joining the Catholic Church. Bernard has found that people who have been in the church for a very long time have expressed interest in that course because they would also like to receive teaching about some beliefs or practices that they have been brought up with but have never really understood:

In fact I hear constantly from people, “We’d like to do that because we have sort of accepted our faith, got it from our parents, but now we actually want to learn about it. We would like to actually know: Why do we this? Why do we celebrate this feast? Who said the church can do that? Or where’s the Church’s authority for this? Where’s that in the Scriptures?” So there’s a new sense of enquiry, but we don’t have that set up. We do summer camps – all sorts of camps – for young people, Hearts Aflame for ... young adults, we’ve got sacramental programmes, we’ve got things for ... people who want to become Catholics, but we have nothing for people looking to re-examine their faith. We don’t have that. Incredible isn’t it?

In another Catholic parish, Paul screens a ten-part DVD series on Catholicism annually, because of his conviction that “faith seeks understanding.” A lot of those who attend this course are already members of the Catholic Church. The first year Paul offered it almost one hundred people attended at the start, and about fifty attended all ten sessions. In the second year fewer from the parish attended, as many had already been along in the first year. Paul believes that the programme has been very well received and very effective, as he has offered it over several years, and each year there has been someone who has converted to Catholicism at the end of the programme. He


378 An allusion to St Anselm’s motto, fides quaerens intellectum.
noted that every one of those converts has been in midlife, except for one who was “sixty-something.”

Liz (Anglican) also believed that midlife churchgoers are “looking for extension.” In this regard, some of the members of Liz’s congregation find attending spiritual direction helpful, and a number of people within the congregation have themselves trained as spiritual directors. When asked if she felt that spiritual direction has any particular applicability in midlife, Liz replied:

Yes, I think it does. With all the transitions people are facing (and part of that are certain transitions in spirituality) ... that’s helpful for people. And exploring – a lot of people are having great fun exploring things. And I am too. Yeah. Perhaps often, when there are so many demands, that actually that chance to go in new directions, new places, permission-giving to have a bit of fun and to explore is really freeing.

The fact that “transitions in spirituality” can be challenging to negotiate was picked up on by Don (Presbyterian), who observed that it can be difficult for some churchgoers to find a safe and accepting place to wrestle with some of “the paradoxes and hard questions of faith.” He mentioned a parishioner who doesn’t come to church so much now, but certainly hasn’t lost his faith. Don said, “One of his issues is how can he ask the questions of the Scriptures that he wants to ask without feeling like he’s being naughty. ... He wants to be able to sit down and talk about things without upsetting someone else’s faith.” While there is already a well-resourced network of small groups within Don’s parish, where significant questions of faith may be explored openly, the church intends to establish another group that may meet on a monthly basis “in a different setting” (such as a café), to delve deeper into particular topics. The space to explore “hard questions” may be more difficult to find in some parishes than in others, as some of the spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project also pointed out. The life experience and personal faith journeys of clergy and laity are factors that affect a congregation’s responsiveness to those who may be struggling with their faith or with the church.

Liz’s description of what “extension” for midlife churchgoers might look like included opportunities for the exploration of a range of spiritual practices or disciplines. Sung-ho (Presbyterian, 53) also emphasised the place of traditional spiritual disciplines in contributing to genuine spiritual growth at midlife. He contrasted involvement in many church programmes and activities, and even the quest for theological understanding,
with the slow process of inner transformation which requires “private time in silence and deepening.” Reflecting on his own journey, Sung-ho said, “A little bit of transformation and change and growth, I found, it took a long time.” While knowledge and intellectual understanding and reason may be helpful, Sung-ho felt that in this time and age we need an “emphasis on spirituality.” Time in prayer and meditation and silence help us to know ourselves and recognise God’s work in us, and other things – including church programmes and activities – can distract us from that work. Sung-ho listed a number of activities offered in his present parish and in former parishes he has been part of, then said:

In many cases we feel satisfied, just satisfied – I enjoyed it, that's all. But it doesn’t lead us to deeper change, or challenge us to commit to lay down something of my long-standing possession of something. So we feel good, we feel satisfied, I enjoy it, all the programmes, but in many cases they've failed to connect myself to the truth.

The spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project shared similar views about the desire for spiritual growth and deepening that prompt some Christians to seek spiritual direction in midlife. The comments of spiritual directors will be explored in Chapter Seven.

Patricia (Anglican) felt that her own spiritual journey at midlife had been “filled with a great deal of change, and adventure, really.” Prior to her ordination, Patricia moved from one denomination to another, an experience that was in some ways “a wrench” but also “felt like a home-coming.” She described her openness to spiritual nourishment from multiple churches and a range of types of services, including Celtic, Taizé, traditional, and contemporary services, during this period of transition. She also considered that “Pentecostal and charismatic areas” were part of her formation. Paradoxically, while Patricia was one of the participants in the project who was most eloquent about the joy of exploration in faith and spirituality at midlife, she was also particularly sensitive to parishioners’ desire and need for familiarity and stability, especially in post-earthquake Christchurch. When asked what she believed helped people to connect with God at this stage of life, Patricia said, “I think the familiar is really important to them. Especially, perhaps, coming back to the earthquake situation.” Within her parish, one of two church buildings is currently out of action, and she explained the impact of this on her midlife parishioners:
For some there is enormous grief at the loss of their familiar building, which holds so much of their story, and the story of their family. ... And they’ve been wrenched out of it. And alongside that, the same is probably happening through their own homes. So that’s an enormous thing. But at the same time, they gather together, and the sacramental, the liturgical, is a huge comfort and encouragement to them. So they are connecting with God through liturgy, through sacrament, through music very strongly. They are things that I really notice.

Resourcing and extending Christians who wish to establish a more robust theological framework within which to explore questions of faith, or who are seeking to explore a variety of expressions of spirituality, presents interesting challenges and opportunities for clergy and their congregations. Relevant courses are already offered in a number of contexts within and beyond parishes, but informing churchgoers about what is available, and connecting individuals to particular programmes which may best meet their needs, may be a demanding task. Connecting parishioners to spiritual directors, who might offer helpful support during times of transition, may also be difficult, especially in denominations where the ministry of spiritual direction may not be well known or understood.

**Work**

Clergy who contributed to this project perceived work to be an extremely important aspect of life for most people in middle age. Several commented on their own sense of vocation. They also identified some significant work-related issues affecting midlife parishioners. Their reflections about work provided different perspectives on some themes already raised by midlife interviewees. Clergy also mentioned some work-related issues which were not mentioned by other participants.

As was noted in Chapter Four, many midlife churchgoers who were interviewed for this project spoke about the conflicting demands of work and family life. Findings from recent research relating to middle-aged adults’ experiences of work and attitudes to Work-Family Conflict (WFC) suggest that those in late midlife “seem to place greater importance on family relative to work due to differences in motives for working. ... They are probably less willing to accept high levels of WFC and actively engage to reduce it.”379 Some members of the clergy were certainly conscious of desiring (and achieving) better work/life balance in their fifties than they had sought when they were younger.

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Don (Presbyterian) told me that in midlife he has begun to be “much more intentional” about his friendships and about “connecting up with people.” When asked what had motivated this shift in focus Don paused before saying, “It may have been a little bit sort of wondering what’s really important. I think in some respects I think maybe it’s having less to prove, but I don’t feel quite as driven as I sort of used to be, I don’t think.” Describing his role at church as “somewhat unsustainable,” because the parish is trying to do so much and trying to meet many diverse needs, Don noted that he has always worked very hard. Now, he said, “I am going home at five o’clock far more than I used to.” Sandra (Anglican) also commented on the desire and need for better work/life balance which has emerged for her in midlife. Sandra said she has learned to pace herself much better and to take time for refreshment. She recognised that “having a better rhythm of life has been important.” Managing the demands of work alongside other responsibilities and relationships is a significant challenge for many people in this stage of life.

In speaking about the pressures of work, priests and ministers showed genuine understanding of, and sensitivity to, the needs of their midlife parishioners. Most commented on the fact that the demands of work for people in this life stage mean that the time and energy that middle-aged churchgoers can commit to activities within their parishes is limited. Don (Presbyterian), for example, observed that his team of elders, most of whom are in midlife, “are able people, so they have a lot of other calls on their time.” He gave examples of some demanding leadership roles these people held in various workplaces, and noted that one elder travels quite a bit for work. He said, “There’s a limit to what they can commit to beyond the regular meetings that we have.” Parishioners’ busyness also affects what parishes can offer for those in midlife, as Russell (Anglican), and many other priests and ministers, observed:

The church is limited to the extent that people are involved as they want to be, as they are able to be. And there are deficits all over the place. But part of that is that people are busy, people have got lots of other things, so you can’t do everything.

The hopes and expectations that midlife parishioners have from their participation in church life relates to their work, in two further respects. First, it is not unusual for Christians in midlife to understand their work – including voluntary and unpaid work – in terms of vocation. Several members of the clergy noted how important it is, therefore, to value and honour the work that parishioners are doing during the week. Their
comments paralleled those made by some midlife participants who expressed the desire that their churches could make more explicit acknowledgment of the importance of their weekday employment and that they could be helped to think theologically about work. Clergy acknowledged that this could be done better in most churches.

Second, a number of the priests and ministers who were interviewed noted that midlife parishioners who hold responsible and demanding positions in society are likely to place a high priority on receiving spiritual replenishment at church. Although many people in midlife are energised by being able to contribute their skills and experience within a church context, as was evident from the comments recorded in Chapter Five, others, especially those who are in “high-powered jobs,” want “something stable and regular, you know, not too challenging. They want to be chaplainned, actually,” Yvonne (Presbyterian) said. With a laugh, she added, “I don’t really like this, but I mean as I say this I think, well, actually, it’s probably reasonable. They just want to be looked after ... and not have too many things required.” Sandra (Anglican) noted that a lot of her parishioners who are most involved in church life are retired people. A lot of those who are working full time “just want to come on a Sunday, be a part of it, but don’t want to do too much.” Sandra pointed out that these parishioners can be facing significant challenges at work:

There’s often many people that are going through that whole, you know, needing to change jobs, needing to slow their own jobs down, somehow. There seem to be a lot of people, you know, that are frustrated up to here [she gesticulates] with the pressures of work, so church needs to be a place where they don’t feel pressured but they’ve got something to contribute.

Liz works in an inner-city Anglican church. A significant proportion of her parishioners are involved in “helping professions.” She told me that it is a challenge to find a balance between providing a place for lay-people where they can “sit and stop” while also being a place where they can contribute. Liz admitted that she sometimes needs to remind herself to honour parishioners’ work within the community during the week, rather than focusing too narrowly on their ministries within the church. Referring to her own congregation, Liz said, “I would think a good number of those in midlife, that I see at the moment, do see what they are doing in the week as their ministry.” Comments made by midlife participants and by clergy interviewed for this project suggest that Christians in midlife do regard their roles at work as linked to their spirituality. There is potential for the church to provide more effective support to midlife churchgoers who would like to
reflect on the meaning of their work and its connection to their faith. This theme will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

Some of the clergy – notably those serving in parish or diocesan settings that enabled them to offer leadership to younger, less experienced colleagues – stated that, in midlife, they were finding deep fulfilment and satisfaction in their work roles. A number exhibited a sense of generative care in desiring to empower and equip others. Russell enjoys leading the staff team in his Anglican parish. He laughed as he described being “a wee bit like a parent, especially to the younger members of staff”:

My role is to encourage and to guide and [to] not to be too overly anxious when things go wrong, but to say everything’s going to be OK. I would like to think I pass on some ministry values, through who I am and what I do, the way I go about things, and to reflect on those, especially with the curates.

Don (Presbyterian) said:

In terms of kind of life stage, I feel like, I mean, there’s lots of things I don’t know, but there are a few things I do know now. I’ve been a pastor for twenty-four years so I feel like my sense of personal call for the next, whatever I’ve got, fifteen years or so of whatever it is, of ministry, is to see this next generation of leaders come through and just run well. So that’s one of the things that gets me out of bed in the morning. ... I’m more excited about ministry now than I’ve ever been.

These men were energised by the fact that they were able to draw on their life and ministry experience in mentoring others, and, in this respect, there were obvious parallels with some of the attitudes to work that midlife participants shared. However, unlike most of the midlife interviewees, almost half of the clergy, including Russell and Don, also spoke about anticipating and preparing for retirement.

For people in midlife, the transition to retirement is a predictable phase of the work cycle, although, as Lachman notes, “The preretirement phase occurs at different time points, and may be affected by historical variations, timing, planning, adjustment, and resources that are brought to bear on retirement decisions.”\textsuperscript{380} All of the clergy who commented on retirement noted the impact that thinking about the next stage of life was having on their current choices, actions, and attitudes to their ministry. Several ministers described taking practical steps, including seeking advice from professionals and from family members, to ensure they had made adequate financial provision for

\textsuperscript{380} Lachman, “Development in Midlife,” 324.
their future. One minister had gained further tertiary qualifications, in order to broaden employment options once her time in parish ministry ceased. For some clergy, the realisation that retirement was no longer far off had increased their appreciation of the current opportunities they had to serve and to accomplish projects. Russell told me that he was very aware that in eight and a half years' time he will not be in the privileged position he is in now of leading “a very positive and life-giving church”:

It does make you think, “What I’m doing now I can never do again.” So these are precious years. And you want to invest them as positively as you can, because it won't last forever. So that’s been on my mind a wee bit as we’ve worked through our retirement planning.

It cannot be determined whether retirement was commented on more frequently by clergy than by other participants because of the particular demands of ordained ministry, because the clergy were a decade closer to the age of retirement than half of the midlife interviewees, or for other reasons.

Two further aspects of midlife experience were discussed in some detail by many of the priests and ministers who were interviewed. Six out of ten clergy spoke about the opportunities and challenges that are likely to arise within marriages and families at midlife, particularly after children have left home. The same number of clergy identified the care of elderly family members and the grief associated with parental loss as being extremely significant aspects of midlife experience for many midlife parishioners. Few of the clergy’s comments about these matters have been included because their perspectives and those of the midlife participants, whose stories have already been recounted, were very similar. However, clergy’s observations about the challenges for the church in supporting churchgoers facing these issues are noted in the next section of this chapter.

**Churches’ responses to the needs of midlife parishioners**

Half of the ministers and priests who were interviewed for this project stated explicitly that, in their experience, the needs of Christians in midlife are not given a great deal of consideration within the church:

There’s nothing targeted for them. And yet I think … that in fact it’s quite a critical area because people are confronting, often quite unexpectedly, these issues. Have we got anything targeted for them? No. Sorry to say that. (Bernard, Catholic)
How is the church addressing midlife? Um, I don’t think it’s doing it very well. Especially with the fact that I’m not really thinking about it! (Yvonne, Presbyterian)

To be honest, when it comes to negotiating the middle years, in specific terms, or trying to be helpful, we don’t really do anything like that. (Russell, Anglican)

We don’t have something specific for people in midlife … but if we know there’s a need we address it. (Paul, Catholic)

Sorry, I’m drawing a blank. It probably means we haven’t been intentional enough. (Greg, Presbyterian)

These comments, taken out of context and grouped as they are, indicate that there is certainly room for some consciousness-raising among clergy and congregations when it comes to reflecting on the needs of Christians in midlife. That being said, it must be noted that all of the clergy who made these remarks went on to qualify or modify the statements they had made. These five clergy, and the other five priests and ministers who were interviewed, were able to provide numerous examples of ways that at least some needs of midlife churchgoers are being met effectively within parishes. By this stage of life people “will probably have made a decision whether they are living out the faith in a traditional church-based organisation or not,” as Patricia (Anglican) pointed out. She noted that although the services, programmes, or forms of pastoral or spiritual support being offered may not be targeted specifically at people between the ages of forty and sixty, people in midlife who choose to attend church frequently find it “hugely meaningful.” Patricia felt that many in midlife “find community, and acceptance, belonging, encouragement and nurture in that space.”

A summary of four aspects of church life which clergy considered to be of particular benefit to churchgoers in midlife follows. It will be evident that these are likely to affect Christians in other age groups positively also; this does not diminish or detract from their relevance or significance for those in middle age. Parallels between the perspectives of clergy and the opinions and the church experiences of midlife participants, which were recorded in Chapter Five, are numerous and striking.

**Services and sacraments**

People in midlife are often juggling family commitments and work, and, more frequently than in previous generations, an individual in midlife may be the only member of his or her household who considers church attendance a priority. These factors can make
regular attendance at services difficult. Sensitivity to these dynamics, on the part of clergy and congregations, can facilitate participation in church life by those who might otherwise be excluded. For example, several members of the clergy observed that some parishioners in midlife find it helpful if services can be offered at different times of the day or week. With the express purpose of suiting busy families with children involved in sport and other activities Greg (Presbyterian) established an early morning Sunday service which goes for an hour and a quarter. Greg talked to me about the importance of “honouring the time” – guaranteeing that they will finish on time – which means that sometimes he decides to cut his talk short and emails it to parishioners. Other churches offer midweek services, although these are not necessarily at times that suit people who have full-time employment. Mass is offered daily in Catholic churches.

Liz’s Anglican parish offers a number of services at different times of the week. As well as the regular Sunday service a contemplative Eucharist service is offered monthly, on Saturday nights. Midweek liturgies are held on Wednesday and Thursday mornings, and another service is held every Tuesday, in the early evening, which one or two people in midlife come to directly after work, “so it’s sort of part of their pattern.” Attendance at each service is quite small. Liz told me that “worship attendance is perhaps more fluid” for those in midlife, but she noted that the night before her interview most of the middle-aged members of her parish had attended a mid-week public talk hosted by their church, which was part of a monthly series relating to spirituality. When thinking about the ways that the needs of midlife parishioners were being addressed, Liz felt it was important to look “across the whole gamut of our life together” rather than just considering Sunday attendance.

Among midlife churchgoers there is a “mixture of liturgical preferences,” as Russell (Anglican) pointed out. Some can find it helpful, therefore, if services are not only offered at different times during the week, but if a variety of types of service are offered within a church or across a number of churches. Services that accommodate and foster “the willingness to explore” in liturgy, theology and in spirituality – something that was identified by a number of clergy and spiritual directors as being a significant part of their own journey of faith in their forties and fifties – are beneficial to Christians in midlife. Some midlife churchgoers find contemporary forms of worship help them to experience a sense of God’s presence and allow them to express themselves openly in

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381 One of Liz’s parishioners, Malcolm, was interviewed for this project. His comments about the Tuesday evening service were recorded in Chapter Five.
prayer and song. Clergy and midlife interviewees also mentioned contemplative services which can be appreciated by midlife parishioners who are juggling multiple responsibilities and busyness. Liz told me that many members of her parish say:

We love the oasis of calm and silence, you know, particularly those who are working in the city during the week. And we really value the chance to come along to a place that’s quiet, that values silence, that doesn’t get freaked out by silence, that doesn’t try to fill it up with words.

Liz added that it’s a challenge to meet the needs of these people alongside the needs of parishioners who have small children, so that the parents don’t need to be going in and out of church and feeling uncomfortable. Some churches hold services with an intergenerational focus, such as “Messy Church,”382 which can provide effective support to midlife churchgoers with young children. By necessity, smaller churches do their best to engage parishioners of all ages in services, and this can benefit all involved, as Sandra (Anglican) suggested:

I just think that whole “across the generation” to me that’s what church should be. So I’m not keen to have, you know, a separate this or a separate that. Or even to have, you know, like an earlier service that’s really traditional and a more modern one to suit people.

Sandra said that, at her church, they are blessed not to have people who express concern that things aren’t traditional or modern enough. Some people might occasionally not come to a service that they don’t think will suit them but most services are pretty blended. Big churches may have the privilege of being able to offer a variety of services and programmes but Sandra noted that this isn’t necessarily always a positive thing for parishioners with families:

I don’t know if it actually does any good. If you take kids out of church until they’re twelve, then why do they think they’re suddenly gonna want to start coming to church? They’ve never been before; they’ve always gone off to their programme. Church seems boring compared to that, so, “Why should I go?” [She laughs.] And then they opt out. Whereas if they’ve been a part of things, and they’ve been putting the candles out, or collecting the money, or doing a reading, or whatever, from when they are little, church is just familiar to them.

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382 Claire Dalpra of The Sheffield Centre, UK, defines Messy church as “an all-age fresh expression of church that offers counter-cultural transformation of family life through families coming together to be, to make, to eat and to celebrate God.” Messy Church NZ, <http://messychurch.nz> (11 October, 2016).
One Presbyterian minister, Don, also spoke about the benefits accruing from intergenerational forms of worship. He described the relatively new format of the Sunday evening service in his parish, which uses a small group model to address the needs of teenagers and the middle-aged parents and other adults who attend. The focus of the programme is not simply on the needs of youth, but on “intergenerational discipleship.” Don felt that this model was proving to be of value to all those involved, including those in midlife. Some Christians in midlife find fulfilment and opportunities for spiritual growth through involvement in more than one congregation, attending services of different kinds at more than one church. Liz noted, “In midlife and younger ... increasingly people can juggle multiple commitments, so that they might actually be part of a couple of communities.” This raises interesting questions for clergy, Liz told me; she laughed as she suggested there might be “turf wars” between them.

Patricia (Anglican) captured the essence of many of the opinions expressed by the midlife interviewees when she concluded that what is important about church for Christians in midlife is “that sense of connecting with God and with one another.” Contexts within which “connecting with God” can occur are certainly not limited to those provided by churches, but the church is a place within which people may experience and respond to God’s presence in special ways. Patricia described the “enormous privilege” it is to be able help people connect with God – “to offer that ‘holy ground’, the ‘I–thou’ relationship” – as they struggle with a range of life experiences:

Sometimes we meet people through our worship, through homilies, through, you know, making the Scriptures relevant to people today, and what’s going on in their lives. So I tend to move very much in that direction in my preaching. That can give people the permission, in the acknowledgement of where they’re at, and that we all share some of those challenges and that it’s OK, you know?

Patricia and other clergy also spoke about the significance of the sacraments, particularly communion, in assisting parishioners to connect with God. Eucharistic Adoration and the sacrament of Reconciliation were identified by some Catholic priests as helpful to churchgoers, particularly those in midlife. Services at which healing prayer was offered were conducted in Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. Bernard told me about the importance of Eucharistic Adoration within the diocese he serves. He

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said, “A big thing for me is – it’s a big thing in the Catholic tradition – we have started twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week, Adoration.” When asked if he considered this particularly helpful for people in midlife, Bernard replied:

It’s full of people in midlife. Any hour of the day or night ... our Lord is there waiting for them, quite a sacramental reality, and it’s a beautiful thing. We have over four hundred adorers.384 ... Midlife, I think you become a bit more attentive to spiritual things. A little less active, a bit more passive.

Another Catholic priest, Thomas, also regarded Eucharistic Adoration as “a big thing”:

It’s interesting that in the Catholic Church, in the Western world, one of the biggest growth things in parish life in the last ten years has been Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Which is nothing. Silence. Nothing. The presence, the reality of Christ present, but no-one’s doing anything. The people are coming and going in their own time. So people come to church, come in silence, don’t talk to anyone, stay there for fifteen minutes or an hour, and then leave again, in silence. We say, this is the heart.

Both Thomas and Bernard also spoke about the sacrament of Reconciliation (or confession). Thomas observed that for most Catholics who are currently in midlife going to confession is not a regular practice. Fifty years ago everyone went regularly, and then “it just died off completely.” Among his directees, confession is a regular part of the lives of Catholics under the age of forty, but this is not usually the case for those who are a little older. Bernard described the profound impact that going to confession can have for those who have rarely attended until midlife. He explained that children attend classes prior to making their first Reconciliation, with their parents, of whom “a good majority ... wouldn’t have been to confession for quite some time”:

They've got sorrows in their life that are like a hand break, so those first confession sessions are good for the kids, and the parents start coming up. And tears, conversions. There’s often been a big knot in their lives about who knows what. Regrets, mistakes they’ve made as young people, bad decisions, infidelities, and it’s a very powerful thing at midlife to rediscover in the midst of that sacrament that the Lord has loved you far more than you could have imagined. It is a beautiful discovery. So that is something that happens in the church that is a very beautiful thing to watch.

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384 These are people within the diocese who have signed up to a roster and attend regularly. Others are also welcome to go along when they choose, and a lot of people who are not on the roster also attend.
Fellowship

As Patricia stated, “connecting with one another” is another core element of parish life. Both midlife participants and clergy acknowledged that the emotional and social support provided by congregations can be central to churchgoers’ sense of connection with the church and with God. Churches often provide social groups for those they perceive to be the most isolated and vulnerable members of their communities – such as the frail elderly – but all of the priests and ministers who were interviewed believed that it was important not to overlook the social and emotional needs of middle-aged parishioners.

Sung-ho (Presbyterian) expressed concern about the social isolation experienced by some New Zealand churchgoers. When asked what he considered to be the most significant needs of people in midlife, he paused for quite some time before saying, “I think they need more friends.” Sung-ho said that his parishioners tell him, “We are living in a lonely society.” This observation is borne out by research conducted within New Zealand. A study carried out by Auckland’s University of Technology (AUT) in 2015, found that, compared to twenty-nine European countries that carried out the same study, “New Zealand fared the worst when it came to social connections and community.”385 Of the 10,000 New Zealanders surveyed, almost forty percent met with others socially once a month or less, and only four percent said they felt close to people in their local area.386 Overseas research suggests that people in midlife may be some of the loneliest members of society, as, increasingly, many middle-aged people live alone, are geographically disconnected from their families, and, due to developments in technology, frequently work in isolation.387 Drawing on a number of studies, Oliver Robinson, of Greenwich University, observes, “Midlife is the peak era of occupational and civic responsibilities for most people, and friendship network size decreases by over a third compared with young adults.”388

385 The study was carried out by AUT University's Human Potential Centre and insurance company Sovereign in 2015. “Only 36 per cent of those surveyed said they felt appreciated by people close to them. New Zealand ranked last in this category compared to other countries surveyed. Denmark was ranked first, with 83 per cent.” Laura Walters, “Kiwis Suffering from Disconnect,” 15 May 2015 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/well-good/68591123/kiwis-suffering-from-disconnect> (5 April 2017).
386 Ibid.
388 Oliver Robinson, Development Through Adulthood: An Integrative Sourcebook (Basingstoke: Palgrave
Sung-ho went on to say, “Overcoming, coping with, loneliness ... is true actually in the church as well.” Paul (Catholic) agreed. He ministers in a large parish and is very aware of the need to offer opportunities for social connection for churchgoers who are in midlife. Paul told me that it is in midlife that people are most likely to shift house and move to a new parish, but because people can go to mass at any church it’s easy to assume, in a big church, that a new person is just visiting on one day. He acknowledged, “So we don’t reach out to that person. And you can be doing that the whole year, and no-one said hello to you.” Paul noted that church “can be a lonely place ... if you are a shy person and don’t reach out to others, you go to a parish and no-one reaches out to you. ... So I make people aware of that.” Paul has instituted an evening to welcome newcomers, which is held once or twice a year. It is open to everyone, but people who are new to the parish are phoned and invited, and some established parishioners are asked to come along to meet and welcome them. Paul thinks that these social evenings, which include sharing wine and cheese and engaging in some purposeful activities, are working well. Additionally, a cup of tea is served after mass on Sundays, something which has been introduced during his time in the parish, in order to facilitate more opportunities for conversation and connection between members of the congregation. Many churches, of all denominations, invite church attendees to meet together after services for a cup of tea or coffee; these informal gatherings are clearly considered by clergy and congregations to contribute to a sense of fellowship among churchgoers of all ages. It can be easy for churchgoers who have regular opportunities to connect with others in these familiar contexts to overlook the value and potential of such gatherings in offering support to individuals from communities where people are “suffering from disconnect.”

While some sense of fellowship within a community can be created over cups of tea after church services, closer bonds between people are more likely to be formed in small groups, as the interviews with midlife churchgoers revealed. Clergy from parishes of all sizes also spoke about the importance of small groups within the church. Priests and ministers observed that in such settings people are able to share their lives openly with others, to “discuss the things they need to discuss” (Don, Presbyterian), to pray for one another, and to provide practical support when needed. Participation in small groups may benefit Christians of any age, but clergy identified a number of reasons that midlife

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Macmillan, 2013), 300.

parishioners might find small group involvement particularly helpful. If they are in a strong, trusting group, they can share the struggles and questions they are grappling with, and have opportunities both to receive support and to offer it to others. The support of others can be particularly meaningful to Christians in midlife as they grapple with challenges, as Sandra (Anglican) observed:

I think often people in that stage, say something happens, say in their family or work, that’s really overwhelming, they think, “Nobody else would have these problems here, and if they knew my child was going through this, or whatever, they just wouldn’t understand.” And then they’ll start talking to somebody who says, “That happened to me. And I’m right with you.” … Some of those families that I see that, you know, their adult children or young adult children are going through crises, or whatever, there’s been people in the parish that have had that happen to them twenty years ago, and they have actually just got alongside and quietly prayed with them, encouraged them.

At their best, small groups can be contexts within which members can share “spiritual wisdom,” Patricia (Anglican) told me. In Patricia’s parish there are some home groups, a craft group, and several women’s groups. Men have been away on retreat together, which they really loved. “Working bees, even, become very much a community, you know, a communal activity,” she said. She continued, “In the past the church was much more the hub of social groups and sporting groups, so there was a lot of activity that happened for people together. I think we’ve lost some of that. And there are other organisations that offer those things.” According to Patricia, clergy and congregations now need to be intentional and creative about providing opportunities for meaningful fellowship:

I think each cohort needs to evolve its own requirements, you know, and attend to those requirements. Because I think particularly in the context right now, it’s changing, and changing quite rapidly. You know, we looked in the past and there was a huge drop-off in engagement in traditional groups – social groups and sporting groups. Whether that’s sort of increased a bit right now, I’m not too sure, actually. I mean I’m aware, in perhaps guys going into the midlife area … a number of them are really involved either in music, or in sporting activities, cycling, and stuff like that. But whether the church would evolve, you know, offer groups, it’s a fun idea, I think. I like the idea of combining interest groups and spirituality in a quite natural way.

Men’s engagement in small groups within the church was an issue discussed by midlife participants. Like the midlife interviewees, clergy considered that men had particular requirements that differed from women’s. Several priests and ministers spoke about the pressures facing men in midlife, and the need for the church to encourage men to make
time to meet informally together. Sandra (Anglican) acknowledged that some middle-aged men in her congregation have stressful jobs. While they may not want to meet up for a Bible study, "because some of them would just not be into that," she felt that they might enjoy going out for a motorbike ride, or a bit of four-wheel driving, or a barbecue, and things like that:

That kind of relational stuff, for some of those guys is actually really important, because I know that a lot of them are really stressed. And whilst I can go and have a bit of a chinwag with them, you know, as a female minister it’s possibly not connecting sometimes. ... Women are good at organising groups and coffee mornings, and they like doing that. And the old retired guys love it, because they’ve all got plenty of stories to tell. But you know, for working men, often they don’t necessarily have that connection. They don’t necessarily have that talk-time with their colleagues at work because they’re so busy. They might talk a little bit about it when they go home, but they might not. So, a place for them to kinda unwind and sound off if they need to, or encourage each other, I think’s important.

Sandra went on to give an example of an event organised by a man in her congregation, for the men, which was a barbecue with boutique beer tastings. She said, "It was such a brilliant event. And they all got talking. It was – I would have loved to have been there.”

Greg (Presbyterian) said that if he had time he would like to offer more for men. Like Sandra, Greg believes that women are very well catered for in the church, with mid-week groups where they have coffees and lunches, Music and Movement, and so on. “But the guys – we have breakfast together on a Friday morning, and we meet for prayer after we’ve set up here, and we talk about all sorts of stuff. No agendas.” The men also have film nights fairly regularly. They don’t have a study. They just meet as “guys without an agenda.” Greg told me that the men “seem to be hungry for the fellowship.” He then added, “When I think about the age of these guys, they’re all in the age group that you’re talking about.” I observed that those who are making time to attend must be enjoying the company of the other men, and Greg agreed:

It is wholesome. How do you describe wholesome? It’s not dull and boring. We’ll sit and have a beer over a game of pool. But I know I’m not going to get awful language. You know, I can’t stand that. ... And I’ve never heard anything even negative in a tone of voice, about their ladies, or their kids. ... There’s never going to be a little backhander about anything. Now it’s very rare to find where you can actually just be a guy in that situation where you’re not, yeah, well, where it’s just wholesome but it’s still fun. Not geeky.
Greg would like to invest more time in addressing the men’s needs as he thinks that there are times when it’s good for the men and women to be separate.

Women in midlife also appreciate opportunities to spend time together without an agenda. Sandra (Anglican) mentioned that for several years a group of about half a dozen female parishioners, who were a little under the age of forty, went away on “a girls’ weekend” and they always invited her to join them, which she appreciated. She sees the value of sometimes “retreating out of normal life” but it’s not always easy to work out how to do that, especially with women who may be working and busy. “Dragging them off for a weekend and just doing something fun, and being refreshed, I think would be a really nice thing to do. It takes a lot of organising.” She felt that the same thing could be really good for the guys that are working. She thought it would be beneficial to them if they could “just go off and have a guys’ weekend out in the country, or do something.” Sandra contrasted that sort of relaxing weekend, which provides a “change of pace and space,” with “trying to get things like vestry retreat days and things like that. They just don’t want to do it. They don’t want to waste a Saturday doing that stuff.” Sandra sounded perfectly accepting of this perspective. “I think it’s often in that change of pace and place, that’s when a lot of the true relating kind of goes on.” People in midlife may really appreciate time spent away from normal routines and responsibilities, enjoying fun activities and the friendship of other Christians.

The value of such events should not be underestimated. They help members of congregations to form close bonds with one another. Strong social connections have beneficial effects on health and well-being. Drawing on studies from Harvard University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the University of Virginia, and an Australia longitudinal study of aging, Barbara Bradley Hagerty claims that, “Friends are kind of the Swiss Army Knife of relationships: They do everything, boosting your health, lengthening your life, preserving your memory, helping your career, gentling the aging process.”390 Within the church, close friendships may also provide support, encouragement, and accountability in the Christian life. For Christians in midlife, opportunities to connect with others, which the church can (and often does) provide, can be both life-enhancing and faith-building.

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390 Hagerty, Life Reimagined, 94-96.
Opportunities for service and for reflection

Clergy acknowledged the significant contributions that many middle-aged Christians make in a range of voluntary roles within their parishes, although busyness, stress, and responsibilities outside the church limits the involvement of some churchgoers in this stage of life. A number of priests and ministers perceived that parishioners’ voluntary service was not only of benefit to the church but also a way in which midlife parishioners’ own needs were being met. When Russell (Anglican) was asked how effectively he thought the church was addressing the needs of people in midlife, he identified “opportunities to contribute,” particularly to the governance of the parish, as being important to those in midlife:

If you looked at our vestry, generally, the majority would be in that forty to sixty age group. Definitely. And I think that they really find it very empowering to bring some of their skills and offer those skills to help the parish. You know, legal skills, accounting skills, general management-type skills, health and safety type skills. So that’s a big thing.

Patricia (Anglican) noted, similarly, that midlife churchgoers who are involved in volunteering and helping “find a sense of community and support in doing that, because it’s often when they’re doing something like that that they will be sharing their own challenges and dreams, and so that becomes a good place.” Russell and Yvonne’s comments reinforced the views expressed by midlife churchgoers themselves. As was noted in Chapter Five, many of the midlife participants in this research clearly found fulfilment and fellowship from their involvement in a wide range of ministries within the church, particularly if they were able to serve in roles that drew on their gifts and life experiences.

Clergy made two further observations about this matter. First, they noted that, by midlife, churchgoers not only appreciate existing opportunities to serve others but they are frequently able to see needs within and beyond the church which may motivate them to take the initiative in establishing new ministries. In doing so, it is essential they have the support of clergy. The reverse is also true. Clergy acknowledged that they need the support and energy and passion of parishioners behind them if initiatives they wish to introduce are to succeed. Paul (Catholic) told me, “I usually start something when someone mentions that there’s a need. I say, ‘Right, why don’t you help me co-ordinate one?’ and we’ll go from there. Because if it’s simply my idea, we won’t get anywhere. I need someone to be ... passionate for something.” Sung-ho (Presbyterian) suggested
that, if the congregation is to grow together, it is sometimes necessary for the minister to hold back and to wait for parishioners to identify needs and take responsibility for addressing them. He realises that some people might think, “Our minister is quite lazy. Our minister doesn’t do this thing,” but he feels he needs to exercise patience as it can put people off if the minister is “taking charge” or “taking control” of areas where people in the congregation can contribute. “If they see someone with authority do something they are reluctant to be part of that.”

Patricia (Anglican) told me that she enjoys tapping into and releasing parishioners’ gifts and desires in areas of service as particular needs and gaps arise within the church. She likes to see ministries develop in an “organic” way within the church. She said, “I’m very much one to, personally, to try and sort of look where, look at what God’s doing, and join in.” Patricia was asked if she had any thoughts about how to ensure that the ideas of all parishioners could be heard and incorporated, as shy members of a congregation who are conscious of a gap or need within the church, or who would like to serve in a new role, may not always have the confidence to approach the vicar or vestry. Patricia said that in more than one parish she has held an “Exploring Our Gifts” Sunday, fitting with the Bible reading of the day, at which, after a brief homily, she has issued a questionnaire and given people time to fill that in. The questionnaire covered all the things in parish life that people might be on rosters for:

They had the opportunity to indicate what they were involved in, what they might like to be involved in, what they might like to also give up they could note, and then “other” – so anything else that they wanted to write down. And out of that a number of additional people are now involved in all sorts of areas. ... For me, it’s enabling people to be open to the Spirit of God working, you know, in their lives, and giving that permission to, yeah, try something new! Or to release something. It’s really important.\(^{391}\)

Ensuring that parishioners’ gifts and experiences are valued and that they have opportunities to contribute, but that they do not feel overburdened, can be a balancing act for clergy and congregations. Greg (Presbyterian) noted that some people in the midlife age range who have come to attend his church have been hurt through “burnout” in other churches. These are people who have been “unappreciated” after serving the church in a range of capacities. In Greg’s parish everyone is “stood down” at the end of a

\(^{391}\) One of Patricia’s midlife parishioners, Murray, was interviewed for this project. Without prompting, he mentioned this questionnaire. It had enabled him to express his interest in singing and he now finds fulfillment as serving the church as a cantor.
year of service. They get personalised letters of acknowledgement from Greg, and the opportunity to reapply to serve again. He found that for some of those from some other churches, “The only way they could get off the roster was to leave. They had to leave the church to have a break.” Greg told me, with satisfaction, that in his church there are “no life sentences – a year max.” Volunteers can sign back on, but they have the choice about whether or not they wish to do so. And Greg ensures they get a lot of acknowledgement and appreciation regularly throughout the year, as well as at the end of the year. Greg felt that some of those who have been hurt by church “have been hurt by being used, actually.” He noted, though, that clergy do need to rely on the laity, and trust them, if clergy are not to be “run ragged.” It can be difficult for ministers and priests to discern how much time or energy some members of their congregations can manage to contribute to activities within the church. Individuals in midlife may themselves find it difficult to gauge how they may best contribute to their communities of faith while coping with transitions and adjusting to multiplying or diminishing responsibilities in other spheres.

It is important not only to acknowledge and support people in midlife as they serve in a range of roles, but also to provide opportunities for parishioners to reflect on their involvement in the church and on their roles in their workplaces and in the community, clergy said. People of all ages benefit from being asked to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it, but, as has already been noted, time for reflection can be particularly valuable for people engaged in some of the tasks of midlife – and it can be hard to come by. There are a myriad of ways that churches can encourage reflection, some of which have already been described. Liz (Anglican) commented on a series of public talks that her church has been hosting in cafés, and the worthwhile nature of these, both for the listeners and for the presenters themselves. At these evening events presenters from within and beyond the parish have the opportunity to talk about the intersection between their work and faith. Two parishioners in midlife recently spoke, and Liz said how interesting it was for her and for other members of the congregation to hear them describe their sense of God’s call to serve as doctors in an impoverished community over twenty years ago. Liz considered it “one of the joys” of the evening to hear them telling their story to fellow parishioners:

So often you might have your coffee conversations afterwards, but to actually have a chance to share your story, I think, you know, I’d love to see more of
that, even within the church service pattern. ... It challenges me, too, because the danger is we sort of polarize or just get so church-focused.

Liz also commented on the value of the presentations for those who had been asked to speak. Preparing for the event allowed and encouraged them to reflect on their story. She feels that we are often “not strong” at speaking about our spirituality and how that has impacted on our lives, but it can be very encouraging to do that.

Don (Presbyterian) is conscious that one of the issues for some Christians in midlife who have been in the church for many years can be lack of excitement or passion for the Kingdom of God. Some of his middle-aged parishioners have expressed “boredom” and a desire for something “new.” Don’s church has been considering a number of possibilities of new things God might be calling people to, including short-term mission trips, and the church is endeavouring to provide space and time for parishioners to reflect on these and other aspects of congregational life. The parish has usually held one service a year where all the congregations combine, but instead of following this pattern this year, on one Sunday they intend to encourage parishioners not to come to church, but to engage in another act of worship – some options will be suggested – to get people thinking about their life of worship. Opportunities to step back from normal routines and activities, with time to reflect and consider priorities, patterns of behaviour, beliefs and values, are sometimes provided in parishes, although these are most often offered to those on parish councils or in leadership positions within the church. Times for reflection and re-visioning are less frequently thrown open to whole congregations in this way.

Midlife participants’ comments about the value of short and long-term retreats were reinforced by the comments of clergy. While traditional retreats do not necessarily appeal to everyone, it is usually possible for middle-aged Christians who would like to dedicate time to prayer and to pondering the deeper questions of life to find forms of retreat or contexts for reflection that may be helpful to them. Bernard (Catholic) described a retreat in daily life that was offered in his parish. About fifty parishioners participated in the month-long retreat, “plenty” of whom were in midlife. Bernard considered this to be an effective programme and, with the support of the spiritual directors from beyond the parish who facilitated the first retreat, his church intends to offer it again. Other Catholic parishes in the same diocese are offering similar forms of retreat, which have the support of clergy and laity. A further “big project” Bernard is
currently involved in is establishing a new residential retreat centre, which he is sure will provide many opportunities for people in midlife. He said, “People are longing to get away to try to attend to these unresolved things that have sprung up in their life.”

Yvonne (Presbyterian) also commented on the value of retreats for Christians in midlife. In her experience, midlife parishioners do have the time and commitment to attend them, as long as they aren’t too long. Women’s retreats which have been offered in her parish have sometimes taken place over a day or a day and a half. At times these have involved parishioners leading sessions, based on areas of expertise, and at others a spiritual director or educator from outside the parish has contributed. Yvonne observed, “A good number attend.” Across denominations many types and formats of retreat exist, and, if the needs of parishioners are taken into account when these are planned, and an appropriate balance of fellowship, material to encourage and extend attendees, and silent time for prayer and reflection is provided, then some midlife churchgoers will wish to participate in them and will benefit from doing so. This balance will differ depending on the parish and the circumstances, personalities and desires of individuals involved.

Ordained clergy also need space and time to reflect on their ministries and on aspects of their own faith and life journey. Members of the clergy are usually encouraged to attend supervision and/or spiritual direction, and some are enabled to take study leave or sabbaticals, but it was clear from interviews with the clergy who were involved in this project (all of whom were in midlife) that opportunities to simply chat with an attentive listener about life, faith, and ministry may be infrequent. A striking aspect of the interviews with clergy was that so many individuals stated that they found the opportunity to speak about their experience of midlife, and about their work in the church, very valuable. A number concluded their interviews by thanking me, making the observation that, as Sandra (Anglican) put it, “It’s always good to reflect.”

**Pastoral care**

In addition to the issues already explored in this chapter, priests and ministers commented on other issues – relational issues, in particular – that they considered closely connected to the welfare of midlife parishioners. Noting that programmes designed to support people in addressing some of these are offered through many churches (sometimes in conjunction with church-based organisations, such as Presbyterian Support, Anglican Care, and Catholic Social Services), clergy also expressed
the hope and belief that, at times of struggle or distress, individuals would find support and experience grace through their involvement in congregational life. Many of the midlife interviewees involved in this project expressed gratitude for the care they had received from fellow parishioners and a number also described meaningful support received from parish priests and ministers. However, clergy admitted that the pastoral needs of midlife parishioners can be difficult to address, for two fundamental reasons. First, the complexity and variety of issues that people in this stage of life are dealing with demand a multiplicity of sensitive, empathetic and creative responses from those in church leadership, and from congregation members, sometimes over a long period. Second, there can be obstacles of a practical nature in reaching out to people of middle age that do not exist for people in older or younger age groups.

Relationships can be complicated to negotiate at any stage of life, but clergy suggested that some relational issues are of particular significance for people who are in their forties and fifties. Don (Presbyterian) observed that marriages can be in difficulty at about this stage of life. Don’s own parents separated when his father was about fifty or a little younger, something which he attributed to “classic midlife crisis type stuff.” Don said, “I’m not sure if that’s talked about a lot.” In Don’s church the subject of marriage is addressed in sermons, and the Alpha Marriage Course\(^1\) is also offered, once a year or so. This seven-part programme presents practical tools designed to help couples communicate more effectively, resolve conflicts, develop greater sexual intimacy, improve relationships with extended family, and address a number of other important topics. It is well received by people in midlife. Don and his wife have also found it helpful personally, even though they have done it several times now (as they are part of leading it). “The marriage course has, I think, been more helpful for the people who have been married some time, than the younger newly-marrieds,” said Don. Sung-ho (Presbyterian) also believed that programmes addressing issues relating to marriage, and marriage counselling, are likely to be of value to middle-aged Christians. He noted that in midlife many couples are becoming free of ties to children’s education and have more time for each other. Sung-ho said, “As a couple, wife and husband, it made more time to redevelop or enhance their relationship. ... They are not newly-wed but I think that would be helpful, to rediscover.” Yvonne (Presbyterian) shared something of her own experience of marriage now that she and her husband are both close to retirement. She said that the departure of their children from home has meant that she and her

husband “have to re-think who we are as a couple, and how we will live.” Churches represented by clergy who were interviewed for this project included those that offered courses in marriage guidance or divorce recovery, churches that provided on-site counselling options that could be accessed by parishioners and by people in the community, and parishes that referred parishioners to external secular or Christian counselling services. There was widespread acceptance that such services might be of value to couples in midlife.

Greg (Presbyterian), Patricia (Anglican) and Liz (Anglican) gave further examples of relational issues affecting people in midlife within their parishes. Some members of Greg’s church are divorcees who are dating and are thinking about whether to live together or not. Then there are some who have been widowed young. Some have left other churches because they have felt guilty, or have been made to feel guilty, because they are divorced. “What do we provide there? I can’t answer that,” says Greg, except for “as much TLC as we can.” Patricia identified a number of relationship issues that can typically arise at midlife, including people re-evaluating their marriages, the empty nest syndrome, sexual issues, and intimate relationships breaking down. When asked how well the church is doing in supporting people who are having relationship difficulties, she said she would not like to make a blanket statement on it. She added:

We could spend another afternoon talking about that. ... I’d like to think the church could be a place of grace where people can really talk about that, but I think we could, you know, we probably could improve on that. And probably it will vary hugely from place to place, I think.

Liz pointed out that, in supporting couples in midlife, an additional challenge for churches can be that some people in this stage of life come to church on their own, but have partner who is not involved. Liz wondered if there is, now, “perhaps more acceptance that people can be in quite different places within a partnership spiritually and there is no sort of felt obligation that they have to come along to keep up appearances.” Liz said that in responding to this situation her church is considering “how we still have events, you know, social or community events, where people can feel comfortable for their partners to come if they’d like to.”

Clergy also spoke about intergenerational relationships affecting their midlife parishioners. Sandra (Anglican) expressed concern about the pressures that people in midlife experience if they are caring for elderly parents. This is a complex issue with
multiple ramifications for whole families, but front-line care providers are quite likely to be people in midlife. Myers and Harper estimate that, “at any time, approximately 20% of midlife women and 14% of midlife men provide care to relatives and friends who are ill or have disabilities.” Some of Sandra’s friends, outside her church, have had responsibility for aging parents. These friends have met once a month for coffee over the last fifteen years, and, as their parents have required more help, they have appreciated being able to talk about the challenges they have been dealing with: “Meeting on a social basis, being able to talk about that, has actually been a really important support, you know.” Sandra observed that churches can play a role in helping caregivers in a number of ways, by listening to people talk about their situation and concerns, and by providing opportunities for caregivers to have a little time to leave the house and do something recuperative. Sandra’s Anglican parish has combined with a local Presbyterian church to run a day programme, through Presbyterian Support. If the spouse needs a break, they can go there for the day, or, if someone is isolated and alone after their spouse has died but they’re not ready to move into a rest home, they may also attend. Volunteers from both churches take part in this programme, one day a week, and some of the people offering care are in their forties to sixties. Sandra described some of the intergenerational relationships that have formed as “lovely,” especially for a few individuals in midlife who have already lost both their parents. She said, “You can actually just offer some care, but receive as well as give. And that’s been really nice just to watch ... across the generations.”

Sandra went on to comment on how hard it can be for people in midlife to deal with the death of parents, especially if a relationship with a parent has been difficult. Mixed emotions can arise and there may be unresolved issues to face. She pointed out, “You need to be a good listening ear, I think, at, you know, for that stage of life.” When asked about the place of bereavement courses or counselling, Sandra agreed that it was good to be able to get people “hooked into something that’s going to be long-term for them.” She said, “I can’t sustain that listening-ear stuff with people that are going through all that sort of thing, so if I can do the initial listening and then suggest that they do go to a counsellor, or whatever ... there have been cases where that’s been really helpful.” Sandra felt that, as a vicar, she had well-established networks she could tap into and refer parishioners to. She identified a particular counselling service with a wide variety

of counsellors as being “not too expensive.” She added that, in Christchurch, it has been very important after the earthquakes, with some of the stress associated with them, to be able to link people in to “regular counsel.”

Another Anglican priest, Patricia, also felt that being able to link churchgoers to resources and services within and beyond the parish is an important part of pastoral care. She said, “The church is well-placed to be supportive, and it’s important to be aware of the network possibilities, and sort of guiding people to what is available, as well.” Patricia described a leaflet that had recently been put out by Anglican Care regarding the support of people with dementia in the congregational setting. The publication includes suggestions around support of carers. She has also shared books about these issues with carers within her own parish, as well as resources about grief and trauma. I asked Patricia if she considered it worthwhile to invite someone to come to the church to speak about issues such as bereavement, or whether it is more helpful to send an individual to a course or to a counsellor to speak with someone one-to-one about their experiences. She said, “It depends a lot on the groups that you have in your church.” There are some groups within Patricia’s parish, such as the women’s group, that are pretty good at organising their programmes for the year, and choosing the speakers they want to have in. They have autonomy and can make their choices of what they think would be worthwhile. Patricia considers that to be really important, but acknowledges that there could be some – particularly men – who may fall through the cracks. She described a resource about grief which has been written specifically for men, which she has been able to share with male parishioners, and said, “I think we can have a role in enabling church members to connect with what is useful to them.” This was a theme that also arose in interviews with spiritual directors, many of whom considered it important to assist clients by informing them about resources or opportunities they might find of value.

When asked if people can readily find resources they might find helpful, Patricia made some interesting comparisons between two parishes she had worked in. She said, “I find it quite exciting, I think, being where I am now, in that reading material is, you know, is welcome, is sought, and I can provide some.” She acknowledged that in her previous parish, one that was serving a low socioeconomic community, that did not work so well:

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It was really the face-to-face talking, making time to see people, perhaps over a number of weeks, or whatever, to support them or go to appointments with them. It was a much more hands-on and relational support because they weren’t necessarily readers. That wasn’t their way. No internet access, that sort of thing. So quite different. Whereas now it’s, you know, reading material is more the norm, more welcome. But then people also tend to be sort of text-savvy and they all Google lots of stuff as well. But in terms of spiritual support, yeah, it’s good to have resources.

Patricia went on to talk about a diocesan library, which is open to the public, and which is “full of books” on all sorts of topics. She described recent resources purchased by the library, which related to dementia support and carer support. But, Patricia reiterated, “Libraries are good, but a lot of people use on-line resources. … There’s quite a big shift there, in how people use resources.”

In considering pastoral concerns, Yvonne (Presbyterian) raised the subject of menopause, a topic which is frequently mentioned in literature relating to midlife but was mentioned by very few participants in this project. As Yvonne observed, “In terms of women in midlife, you know, the menopause thing is certainly out there, and not often talked about.” Yvonne invited a counsellor to come and speak to women in her church about this topic. There was a lot of interest – about thirty people attended – and although the evening didn’t go quite as Yvonne had anticipated, she still thought it was worthwhile:

I think it’s something you could easily do every year – just a one-off every year, just to help people talk about it. Because they would say to me, “No-one talks about these things.” When I mentioned it at church there was quite a lot of interest from the younger women as well. I was trying to get a range of people coming so the younger ones can think about it and the older ones can help. … But in the end the younger ones didn’t come.

Although, on this occasion, there were fewer interactions between group members than Yvonne had hoped, she said, “The idea is good … I think that’s definitely a way the church can help – by bringing up some of these subjects.”

Almost all of the clergy who were interviewed for this project suggested that it could be helpful for Christians in midlife if seminars, presentations, and opportunities for people in midlife to discuss issues that were affecting them were available. Topics that clergy felt might usefully be explored included retirement planning, employment issues, coping with transitions, self-care, and use of leisure time. Clergy felt that these matters are rarely discussed in the church, despite their relevance to many of their parishioners.
Presentations on these and similar subjects are, of course, sometimes offered by secular organisations and community groups, and, rather than parishes endeavouring to offer courses about topics that others are covering effectively, sometimes churches can play a role in informing parishioners about what is available and encouraging members to be involved in these. Churches are likely to have experts in various fields within their congregations, who may be glad to share their experience and wisdom with others. Where gaps exist, churches can also host events which may be thrown open to the whole community.

Whatever programmes and events of this type can or should be offered by churches, the most effective pastoral and spiritual support is often provided within the context of close relationships, as midlife participants and clergy recognised. The place of small groups in building trusting relationships within the church was explored in some detail in Chapter Five. Many clergy also believed that small groups played an essential role in nurturing churchgoers spiritually and socially, but as many of their views on this topic were similar to those of the midlife interviewees few references to their comments about small groups are included within this chapter. Sandra explained how cultivating a culture of prayer is also part of her role as a priest. In addition to providing services which include prayer for healing (which are now offered in churches across a number of denominations) in some Sunday services at Sandra’s church parishioners are encouraged to pray in small groups about particular issues, even if silently. Sandra described how she sets that up, in order to cater for those who find themselves a bit out of their comfort zones. “It’s quite permission giving – you know, do what you need to do. ... I figure if we can’t pray for each other, what are we doing here?” she said, with a laugh. “I have seen that really supportive of people particularly that are struggling with stuff.”

Sung-ho (Presbyterian) regarded encouraging Bible study as similarly essential. When I asked him what he considered to be the most significant needs of midlife parishioners he spoke first about their need for friends, as was mentioned earlier, and then said, “This is very very basic, and not the least – reading the Bible.” In explaining his conviction that reading the Bible is “necessary and urgent” Sung-ho told me that he had a Buddhist upbringing, so, for him, the religious text is very important. He realises that this may be different from the Western point of view. People in New Zealand have perhaps moved away from reading the Bible, something which Sung-ho sees as related to the problem of loneliness, as well as limiting parishioners’ spiritual growth:
When we start to reading [sic] the Bible it is very natural to grow with the small group, because we want to share, and we want to pray together, not in a prayer group, just at a friendship level. And ... we can just meet any time. We can read it together.

Sung-ho also believes that one “critical part” of his ministry is pastoral visiting. Soon after beginning ministry in his current parish Sung-ho called the people on the pastoral roll and asked if he could visit. It took him three months to make the visits, but these helped him to establish good relationships with his parishioners. Sung-ho regards pastoral visiting as “very very important.” It is “where leadership, mentorship, friendship and the modelling all happens.” In addition to visiting people himself, volunteers from within the church visit and maintain friendships with some parishioners in an intentional way. Sung-ho realises that some ministers do not make general pastoral visits, but visit when people are in hospital, or sick at home, or when there are funerals. He is not sure if that applies in all New Zealand churches. Sung-ho takes his own responsibility to visit parishioners very seriously, but acknowledges that doing so is not easy, and he can feel “somewhat burdened.”

Liz (Anglican) feels that the “routine pastoral call” does not work so well for people in midlife:

I’m just very aware with a number of my midlifers that the only way we manage to catch up is to have a coffee during the work day, if it works for them to do that, or after school, or early evening, or something like that. And I suppose I’ve got the flexibility to do that. Which is a very different model from the “norm” of going to the home. And so that’s interesting. ... It’s a different model, and perhaps ... a bit more needs-driven.

She explained that sometimes middle-aged members of her congregation might ask if they could meet for a coffee if they want to talk about something, rather than inviting her to their home, whereas older folk invite her for morning tea or lunch for a longer engagement and tell her all about their family, and so on. For those in midlife:

It seems to be more, “Um, yeah, it would be good to catch up some time, but I’m busy. Um, we could fit in a coffee. How about we just fit in a coffee?” And that’s fine. And you do what you do. Or otherwise a sort of a needs-based thing, like, “I’d just like to touch base with you about something.” But again it seems more purpose-driven or intentional, perhaps because of the juggles of so many things.

Having acknowledged the advantages of meeting midlife parishioners in neutral venues for coffee, Liz paused, and then made two observations about the benefits of continuing
to visit parishioners’ homes. Reflecting on the situation she described earlier, of people whose partners do not attend church, she noted that she may not meet these partners at all if she doesn’t visit parishioners at home. She has also found it helpful to visit the homes of those who are still badly affected by the Christchurch earthquakes – where she has had to park two streets away and walk, for example – as it has given her better appreciation of parishioners’ circumstances and what they are dealing with. But if people are dealing with building repairs or inspections, or similar issues, they don’t necessarily want a visit from the vicar. Liz sees it’s important for visits to midlife parishioners to be organized, rather than, “I’ve just popped in to see you.” She added, though, that she would probably still “pop in” on older people.

Another interviewee, an ordained Presbyterian minister now working in a role outside a parish, shared Liz’s perspective about the challenges of meeting with middle-aged churchgoers, and the suitability of meeting with them in cafés rather than in homes. He regarded cafés as being ideal settings within which to meet with parishioners, for a number of reasons. He added:

But there’s a generational thing involved there. One of our younger elders said that to our largely elderly session. If you want to connect with me, she said, don’t try to visit me at home, because I’m never there. If you roll up and I’m off to hockey, or whatever, I’m not going to have time to talk with you. If you want to connect with me, flick me a text, make an appointment, and we’ll meet at a café. So that is a significant generational shift.  

When I spoke to Sandra (Anglican) about the contrasting needs and expectations of midlife churchgoers and the elderly, with respect to pastoral care, I asked her, “What works, what are the challenges, and what are some of the opportunities or solutions?” She paused for some time to consider this, and eventually said:

It’s got to be relational, obviously. We’re not a parish that does heaps of social stuff – probably in the last five years we haven’t done lots at all  

395 Interview by author, Christchurch, 30th November 2015.
396 Five years was the period between the most destructive of Christchurch’s earthquakes, in February 2011, and the interview with Sandra. The impact of these earthquakes on participants’ responses is discussed in Chapter Eight.
Sandra noted that, over the years, it’s been better at some times than in others. She said, “As people have got tired or busy or whatever, they kinda don’t go down that track.” Then Sandra added, “I think with the midlife people, a lot of it happens informally.” Some parishioners want to do motorbike stuff together, and others meet up on Friday nights for tea, for example. Sandra thinks these things are great. However, the danger of those informal arrangements is that “there are people missing out on that kind of connection, because they’re newer and [they haven’t] they’re not necessarily outgoing, and so you’ve got to kind of formally do it.”

It is difficult for clergy and congregations to address the needs of parishioners who, for various reasons, do not readily share their problems or concerns. In large parishes, especially, churchgoers who feel unable to let others know about their difficulties, or do not wish others to be aware that they are struggling, can easily miss out on receiving tangible support. In the context of speaking about the needs of parishioners who are caregivers, Paul (Catholic) said:

> Often it boils down to whether you reach out or not – whether you make yourself known, that you need care or not. There might be people out there who say I’ve neglected my duty. My simple answer is, “I don’t know that you’re sick. ... No-one told me.” And it’s the same for the carer. Unless they are active and they’re involved in things and people pick it up and tell me, then they could fall through the cracks, too. Secondly, some people are very, very personal. These things are decided within the family and they don’t want it out there.

Paul’s comments recall remarks made by midlife interviewee, Nina, (Anglican, 43), who spoke of “the yo-yoing between individual responsibility and corporate response.” Nina acknowledged that “there’s stuff that individuals can do” to find support, including support from people outside the church, but still expressed the hope and expectation that clergy and congregations would be well-equipped and willing to reach out to care for parishioners in need. It was evident from the interviews with clergy that, if effective pastoral care is to be offered to churchgoers who are in midlife, clergy and lay leaders need to adopt a variety of ways to help church members build close and trusting relationships with one another, and to access appropriate resources and support both within and beyond their parishes.
Summary

Clergy drew on their own experiences of midlife as well as decades of pastoral experience in commenting on the needs of middle-aged churchgoers. There was agreement among those who were interviewed that “there is a significance about midlife,” as Bernard (Catholic) put it. Clergy believed that for many people midlife can be a time of realisation of limits and revision of goals, of attending to issues that have formerly been pushed aside, of healing, and of changes in spiritual outlook. However, many midlife churchgoers may be struggling to achieve balance in their lives as they juggle multiple responsibilities. Given that many churchgoers in their forties and fifties are very busy, it can be challenging for clergy and congregations to provide accessible opportunities for parishioners to reflect on significant aspects of midlife experience. Ensuring that the church is a place of prayerful reflection and replenishment for Christians in this life stage, as well being a place within which individuals’ gifts and life experiences may be used in leadership or in ministries which will extend them and be of help to others, is a balancing act which requires sensitivity to people’s changing needs and circumstances.

Clergy also noted that Christians in midlife frequently express or demonstrate a desire to deepen in faith and theological understanding and to connect with God in new ways, while still valuing familiar spiritual practices and traditional forms of liturgy and worship. They spoke of the need for the church to provide a range of opportunities, at different times during the week, for people to meet with God during services of worship or in silence. The important place of the sacraments in midlife churchgoers’ journey of faith was emphasised by some clergy, as it had been by a number of midlife interviewees. Some clergy also spoke of ways that congregations might provide opportunities for “extension” in response to midlife parishioners’ willingness to learn more about their faith or to explore new forms of prayer. Parishes that are able to build churchgoers’ understanding and experience of a range of communal and individual spiritual disciplines are likely to be serving their midlife parishioners well.

Like the midlife interviewees, all clergy, irrespective of denomination, noted the importance of fostering strong, supportive relationships within congregations, within which people may talk openly about their problems, questions of faith, and their desires and aspirations. It is almost inevitable that in any congregation, at any point in time, some midlife members will be dealing with relational issues, work pressures, illness,
bereavement or other losses. It is important that these parishioners feel that they are able to talk about their experiences with clergy and trusted friends within their faith communities. As there are limits to what individual churches can do in response to the multiplicity of needs that commonly arise in this life stage, mechanisms for directing churchgoers’ attention to the resources and services offered by other local congregations, church-based organisations, secular professionals (such as counselling services), or resources in libraries or elsewhere in the public domain (such as websites or podcasts) also need to be considered and employed.

One source of support, which some Christians discover to be immensely helpful at midlife, is spiritual direction. In the next chapter spiritual directors’ insights into the needs of their midlife clients, and churches’ responses to those needs, are explored.
Chapter Seven: Spiritual Directors

If we could have ‘Beta’ to go with ‘Alpha’...

– Matthew (61)

William Barry and William Connolly define spiritual direction as “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”397 Kathleen Fischer calls spiritual direction “a conversation in which a person seeks to answer the question, ‘What is spiritual growth and how do I foster it in my life?’”398 Spiritual directors usually meet with individuals on a regular basis, often over a period of months or even years. At each appointment open-ended questions are asked which encourage attendees to reflect prayerfully on their lives and faith. Susan Phillips, who is both a spiritual director and professor of Sociology, explains that, “Talking to another who takes an interest in our spiritual experience allows us to narrate our lives, weaving coherence and meaning as we do.”399 For people experiencing any degree of midlife disorientation, being able to do this can be very helpful. It is not surprising that, among the minority of New Zealand churchgoers who attend spiritual direction, Christians in midlife are well represented.

The decision to interview experienced spiritual directors was based on the assumption that people working in this field would have some insights into the experiences and needs of midlife churchgoers which might differ from, and complement, those offered by other participants. The combination of directees’ willingness to attend regular appointments to devote time and attention to the spiritual life, the nature of the questions that are posed in spiritual direction, and the fact that spiritual direction is conducted on a one-to-one basis in a context within which confidentiality is assured, means that issues of real import and concern to attendees are often discussed. Some of the matters that are raised in spiritual direction may never be shared elsewhere, even—and sometimes, particularly—within parishes. As expected, interviews with the spiritual directors who participated in this project shed light on aspects of Christians’ midlife

experience which other participants did not mention, as well as reinforcing themes which had emerged from interviews with churchgoers and clergy.

Ten spiritual directors contributed to this project. Three of the directors who were interviewed had received their initial formation through New Zealand programmes grounded in Ignatian spirituality: the Spirituality, Energy, Encounter, Direction programme (SEED), and the Arrupé Programme, the precursor to the recently-introduced course, *Te Wairua Mahi: Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition*. A fourth director had studied spirituality and retreat direction at a Jesuit university outside New Zealand. This director was reluctant to describe his training as “Ignatian” as he considered much of what is called part of “the Ignatian tradition” to simply be “Christian.” The remaining six directors who participated in this project had trained through Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM). Three of these six directors had gone on to further study in the Ignatian tradition, which they felt complemented the training they had completed. Several of the spiritual directors who were interviewed had engaged in short or long-term courses in spiritual direction overseas. Selection of spiritual directors who had participated in different formation programmes was deliberate, as I considered it probable that different forms of training would have some influence spiritual directors’ perceptions and interpretations of the needs of directees. All of the directors identified as New Zealand European.

Spiritual directors were asked to give a brief description of their role, including some explanation of the spiritual tradition within which they had trained and the length of time they had practiced. They were also asked to state the approximate number of directees with whom they met regularly and the proportion of those who could be considered to be in midlife. As the spiritual directors were themselves aged between fifty-four and seventy, they were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own midlife experience in addition to speaking about the experiences and needs of Christians who attend spiritual direction in midlife. The interviews were open-ended but were structured around the following key questions:

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400 The Society of Jesus (members of which are called Jesuits) was founded by Ignatius of Loyola, and others, in 1534.

401 It is beyond the scope of the present project to explore differences between the perspectives and practices of those whose formation as spiritual directors has occurred in different contexts within New Zealand, but given a larger sample, and by posing different questions, this would certainly be an interesting topic for exploration.
1. Would you like to describe your own experience of midlife?

2. From your experience of working in spiritual direction, what do you consider to be the most significant needs of Christians in midlife? What supports your belief that these issues are significant?

3. How well does the church appear to be supporting Christians in midlife? What further support would you like to see offered to midlife churchgoers and the church communities from which they come? You may like to refer to aspects of spiritual direction within your answer.

In order to protect their anonymity, the spiritual directors’ denominational affiliation is identified only when their comments pertain to denominational concerns. All names used are pseudonyms.
Table 3 Demographics of spiritual director participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Approximate number of directees</th>
<th>Proportion of directees in midlife(^402)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Trained overseas</td>
<td>Up to 20 in the past, but currently only 2 or 3</td>
<td>About half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>SGM</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Half to two thirds are in the 40-60 age range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>SGM</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>About one third, but others are just on the edge of midlife or a little younger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>SGM followed by study in the Ignatian tradition</td>
<td>Up to 15 in the past, but currently fewer</td>
<td>Most in midlife or in their early sixties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>SEED followed by further Ignatian studies</td>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>&quot;The overwhelming majority&quot; are in midlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>SGM</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>About half (6 are younger, 5 older)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>SEED followed by further Ignatian studies</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>&quot;Most ... Generally my clientele would be midlife.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisa</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>SGM</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Very few younger than midlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>SEED</td>
<td>5 (at a time)</td>
<td>All have been in midlife or older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>SGM followed by study in the Ignatian tradition</td>
<td>20 individuals, in addition to having led extended group programmes</td>
<td>&quot;A lot.&quot; And the majority of those involved in group programmes were also in midlife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spiritual directors commented on many of the themes that had been addressed by the members of the clergy and midlife churchgoers who were interviewed. However, there were three interesting differences between the interviews with spiritual directors and interviews with other participants. First, discussion of the inner shifts of midlife, including transitions in spirituality, formed a greater proportion of the interviews with spiritual directors than it did of other interviews. Clergy and midlife churchgoers certainly drew connections between the events that were part of their midlife.

\(^{402}\) Spiritual directors were asked approximately what proportion of their clients were in midlife. The table includes the words directors used in response to this question. Their perceptions of the age range of midlife differed from one another, as other comments in each interview revealed, but the spiritual directors were all aware I was interviewing churchgoers between the ages of forty and sixty when they answered this question.
experience and changes in their perspectives and beliefs and relationship with God, as has been demonstrated in earlier chapters, but they addressed many other topics as well. In interviews with spiritual directors, the interior journey was the primary focus. This is not to suggest that spiritual directors overlooked the challenges and opportunities of midlife that clergy and midlife churchgoers described. Spiritual directors identified a gamut of life events that they considered to be significant in midlife, and which had, in some cases, been part of their own midlife experience. Burnout, redundancy, busyness, menopause, and adjusting to a range of significant changes in relationships within and beyond families – including changes precipitated by the illness or death of a loved one, the departure of children from home, and divorce – were all identified as challenges that people in their forties and fifties frequently face. After speaking about some of the specific circumstances his midlife directees were dealing with, Tony (56) observed that many were coping with “the big stuff of life, really. And it often hits around that time.” Matthew (61) had himself experienced “emotional upheaval” as he struck a “rocky road” in his marriage in his mid-forties. In describing his own journey at midlife, Matthew said:

A lot of things got thrown up for re-evaluation, and I discovered first-hand you ... can have ideals, and that's good, but you can't just make them work in an easy sort of way. Life sometimes has other ideas. Or other people have other ideas. So, it's partly facing the complexity of life, and it's facing the grey rather than the black-and-white in some areas, and facing your own limitations I think is a big part of it. ... For me, that was personal and emotional and relational, but it very much engaged the spiritual side of me as well.

Matthew's reflection on the impact of external events on multiple aspects of his life, including his “spiritual side,” was typical of the way spiritual directors responded to questions about their own or others’ midlife experience. When spiritual directors mentioned significant challenges or external “marker events” – events “after which in some significant sense one’s life is never the same again”403 – they almost invariably linked them to personal and spiritual development.

A second noteworthy difference between the responses of spiritual directors and those of churchgoers and clergy was that, in speaking about psychological and spiritual development at midlife, spiritual directors frequently drew upon the work of well-

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known writers and researchers in this field. References to these sources were sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. Participants occasionally checked that I was familiar with the author or theoretical framework to which they were alluding, but often did not. For example, as they spoke about change and transition in this life stage, particularly in addressing the journey inward that often occurs at midlife, a number of spiritual directors referred to Jung and other authors directly influenced by Jung, such as Mary d'Apice, author of Noon to Nightfall: A Journey Through Midlife and Ageing. Several of the spiritual directors who were interviewed also made reference to faith development theories. In doing so, two identified James Fowler’s book, Stages of Faith, as an important text. Some referred to more recent publications, including later work by Fowler and research conducted by New Zealand Baptist pastor, Alan Jamieson, whose influential book, A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches draws on Fowler’s six-stage framework. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich’s The Critical Journey, which identifies six similar stages within the life of faith, was also mentioned by one director. Several interviewees spoke about faith stages, and transitions between faith stages, without attribution. As would be expected, insights derived from the writings of Ignatius of Loyola emerged in the interviews with spiritual directors who had received training in the Ignatian tradition. In the space of three minutes, Julie (60) wove several core Ignatian concepts into her explanation of her work as a spiritual director. She described listening to the “desires” of directees’ hearts, their experience of movement toward and away from God as “consolation and desolation,” and related directees’ experience of “feeling quite paralysed and stuck in their journey” to the “third week” of the Spiritual Exercises. Even when use of Ignatian terminology was less conspicuous, the holistic, incarnational spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola was evident in other interviewees’ responses. In addition to work by Jung, Fowler, and Ignatius, all ten spiritual directors identified other resources which they felt were pertinent to Christians’ midlife experience. As these are likely to be of interest and value to others, a list of key resources referred to by spiritual directors is included in Appendix Four.

404 Some of these theories, including Fowler’s influential six-stage theory of faith development, were described in Chapter Two.
In terms of the aims of this project, the third difference between the spiritual directors’ comments and those made by other participants was the most significant. In addition to speaking about midlife directees who felt closely connected to their church communities, the spiritual directors described, in some detail, the experiences of Christians in their forties and fifties who, for a range of reasons, felt somewhat disengaged from church. Spiritual direction provides a context in which problems may be discussed openly, and internal and external conflicts may safely be aired. As Susan Phillips observes, if spiritual direction occurs outside an individual’s faith community “it is possible to look at traditions, beliefs, social arrangements and community practices, to see to what degree they do or do not resonate with one’s own experience of God and the life of faith.”

It was to be expected that spiritual directors would not only speak about ways in which the church provided effective nurture for Christians in midlife but would also provide examples of ways that churches are not yet addressing midlife churchgoers’ needs. A few directors spoke about middle-aged clients who no longer attended church. Almost all of the directors identified some significant struggles and unmet needs of midlife Christians who are still regular churchgoers. Some midlife directees had received inadequate pastoral and spiritual support within the church at times of difficulty. Other midlife churchgoers (and some of the spiritual directors themselves) felt that lack of acknowledgement of the gifts of the laity, and lack of opportunities for individuals to exercise those gifts within their faith communities, detracted significantly from their sense of connection to the church. Some midlife churchgoers who were attending spiritual direction felt that their churches did not offer them the freedom or opportunity to address the deeper questions of life and faith that were of most concern to them. For some, services and programmes offered within their parishes which had formerly provided effective nurture and nourishment were now found to be somehow missing the mark. Spiritual directors were able to offer insights into these midlife directees’ experiences of church, which, added to the perspectives of the ordained clergy and the midlife churchgoers who contributed to this project, deepen and broaden our understanding of what support is of most benefit to middle-aged Christians.

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408 Susan S. Phillips, Candlelight, 77.
409 As the purpose of the current project is to explore the needs and experiences of current churchgoers, rich material that arose about reasons for midlife Christians’ departure or absence from church must be omitted. However, where comments made by spiritual directors about these clients addresses the question of what the church might be able to do to support midlife parishioners more effectively, these are, of course, included.
The remainder of this chapter is divided into two parts. The first section summarises the spiritual directors’ perceptions of the most significant needs of Christians in midlife. In order to avoid duplication of material that has already been explored in earlier chapters, and to reflect the dominant concerns of the directors, the focus here is almost exclusively on aspects of the interior journey of midlife. Spiritual directors spoke of directees’ experiences of disorientation and reorientation, using a range of terminology to do so. Seven of the ten spiritual directors who were interviewed spoke of midlife churchgoers’ yearning for “something more” in their spiritual life. Many spoke about the significant transitions in faith that Christians in midlife may be navigating. Their comments about how effectively the church is addressing these needs of midlife churchgoers, and what the church might do more effectively, are addressed in the second section of this chapter. It is regrettable that much rich material relating to the specific benefits of spiritual direction for people coping with midlife transitions must be omitted.410

**The needs of Christians in midlife**

Spiritual directors perceived that some of the deepest needs of middle-aged Christians were linked to developmental and faith transitions that occur for many people in this life stage. Whatever terminology they adopted, directors were clearly conscious of the “tasks of midlife”411 that could be absorbing the attention of their clients. In the 1960s, Bernice Neugarten, a pioneer in the field of Adult Development and Aging, published a “developmental view of adult personality” which suggested that, “the development of the ego is, for the first two-thirds of the life span, outward toward the environment; for the last part of the life span, inward toward the self.” In middle age, there comes “a re-examination of the self.”412 Several of the spiritual directors who contributed to this project had observed these movements within themselves and in the experience of some of their clients. A number of spiritual directors linked the journey inward, at this life stage, to a desire for greater authenticity, greater wholeness, and integrity – for what

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410 This material is likely to be of interest and use to spiritual directors, as well as to clergy and Christians in midlife. I hope to write further about this topic in the future.

411 Some of the predictable interior shifts of this life stage were explored in detail in Chapter Two.

Parker J. Palmer calls “deeper congruence” between the “inner and outer life.” All identified midlife as being a period of change and a period of growth.

Frances (70) has worked with many Christians in midlife, including those taking extended sabbaticals from work and ministry. She stated:

The first half of life is very much geared to the person, you know, becoming their own person, and development of the ego, and their career, and their relationships, and often the focus is from the outside. They’re shaped and formed from the outside world … but in the second half of life there’s a real shift where we want to become our own persons from the inside. So it’s very much an interior journey and re-looking at our lives from that interior place.

Louisa (66) agreed. She described the first half of life as the period in which people are busy establishing themselves, focusing on external things like getting an education, purchasing a house, establishing relationships and a career, and so on, but “somewhere around midlife … the journey goes more inwards.” Often, at the midlife point, “people get to know more who they are, not just the persona that they’ve put out there. … There’s time to get to know themselves. … It’s at that point a number of people look for spiritual direction.” Julie (60) identified middle age as “that stage of life when you begin to question meaning and purpose more.” She added, “You know, Jung talks about it’s a stage of journeying inwards and I think people begin to, start to, look at an inner life and meaning.”

As has already been noted, for some people a search for meaning and deeper authenticity is precipitated by external events. Brian (62) felt that, through a range of circumstances, including burnout, loss, failure, illness, crises in relationships, and workplace disappointments, “People come to the end of themselves. That really just means that they come to realise that they’re not in control. … Circumstances happen to them that are outside any control. … That’s not unusual at midlife.” It can be at this point, also, that:

People notice things about themselves that they don’t like, and that’s when they’ll look back to see what’s the root of that. I think that probably in this time – midlife – people are quite serious about becoming who they are and sometimes there are things in their lives that block that. So that’s when they want to look back, you know. They want to find out, “OK, why am I like this? Why do I get anxious about this? Why am I always having broken

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relationships? Why am I always struggling with intimacy?” You know, those
types of things are really important.

Brian added, “Sometimes with people there’s a knowing that they are not living fully yet
– that they could be – so they really want that.”

When asked what people are seeking when they come to spiritual direction in midlife,
Maureen (56) paused for some time before saying:

It’s different for different people. ... Some people are catapulted into it
because of some sort of crisis, you know, so it might be, you know, a grief or a
loss, or something like that, that actually just upends them. And sometimes
along with, you know, they’ve been Christian people for, you know,
throughout a period, then that can sometimes get upended as well.
Sometimes it feels like God’s abandoned them ... or God’s shifted somehow. ...
Some just get to a point where they want to like themselves more. It’s not
even a God thing. ... The way that they live their lives, their responses to
people – family, children, God, whoever – isn’t working any more, and
actually they want to, um, they want things to be different.

Maureen described the journey of self-discovery that many embark on during midlife as
“unstabilizing.” For some people, the discovery that “I’m not who I thought I was” is part
of a “movement toward truth.” She said:

The identity that I built up as a young woman ... is always part of who you
are, but some of that, you know, I think actually starts to crumble, starts to
get challenged ... and it’s like, “What do I hold onto? What do I let go of?” ... 
It’s a movement towards, um, some people talk about wholeness, but it
doesn’t feel like wholeness to me. It feels more like there’s a movement to a
greater sense of truth about, kind of, who I am.

She added, “It’s actually more of a discarding” of parts that are not quite the truth about
who you are, then facing the question of, “Without that there, who am I?”

Engaging with these questions, and becoming comfortable with the answers, may be
painful, as Raymond Studzinski, author of *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development*,
points out: “Letting go of certain images of self, defective ideals, and unrealistic
expectations constitute losses for people at any age. At midlife the sense of loss may be
especially great because so much energy has been spent in the first part of life in the
service of these ideals and images.”414 But, as Tony (56) put it, for some individuals in
midlife it can be liberating to discover that “they don’t have to be constrained by who

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they have been. You know, God is infinitely creative and still creating.” Many of the spiritual directors perceived midlife to be a very valuable time of growth. Julie (60) used the adjective “rich” repeatedly throughout her interview. In describing her own experience she said, “I think, you know, if you were to say to me what would your word be for middle age, I think it would be ‘rich.’ I think it’s a very rich time. … A rich time, but not without its challenges.” Frances (70) said, “Whilst it’s been difficult to deal with some of the issues that have been part of it, um, it’s kind of made me who I am today. It’s been very transformative for me.”

Midlife churchgoers who attend spiritual direction often express a desire for something deeper or different in their relationship with God. As Carol (66) put it, people in midlife “want to go deeper into God.” They want “to grow in their relationship and understanding.” This desire can be the catalyst which prompts them to make meeting with a spiritual director a priority. A recurring motif in the interviews with spiritual directors was the observation that many people in midlife are longing for “something more”:

One reason given for wanting spiritual direction is, “I think there must be something more.” So it’s not that the first half of life hasn’t been good and fulfilling – it’s been all of those things – but it’s like at this point, perhaps with some pause, some space in their lives, they’re looking for something deeper, something intimate in their relationship with God. (Louisa, 66)

[They] have woken up to the reality that they can’t satisfy themselves in life – that the right partner, the right job, the right amount of money is not enough – that there’s got to be something more. (Thomas, 54)

They usually come with a desire of some sort. And that desire is often connected with, “I know there’s more. I’ve tried this, and I’ve tried that, and it’s not working for me.” Those types of questions that they’re wrestling with. (Brian, 62)

For many people things happen that throw up questions, or the old ways of praying just don’t provide the same nurture, and so I think it’s more often in your thirties and forties that you’ll go searching and saying, “Surely there must be more to this faith than this – than what I’ve experienced or know now.” … Many who come to spiritual direction are looking for something more. (James, 57)

The desire for “something more” may be experienced both as a rejection of former beliefs or practices and as God’s invitation to deeper intimacy. Both push and pull factors are components of development in faith. Tony (56) and James (57) described the discouragement experienced by some Christians when, in midlife, former ways of
praying no longer prove sustaining. Tony referred to the complex life events some of his middle-aged clients were dealing with and the impact these had on their sense of connection to God:

How do you do faith in the face of, or in the midst of those [difficult life events], particularly when God doesn’t seem to be listening to me any more, or, you know, I go to church and it’s just boring as? ... The former structures and ways of doing things don’t work any more, and then so you just give up.

James shared his own experience:

The forms of prayer, and the relationship with God that I’d been given in my evangelical heritage of Bible study and prayer in response to that, were not adequate to maintain a growing spiritual life. ... I no longer encountered God in a way that was nurturing and life-giving through those forms. I have since returned to those, a long time ago [he laughs] – to Scripture reading – but in a different way. I think, for a period of time, creation became a central part of meeting with God and just going and sitting in a park, early morning, and just pondering the beauty of what God has made, rather than meeting with him through his book. Or, as Joyce Huggett would say, “Creation is his other book.”

Louisa (66) told me that people have come to her saying, “I’m longing for something more of God – the felt presence of God.” In this, Louisa perceived “something of an invitation.” Like James, Louisa referred to Christian author Joyce Huggett. Louisa told me that Huggett described God as being on the inside of every longing we have for him. God’s “invitation” was a theme that arose in Brian’s interview, also. Brian (62) said:

The questions that arise in midlife are questions, sort of big questions, about life that ... people haven’t had time to really address seriously. ... But there is, underneath all of that, I think there’s another dimension to it and that is ... it’s not only about the people themselves who are in midlife but midlife creates an opportunity for them to listen to The Other, to God’s drawing them. ... I am aware that everyone’s invited to a fuller experience of life than what they are generally living ... and it’s really in midlife, I think, that things press in on people, that show them that what they used to think was going to give them all the fulfilment and all the happiness that they could possibly get ... falls a bit short. ... Up ’til this stage of life I think it’s all been all about my programmes for happiness. ... Life is not about me but it’s about God, it’s about The Other. God is inviting them to be fully alive, you know, and connecting with ordinariness and creation.

For those who are accustomed to thinking of adult faith development in terms of “stages”415 – as many New Zealanders who have trained in spiritual direction over the

415 As was explained in Chapter One, some describe adult faith development by using related and similar
past twenty years are – transitions between faith stages, particularly between the stages
designated by James Fowler as Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional faith) and Stage 4
(Individuative-Reflective faith), and between Stage 4 and Stage 5 (Conjunctive faith) are
frequently understood to be likely periods of disorientation and dislocation. In an article
comparing faith stage transitions with cross-cultural transitions, Adrienne Thompson,
spiritual director, supervisor, and occasional writer for a range of New Zealand
publications,\textsuperscript{416} observes, “It is important to remember that in moving from one stage to
another something is lost and left behind.”\textsuperscript{417} This can be extremely unsettling. Some
people may begin a “panicky search for substitute churches, leaders, books” to replace
old “spiritual props.”\textsuperscript{418} Others simply feel “stuck.” Louisa (66) told me that she had
attended a course for spiritual directors which focused on “the stuck place” that
Christians may find themselves in at various points in life, including midlife. The course
presenter regarded every stuck place as “a prelude to a new place of opening, freedom,
new beginnings, new season, and so on.” She suggested that when people find
themselves in a stuck place, “there’s something for rejoicing in that. It might not feel like
a great place to be but it’s a prelude to a newer, fuller, richer season.”

Sometimes the “stuck place” Louisa spoke of can feel like a huge obstacle to be
overcome. Matthew (61) spoke about a book which he felt addressed this experience
helpfully. He explained that Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich’s book entitled \textit{The
Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith},\textsuperscript{419} has similarities with Fowler’s \textit{Stages of
Faith}, but in Hagberg and Guelich’s model, between the journey outwards and the
journey inwards, there is “the wall.” This is when people strike a set of issues that make
it feel like it is going to be very difficult to go to the next stage. Matthew said, “I kind of
recognise a lot of that as the sort of stuff that people have at midlife.” Matthew observed
that in some cases he has worked with directees who, when coming up to the wall, have

\textsuperscript{416} Adrienne Thompson has contributed to a number of New Zealand publications including the Anglican
magazine \textit{Taonga}, the Catholic periodical \textit{Tui Motu}, the \textit{Reality} magazine (a publication of the Bible College
of New Zealand), and the SGM magazine, \textit{Refresh}.

\textsuperscript{417} Adrienne Thompson, “Spiritual Direction through Faith Stage and Cross Cultural Transitions,” Spiritual
Growth Ministries, 2003, 8.

\textsuperscript{418} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{419} Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, \textit{The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.} (Salem,
chosen to retreat to more familiar ground. This is a common phenomenon. Revisiting and revising former beliefs and practices is a process which can take some time, and the support of other people during such periods can be very helpful. As Carol (66) put it, some people come to spiritual direction because “they need guidance through how to get from A to B to C. How to move on. How to let go.”

Frances (70) summarised many of the spiritual directors’ comments when she said, “A lot of people question their faith in midlife, and their spirituality, and their values, and what they want to hold onto and what they want to let go of, and what they want to reclaim in a new way.” Whether or not the church is currently supporting midlife parishioners effectively as they grapple with these questions is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

**The church’s support of Christians in midlife**

The majority of the clergy who were interviewed spoke about their midlife parishioners’ desire to deepen in faith and theological understanding, and many commented on the openness to less familiar forms of prayer, or new spiritual practices, that can occur at this stage in life. Some clergy explained why it can be difficult to offer appropriate forms of extension and spiritual support within parishes to individuals who wish to explore hard questions or new paths in spirituality. The spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project noted that, at midlife, some churchgoers require pastoral and spiritual nurture that is different from the forms of support that have been helpful to them in earlier life stages. Like the clergy, the spiritual directors who were interviewed acknowledged that it is not always easy for churches to cater for the needs of those who are questioning aspects of theology or spirituality, especially if these matters are not of concern to the majority of members in a particular parish. Four spiritual directors described the needs and experiences of directees who were experiencing what Susan Phillips calls “dissonance” between their “religiously defined social world” and “their private experience and convictions.”420 Three other directors addressed the related topic of burnout among midlife churchgoers. Given the nature of the ministry of spiritual direction it was not surprising that these issues arose in the interviews with spiritual directors. While these things are examined closely within this chapter, it should be noted that a range of practices and resources which many...

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Christians in midlife appreciate and find very helpful were also identified by the spiritual directors.

Within the church the assumption is often made that that people in midlife are doing well. Several of the spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project believed that midlife churchgoers are therefore easily taken for granted. Tony (56) suggested that it is assumed that Christians in this age group will “just get on with it.” Brian (62) said, “In this shifting stage I think midlife people are being neglected. ... So people flounder round.” Spiritual directors noted that not only are the needs of people in this age bracket often overlooked, but that churchgoers in midlife are usually relied upon to support others within their faith communities. Tony (56) observed that middle-aged churchgoers are “the busiest people ... running this, and doing that, going on the board for this, and all that stuff.” He said, “I think the intention of every church is to care for their people. But, um, often that care is provided by those very same people – the midlife people – ‘cause they’re the ones who are supposed to have got more life experience and they’re older, and so on.” Maureen (56) agreed. She felt that this age group is often seen as “the work horse” of the church.

As the interviews with midlife participants revealed, many Christians in midlife find fulfilment in contributing to church-based programmes or ministries, but due to the varied pressures, demands, and differing desires of people in their forties and fifties, at this point in life some people are unable or unwilling to serve as actively within their faith communities as they have done in the past. Susan Phillips asserts, “Within Christianity there is a call to community: for worship, fellowship, and discipleship – all aspects of our dynamic, growing spiritual lives. Many people, however, seek spiritual direction when they want to gain reflective distance from their ecclesial community or tradition.”\footnote{Ibid., 77.} Spiritual directors who contributed to this project identified the desire for “reflective distance” as being one among a number of factors that can cause some Christians to withdraw – partially or completely – from the institutional church in midlife.

Louisa (66) noted that it is not uncommon for people who have been very active and committed to the church in their younger years to “pull right back, or even pull out in midlife.” While she attributed some of that withdrawal from church involvement to family and work demands, Louisa also wondered if it could be “a kind of exhaustion.”
She said, “You know, they give so much in those early years.” Louisa acknowledged that in her own denomination being very active and involved is seen as good. “It can be all-consuming in terms of service and ministry and busyness, where busyness is really held up as a goal to be attained.” She added:

I wonder if people draw back ... I wonder what that means for their faith. And if they pull back at midlife, and the stages of faith, or the midlife crisis, or “the stuck place” happens, do they toss it all overboard? I don’t know. I have got no answers to that. But those are questions I am interested in.

Maureen (56) felt that, for some individuals in midlife, withdrawing a little from church responsibilities can be beneficial, or even necessary, to their faith and personal development. She observed that individuals in midlife are often pressed into roles within the church just at the point when they need “spaciousness” to do “the midlife work”:

You need time, you need space, you need periods where you’re not doing. ... You’re actually just lingering and, you know [she laughs] and lounging round and kind of really just noticing kind of what and who you are and where you are and what’s going on. ...It feels like people have to fight for that. I don’t know. ... There’s not permission to do that, you know? ... Some institutions, you know, have a sabbatical, but even there ... you have a sabbatical but you’re doing something during that sabbatical. It’s never the sense of, you know, just seeing where God takes you, see what happens, see what unfolds, let life, you know, teach you for a while, or whatever. It’s again, often structured and ... there’s got to be a purpose. ... Actually, this is so valuable. ... It’s all preparation for navigating the next bit.

It is not always easy for people in midlife to reduce their active involvement in their parishes, even when that may be helpful to them, and ultimately to others. Raymond Studzinski writes, “When they experience internal upheaval in the middle of life, their first reaction is to disappear quietly from the scene in order to sort things out. Often, however, they feel constrained to stay with their current responsibilities.”[422]

Some midlife churchgoers require time and space to step back from church programmes and to cultivate the inner life in new ways. Others thrive when they are able to engage in meaningful service, whether that is within or beyond the church. Individuals who feel that they are able to utilise their gifts and experiences for the greater good can have a strong sense of belonging to the church and contributing meaningfully to the Kingdom of God, as the interviews with midlife participants revealed. Several of the spiritual

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directors who were interviewed observed that the reverse is also true; churchgoers who perceive that their gifts are not valued can feel marginalised, and this can be a factor in individuals’ disengagement and sense of disillusionment with the institutional church. People are also likely to disengage from church if they perceive that what happens on Sundays has little connection with what they do during the rest of the week, or if they feel that questions of importance to them are rarely explored or addressed at church.

These things were evident in some of the spiritual directors’ comments about their own church experience. Part of the midlife journey for Tony (56) included an increasing sense of “dislocation” between his work and ministry roles beyond the church, and church itself. He continued to be part of the Baptist parish he had belonged to for many years, attending “off and on,” but “related to it more from the outside, in terms of ministry, than inside.” Eventually he recognised that some of what he was experiencing related to issues raised by Fowler423 and explored by Jamieson.424 After wrestling for some time with the question, “How do I express my faith?” in his early fifties Tony moved to a church he described as “high Anglican.”425 Despite initially finding some aspects of the worship very different from what he was used to, Tony is now comfortable at this parish. He described it as inclusive, accepting and supportive. Having come from a low-church background, Tony appreciates, among other things, “the focus on the church year (the calendar and so on), and the creeds, and the careful attention to words that carry meaning, and the sort of multisensory experience of mass.” He told me that congregation members pray for him, and he knows that, which was not his experience at his former church. He also feels that he is able to express his gifts there.

James (57) said, “Too many people leave the church in their fifties because the teaching just doesn’t connect with their life any longer. We can’t afford to let that be the reality.” Reflecting on his experience of church, and his wife’s experience also, he said, “I would say that what we receive in the church context does very little to nurture our faith.” I asked if he attended for different reasons. “Yes, yes, yes,” James agreed:

423 Fowler, Stages of Faith.
424 Jamieson, A Churchless Faith.
425 Tony was one of five participants in this project who had changed denomination around midlife. All three categories – of midlife churchgoers, clergy, and spiritual directors – included at least one person who had changed denomination. In addition to these five people who had changed from one denomination to another, two of the midlife participants had made a formal commitment to join a denomination, one after many years of participation in a parish, and one for whom regular church attendance was a fairly new practice.
We go there for the relationships we have with people. I do gain some encouragement through perhaps some of the songs at times, and some messages. I go there to give to other people, too. I go there to be “generative,” to use that term, to support a younger generation.

Brian (62) also addressed the issue of generativity. He spoke about his experience in the Catholic Church, within which he felt there was “a long way to go to begin to exercise the priestly role of all the laity.” He said, “I don’t think the needs of midlife are met very well in the areas of church. ... There’s no conversation, invitation, or acknowledgement of the ministries that are among us, of people who could actually assist each other.” Brian said that he would like to see the natural gifts of people in midlife being acknowledged and called on:

When you are recognised as having a gift to offer a community, well that’s empowering for you, you know. But you’re actually, the opposite happens. “Leave this to us.” People just sit back and just sit quietly and shrink back and go ... “Oh, this is not relevant to me any more.”

I suggested to Brian that the people who are disengaging from church might be having their conversations of depth over a beer somewhere. He agreed, with a laugh. “They will be. And they do.” But Brian added that greater collaboration between clergy, religious, and laity is beginning to occur. “It’s getting there.”

Julie (60), who is also Catholic, felt that, within her diocese, there had been a positive shift in opportunities for lay people in midlife. She told me, “In the past, midlife people have been almost taken for granted or overlooked. You know, a lot of energy and resources go into the youth.” However, a few months prior to her interview, Julie had been part of leading a retreat in daily life in a parish during which people had prayed individually and had also met in small groups. There was “very deep sharing” in those groups, and “the feedback was very positive.” Julie said:

I think for Catholics it was having the chance to share in small groups and keep that sense of community happening in an on-going way – which is the hope coming out of it as well. And also that there were lay and professed working together, you know. So there’s something of that in the mix, too. So it felt really exciting, and I think it’s really meeting, you know, a need for people in that age group.

As well as being of benefit to group participants, Julie had obviously found her own involvement in this programme stimulating. She was energized and optimistic about
what could be offered within the diocese in the future for mature Christians seeking a
deeper experience of God, and about her role in contributing to that:

There’s a real kind of interest in parish-based programmes for prayer and
reflection and support, and encouraging people to look at considering
spiritual direction. So I’m really excited by that initiative because I think most
of the people – certainly in the retreat we did in a parish recently – most of
them would have been within that middle-aged bracket. And I’m happy with
that. I don’t think we need to always be appealing to young people. Because I
think, while that’s important, there are resources there. Certainly that’s what
I’ve noticed. And I think it’s important that we don’t just take for granted or
neglect, the, you know, people in midlife. So I think I am seeing a real
attentiveness to people’s spirituality coming through now. ... Maybe we
expected people in midlife to be giving out in particular ways, or helping, but
not actually the right formation necessarily being supported.

Julie’s comment that “the right formation” of mature Christians is not necessarily well
supported is echoed in literature relating to midlife spirituality and was also borne out
in other spiritual directors’ remarks. Mary d’Apice believes that for many people the
years of middle adulthood are a time of “deep spiritual conversion, not in the sense of
transferring religious affiliation, but in the profound and radical change which occurs in
their relationship with God.”426 However, due to lack of understanding or lack of
experience some churches can struggle to support people who are working through
questions of identity and questions of faith. In reflecting on “congregations as support
systems” Lynne Baab writes, “Certainly, in our communities of faith, we embrace the
concept of enabling our members to ‘turn toward greater life or wholeness.’ But we
often don’t understand what is happening in the midlife years, so we lose an opportunity
to come alongside members in this life stage.”427 These issues were discussed by some of
the New Zealand spiritual directors who were interviewed. It was noted, first, that
Christians in midlife who are questioning aspects of their faith, or who feel that certain
church practices are no longer meaningful to them, are likely to find it very hard to talk
about these things at church. It can be difficult for churchgoers – particularly middle-
aged churchgoers upon whom congregations commonly rely – to find a safe place to
share their doubts or spiritual dilemmas without unduly distressing people who do not
share the same concerns. Second, many churches do not cultivate what James Fowler

426 Mary d’Apice, Noon to Nightfall: A Journey Through Midlife and Ageing (Burwood, VIC: Collins Dove,
1989), 156.
427 Lynne Baab, Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute,
1999), 4.
calls a “climate of developmental expectation.” Ensuring that mature Christians have some awareness and understanding of faith transitions (whatever labels one puts on faith stages or phases) can reduce distress and enable individuals to take greater responsibility for their own spiritual development. Several spiritual directors observed that some parishes, and some members of the clergy, do this better than others.

Frances (70) noted that while some people who struggle with the institutional church give their faith away altogether, many others are looking to be “nurtured spiritually in a more meaningful way.” She described the experience of some directees who, in midlife, have begun to question certain church practices and teachings which have formerly sustained them:

Once upon a time the institutional church had a lot of meaning for them but it doesn’t seem to have that now. But I think it’s more than that. I think there’s a real search for spirituality and they’re looking to have, um, not so much beliefs about God but encounters with their spirituality. ... I think apart from their disillusionment with the church (and I’m probably talking more from the Catholic perspective, but I think it’s true of people, a lot of people, in the midlife journey) I think their whole understanding of “who God is” shifts. You know, they discover that how they were taught about God was very limited. And then I think they do question some of the practices that they’ve held on to.

Tony (56) questioned where Christians can go when “former ways of thinking or believing ... don’t work any more.” Alluding to Alan Jamieson’s work on church leavers in New Zealand, he said:

What happens if they’re in crisis? Do they hide their own crisis and doubt, to help the younger ones? ... I mean that’s where the bulk of the running of the churches lies. So how can they be doubtful when they’re the ones the whole structure sits on? You know, ah, that’s quite a problem. ... Expressing doubt at church is actually really hard, because you’re then, either you’re (as Alan’s research shows) you’re considered to be backsliding or um giving up on God, or just not being loyal any more. So where can you say those things, and be held as you explore them, without being lectured?

In some churches members can feel threatened when some parishioners are grappling with questions of faith. Matthew (61) said, “It’s hard, though, Anne, because ... as soon as anybody says anything that sounds like it’s outside the box theologically, you’ve got this self-appointed group of people who will swoop down and say, ‘This is dangerous.’”

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428 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 296.
429 Jamieson, A Churchless Faith.
Matthew accepted that it can be difficult for parishes to accommodate the needs of people who are grappling with questions that may arise in the second half of life as well as catering for those “that do need the Alpha\(^430\) and the straightforward message of the gospel.” He said, “They've got so many other things they're trying to do, um, which are more geared to people in the first journey than the second journey, I think. So if we could have ‘Beta’ to go with ‘Alpha’…” He laughed, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Like Tony and Matthew, Maureen (56) emphasised the need for acceptance and understanding on the part of clergy and congregations when members are grappling with uncertainties – understanding that “this is not, that awful word that they use, ‘backsliding’. This is not. ... Actually this movement could be of God.” Maureen considered that one of the needs of midlife churchgoers is the need “to be trusted.” She felt that churches could be “much more generous with how they react to people who are questioning”:

This is actually a normal, natural process that is actually going on, of, I'd probably call it faith development, at some level, to be questioning and things like that. ... Somehow we don't allow people ... to be struggling, to be stuck, all of those sorts of things, that actually, you know, I think churches sometimes ... don't have the skills or the tools to ... help people kind of wade through some of that stuff. And sometimes they do. ... Some individuals in churches do, you know, provide the support and all the rest of it for midlife. But yeah, it comes and goes I think. And probably it's quite different depending on churches.

According to Adrienne Thompson, “Some churches or fellowships nurture people engaged in critically evaluating their faith, others repress them.”\(^431\) But unless churches explore ways to assist members who are engaged in what Jamieson calls the “work” of deconstructing parts of their faith that are “no longer relevant, meaningful or viable” and the ensuing work of faith reconstruction,\(^432\) without putting a “stumbling block or a hindrance in the way” (Roms 14:13) of them or of other Christians, these people may drift away from the church altogether. Andrew Pritchard, who has worked in spiritual

\(^{430}\text{Matthew's reference is to the Alpha course which a number of churches in New Zealand, as well as throughout the world, offer as an introduction to the basics of the Christian faith. Alpha, <http://alpha.org.nz> (3 April 2017).}\)


direction, ministry supervision, and the training of spiritual directors through Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), for many years, observes:

It is appropriate for churches, especially those who value evangelism highly, to base their programmes and practices towards the needs of those at earlier stages of faith. However, if the needs of those who move to later stages are ignored, or worse, seen to be a distraction from the purpose and mission of the church, many of those won in evangelism will be lost in the passage of time, not because they have grown cold but because they have grown!

Several spiritual directors agreed that some churches and individuals provide more effective support for people navigating changes in faith than others.

Tony (56) told me that churches’ support for those who are navigating faith transitions “varies.” He believes that those from evangelical, Pentecostal, or charismatic congregations who wish to share challenges to their faith may have limited opportunities to do so. “If they are going to more ‘mainline’ churches” – Tony mentioned Methodist, Anglican, and some Presbyterian churches – “it would then very much depend on the experience of the ministers. If they’ve actually been through that kind of thing, and had the opportunity to reflect on it, then they’re likely to be quite helpful. So it’s really going to come down to the experience of those people.” Tony then added that he believed this would be the same in the Pentecostal, evangelical and charismatic churches, too. “If the people that those folk talk to have engaged with those issues themselves – ‘Where is my faith in this, you know, as I face cancer or whatever it is?’ – they’ll probably be of help as well, but it really depends on where the helper is in their faith.”

James (57) described the situation of a middle-aged couple that he and his wife have been supporting as they have experienced health and life crises. James said, “Their spiritual journey was contained within the evangelical/charismatic context and it has just not been enough.” They are currently not involved in church because, as James put it, when the crisis happened “they found no meaningful support from the church they were attending. ... Nobody there could journey with them.” I asked James to explain more about the sort of support these people were seeking and needing. He said, “They were looking for spiritual support but not in the way that they had experienced spiritual support in the past. Not good Bible teaching and prayer, but just being with and walking

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through a dark valley – accompanying in a deep, dark place.” Later, when I asked James if he could suggest how the church could better support people in midlife, he said:

I think we have to provide some teaching around some of the crucial midlife life – and faith – issues. To talk about some of the transitions that happen there, to give input about stages of faith, streams of spirituality. We have to provide places where people are informed and given resources that can help them through midlife life issues and faith issues, and I don’t think the church does that very well. I think we are far too geared for early stages of faith, growth and development, and not providing enough for later faith stages.

James added, however, that there are now relevant resources that “are becoming a bit mainstream.”

Matthew (61) told me that directees who have spoken to him about the helpful support provided by their parishes are those who attend churches where “it’s OK to bring your questions. Or there’s acknowledgment from the front that, you know, that yes, these stages happen, and the doubts can be very helpful if we handle them the right way.” Like James, Matthew also observed that some helpful practices that are now part of “mainstream understanding” might formerly have been considered “a bit fringe.” He noted that some churches are exposing members to things that are beyond their own traditions, and suggested Lectio Divina434 as one example. He continued:

I think what people really value is if they can find support ... if they can find a framework that’s got some long-tested wisdom to it, and it’s not going to ask them to go back in some box that they feel they can’t go back into theologically or personally.

Matthew identified Ignatian spirituality as providing such a framework. He noted, “Mostly they’ve found that outside the church, up til now.” When I observed that some larger parishes seem willing and able to offer a variety of services and different styles of liturgy, across a week or month, to cater for people whose spiritual needs differ, Matthew agreed. He could think of a number of situations like that, but considered that “only the reasonably large churches can sustain that.” Reflecting on churches within his own city, Matthew observed that young people are gravitating towards large churches that are “geared to that demographic.” Matthew noted that young people are at an earlier stage of faith and “they are more conservative in theology” – needing certainties at that age – “but that doesn’t work for people whose lives are becoming more complex

434 Lectio Divina, or “Divine Reading,” is a method of reading, prayer and contemplation which has its roots in the monastic tradition.
and whose questions are becoming deeper.” But the alternative to those large churches is much smaller churches, and most of those attending them are past midlife. Matthew concluded, “So that’s almost become the choice.”

I asked Matthew what he thought parishes could do to better support people in midlife. Like James, Matthew felt that they could offer some teaching, or some acknowledgement in regular sermons, to help people realise:

Not all of life is the same, and the spiritual journey is not some smooth path ... not some smooth upward incline and you just get holier and holier but, um, there are earthquakes, and there are times when you feel like the wheels have fallen off. And it’s OK. This has happened to God’s people ever since the beginning.

He gave several examples of Biblical figures, including Job and Peter, whose spiritual paths were notably uneven, then continued, “Without rocking the theological boat too much, we could do more. Churches could help to normalise these experiences and give people some pointers about where they can find help.” Matthew acknowledged, “There are limitations on what churches can do.” He said, “I don’t think the church needs to do everything, but if they could help people find the appropriate help for what they’re going through at the moment, then that would be great.”

Adrienne Thompson observes that the temptation to focus on externals, to blame others for one’s difficulties, or to blame oneself for no longer enjoying or appreciating what had once been so nourishing, can be part of transition experiences. It is therefore wise to acknowledge that there are limitations on what churches can do, and also to question what it is sensible for them to attempt. It is also appropriate for individuals who are in midlife to seek resources and opportunities that will nurture their spiritual formation both within and beyond their parishes, if they are able to. Andrew Pritchard makes the important point that individuals may need to become less reliant on the institutional church for support as their faith develops:

As positive growth occurs, so the balance between the church’s primacy in meeting our spiritual needs and our own responsibility for doing so, shifts.

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That the church no longer meets my needs as fully or as comfortably as it once did is not necessarily an indication that the church has failed me.\textsuperscript{436}

Some people may find it more difficult than others to access support beyond their parishes, for a wide range of reasons. For example, some may have limited resources available within their communities due to location or socioeconomic factors, while others may simply be ignorant of what is on offer.\textsuperscript{437} Literacy or language barriers may restrict other individuals’ opportunities. Financial restraints or lack of time can prevent people from engaging in theological education or from seeking spiritual direction. The willingness of clergy and church leaders to assist parishioners in exploring avenues for spiritual growth which lie beyond their own churches or even outside their own denominations may also be a significant factor in nurturing or restricting faith development.

Although most Christians’ experience of church is centered on what happens within parishes and congregations, it is very important to note, as spiritual directors and a number of clergy pointed out, that what is offered by the church is not limited to what occurs in parishes. For some people, spiritual direction is a form of the “appropriate help” that Matthew suggested individuals could benefit from receiving. This ministry is, as he told me, “broadly speaking, an extension of the church.” Speaking about the work of spiritual directors, and of SGM, he said, “We don’t see ourselves as an alternative to the church. We see ourselves as serving the church.” Frances (70) agreed. She has worked as a spiritual director for many years. She described spiritual direction as “a wonderful source for people to be supported,” and added, “It’s more the one-to-one encounters and the opportunities to have some workshops, and things like that, that they find most helpful, really.” She considered that workshops that enable people to “put a name on their experience” and provide some possible ways to deal with the issues they are facing can be very helpful to people in midlife. Frances added, “But I think having someone to listen to them, you know, and to tell their stories to ... is probably the greatest help.” Louisa (66) felt that spiritual direction provides very meaningful support to individuals seeking “someone to journey with, someone to be accountable to.” She said, “That seems to be important. ... Like, ‘I really want to do this thing with God but I need someone to help me do it.’” Tony (56) described spiritual direction as providing a

\textsuperscript{436} Pritchard, “Fowler, Faith and Fallout,” 27.

\textsuperscript{437} It was evident from interviews with midlife churchgoers that some were quite unaware of local opportunities they might have found of value. Spiritual directors noted that many Christians are unaware of the ministry of spiritual direction.
“safety net” for people in transition. All of the spiritual directors described (at some length) the specific gifts they believed spiritual direction contained for their midlife directees. While some of their comments about spiritual direction lie a little beyond the scope of the present project, the conviction that this ministry is of particular value for Christians in their middle years certainly pervaded the spiritual directors’ interviews.

Some churches, individuals, and Christian ministries do provide timely and effective support for people who, in midlife, are seeking “something more” in their experience and understanding of God. Carol (66) observed that spiritual directors and clergy can encourage Christians in midlife to go “further afield” as they seek support on their spiritual journey. She told me that some directees benefit from attending conferences, while others might participate in special groups that are only available at particular churches. She identified Taizé services, contemplative prayer groups and retreats as being things that she, or other spiritual directors, might refer clients to. Awareness of these opportunities is fostered through a spiritual directors’ network that holds regular meetings and shares information and resources via the internet. Carol said, “You do encourage people to go if you see a need.” Many people involved in this project, including the spiritual directors, were grateful for opportunities to attend retreats, to engage with others in prayer or discussion groups, to receive counselling, or to attend supervision or spiritual direction.

Others find it helpful to access resources from church or diocesan libraries or websites. Matthew (61) told me that, as an alternative to finding a good book, some of his directees find podcasts very valuable. Some access regular talks by someone who is at the “right sort of place for them at this point in their journey.” They come along to spiritual direction and tell Matthew about things they have found encouraging. Matthew himself subscribes to Facebook groups that regularly post material of interest to him, addressing questions relating to later stages of faith. There are on-line discussion groups that debate questions and direct participants to other blogs and readings. Some people also find value in YouTube clips that raise issues of interest. Thomas (54) uses a blog, Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of social media as tools to connect the Christian faith with people’s lives. He said, “We have received a message of hope and faith, and, on the whole, the Catholic Church, much more, in people’s minds, than any other Christian

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438 Matthew mentioned one website he appreciates because it starts interesting conversations. “Red Letter Christians” was initiated by Tony Campolo, supported by Jim Wallis. <https://www.redletterchristians.org> (22 March 2106).
church, has reduced it to rules and regulations.” Thomas hopes that his blog (which he considers includes “conservative” reflections alongside reflections that are harder to categorize) might prompt people to revise their perceptions and think about things differently. In addition to these contemporary approaches, six of the ten spiritual directors also emphasised that the Scriptures are a primary resource that they and their midlife directees value highly.

Thomas is a priest in a Catholic parish as well as a spiritual director. He believes that some programmes that churches offer are missing the mark, because many happen with “zero reference to faith.” According to Thomas, numbers attending church events are no indication of what helps people grow in their relationship with Christ. Thomas identified liturgy – “the heart of what we do” – retreats, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and opportunities to slip into a quiet church to pray, as central to nurturing Christian faith. Many other interviewees, whose comments have been included in earlier chapters, agreed that such things are of central importance in the spiritual life, but still considered that there was genuine support to be found in church groups that have, as Frances (70) put it, “no religious emphasis at all.” She said, “I think the interaction of people, I think that’s where the support comes. ... If a parish is very hospitable and open and builds good relationships then, by its very nature, then I think people are supported wherever they are.” Matthew (61) told me, in reflecting on his own experience, that a church that is “very gentle, very grace-focused [and] reflective” can be “quite a haven” for those who journey together there. Given the diversity and complexity of midlife churchgoers’ experiences it is not surprising that participants expressed different views about the forms of support that Christians in this age group find most helpful.

**Summary**

This chapter has focused on the needs and experiences of Christians who, in midlife, have chosen to attend spiritual direction. Some Christians do so because attendance is a requirement or expectation of certain leadership roles within the church, but others choose to attend spiritual direction because they wish to reflect on their faith and are seeking greater depth in their relationship with God. The spiritual directors who were interviewed considered, both on the basis of their own experience and the experiences of their directees, that midlife has the potential to be a very significant and rich period of spiritual development. They described it as a stage of life in which the interior journey
demands more attention. Many people in midlife may find themselves reflecting on their past, their priorities in the present and their desires for the future. Some Christians are aware of God’s invitation to “something more” in their spiritual journey. Spiritual directors felt that some clergy and parishes are better equipped than others to support members who are grappling with midlife challenges or transitions in faith. They provided examples of ministries and spiritual practices that they believed were helpful to their middle-aged directees, and also identified resources which might offer further support to Christians in midlife. A few alluded to the fact that the balance between the church’s responsibility for parishioners’ spiritual nurture and each person’s willingness to embrace opportunities to deepen in faith and understanding is likely to shift during this life stage.

There may be some predictable patterns in human development and in the life of faith, but journeys of faith are unique. Given that a significant number of spiritual directors commented on midlife churchgoers’ experience of distance from their faith communities, it is important to recall that the majority of the midlife churchgoers who were interviewed for this project were not only actively engaged in parish activities but were able to identify ways that their churches helped them to connect with God and with other Christians. There are lessons to be learned from people who do not feel very well supported by their parishes as they work through significant issues at midlife, and also from those who experience the church as a place of spiritual nurture and genuine fellowship. All benefit when the church seeks to provide people with opportunities to share their experiences and insights.
Chapter Eight: Implications

We thank you for the heritage of thought we have received, for all that challenged, comforted, was questioned and believed. We seek for yet more light and truth, in confidence that you will be, O God, our guide, our goal, in all we seek to do.

– New Zealand hymn writer, Colin Gibson

The purpose of this project has been to examine the experiences and needs of Christians in midlife, to investigate how well these needs are being addressed within the church, and to suggest a range of responses to the issues raised. Some of the lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of those in midlife, clergy who serve in churches that include middle-aged parishioners, and from spiritual directors who meet with people in midlife have been identified within the preceding chapters. This chapter commences with reflections on aspects of the research process. The remainder of the chapter explores, in more detail, three key concepts that emerged from the interviews, and examines the implications of these for the church and for individuals in midlife who are part of church communities.

The research process

Rich data emerged from the interviews with participants from every one of the three groups that contributed to this research. Although midlife churchgoers, clergy and spiritual directors were asked slightly different questions, essentially every person was invited to speak about what he or she considered to be the most significant needs of Christians in midlife, and to reflect on how effectively churches in New Zealand are addressing those needs, firstly by identifying what midlife churchgoers already appreciate and value about the church and their involvement within it, and secondly by considering what churches might do better in responding to the needs of middle-aged members. Individuals from each participant group brought complementary perspectives to bear upon these key questions.

The twenty churchgoers from Dunedin, Christchurch and Auckland who participated in this project spoke very openly about their experience of midlife. Many of the churchgoers who were interviewed had experienced changes in their perspectives and

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439 Excerpt from “We thank you for the Heritage” in Hope is our Song: New Hymns and Songs from Aotearoa New Zealand (Palmerston North: The New Zealand Hymn Book Trust, 2009), 290.
values, and in their understanding of God and of themselves, in midlife. In many cases, but not all, these changes were perceived by participants to be the result of gradual shifts rather than seismic upheavals. Few interviewees used the word “crisis” to label their midlife experience, but tears surfaced in some interviews as individuals shared stories of bereavement, loss and trauma, or spoke of some significant pressures and struggles that had been, or were still, part of their midlife journey. It was humbling to hear these stories, generously communicated for the potential benefit of others. While acknowledging that some aspects of midlife had been very difficult, many participants also perceived midlife to be a period of relative stability, opportunity and/or personal development. These findings harmonise with results from recent research in the field of life span developmental psychology, explored earlier in this thesis.⁴⁴⁰ As Margie Lachman observes, “The story of midlife is one of complexity.”⁴⁴¹ There is great variability in people’s experiences during this stage of life.

Given that much of the literature relating to midlife, including what is reported in the popular media, focuses on the more challenging aspects of this life stage, it was interesting that expressions of gratitude for the blessings of midlife arose so frequently in the interviews with churchgoers. There are at least four possible reasons for this. The first two relate to the selection of interviewees. The churchgoers who were invited to participate in this project were selected on the recommendation of supervisors or clergy, or were acquaintances of the researcher, and therefore most (though not all) were quite actively involved in their parishes. A number of interviewees stated or implied that a sense of peace and security was derived from their relationship with God and experience of God’s faithfulness to them. To varying degrees, participants also felt that their parish involvement provided some encouragement and support at times of difficulty. It seems likely that the interviewees’ ability to derive meaning from their life experiences and “to give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess 5:18) could, at least in part, be linked to their faith and to their church involvement.⁴⁴² Second, although the

⁴⁴² As this research was not a comparative study – no non-churchgoers were interviewed – this hypothesis remains unproven. However, a large body of existing research into the connections between spirituality or religion and psychological wellbeing supports this assertion. For example, within New Zealand, such questions are explored by “The Spirituality and Well-being Strategy Group.” Members include Dr Richard Egan, Lecturer, University of Otago; Dr Chris Perkins, Director Selwyn Centre for Ageing and Spirituality; Simon Cayley, CEO Bishop’s Action Foundation; Charles Waldegrave, Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit, Dr Tess Moeke-Maxwell, and Dr Anna Holmes, Clinical Senior Lecturer, Department of General
churches represented within this project were located in communities that were economically diverse, many of the interviewees possessed tertiary qualifications, most were employed, and all appeared to have, at the time of the interviews, sufficient income to meet their immediate needs. Greater socioeconomic diversity among the participants would undoubtedly have raised issues that did not directly affect the majority of the interviewees who contributed to this project. Third, all midlife interviewees were specifically asked to comment on the opportunities as well as the challenges of midlife. This turned out to be a leading question, directing participants’ attention to the blessings of this life stage. A fourth possible reason for participants’ sense of appreciation of the goodness of many things in their lives is that, as Lynne Baab has observed, when unplanned events “shatter the illusion of control” – as so commonly happens in midlife – people can find that they experience a transition “from control to gratitude.” 443 In many cases participants’ contentment was clearly linked to a sense of gratitude to God for small and large blessings in their lives. More will be said about this in the section that follows.

The second group of interviewees, ordained priests and ministers, also spoke very openly about their midlife experiences. Members of the clergy were quick to identify significant challenges in their own or others’ midlife journeys, and demonstrated empathy and concern in reflecting on the needs of their parishioners in this life stage. They admitted that, as far as ministry within their parishes was concerned, they had not previously given these issues a lot of thought. Their genuine interest in the research topic and their engagement in the interviews may have been partly attributable to the fact that they were themselves in midlife, but also appeared to stem from the novelty of the questions they were being asked to consider and the possibilities for more effectively reaching out to midlife parishioners that emerged as they spoke. Their responses tended to be both philosophical and practical; as they reflected on the universality and significance of inner shifts at midlife and the connection between these shifts and faith development, clergy provided specific examples of initiatives they had offered or been involved in, and (while respecting the anonymity of their parishioners) shared anecdotes about the impact of these on individuals. They identified a number of means by which churches currently assist midlife parishioners to connect with God and

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one another. Clergy also acknowledged that more could be done to address the needs of Christians in midlife. The fact that the ten members of the clergy who were interviewed were able to generate diverse and numerous realistic suggestions about further forms of support that might benefit churchgoers in this age bracket suggests that interviewing a greater number of clergy could have been worthwhile. It also suggests that providing the occasional forum for clergy to explore these issues together may be fruitful. Several members of the clergy stated that they felt there was scope for personal and professional development in discussing midlife issues with other clergy. Anglican priest, Patricia (58) said:

I think this [the interview time] has been really great. And I think it would be wonderful to have some specific focus in ongoing formation workshops for clergy, discussion points, you know, to get together and actually specifically look at it. ... I think some really interesting stuff could come out of that. It’s stimulating.

The third group of participants in this project, the spiritual directors, focused most closely on the inner journey of midlife and aspects of spiritual formation that often arise in this life stage. Similarities in the ten spiritual directors’ perspectives could be linked to a number of factors, including similarities in their ages and cultural backgrounds, their common vocation, and the comparable formation and training they had received. A number of the spiritual directors identified, and explained within established theoretical frameworks, aspects of psychological and spiritual development that they perceived affected midlife churchgoers. Seven out of the ten spiritual directors commented on the desire for “something more” in faith that often arises in midlife. Some spiritual directors spoke of faith stages and transitions; those who did so stated or implied that churchgoers who have been Christians for many years are not always well prepared to anticipate and negotiate such changes. Spiritual directors were able to comment on the experiences of midlife churchgoers who felt their faith was well supported by their church communities and also on the needs of individuals who felt somewhat distanced from, or even disaffected by, the church. In New Zealand, spiritual directors work with only a small percentage of churchgoers, but the decision to interview them was certainly justified by their understanding of some significant issues affecting people in this life stage.

The sample size of forty participants was sufficient to gain a very good overview of key issues affecting New Zealand Christians in midlife, and the fact that participants were
drawn from three populations, with different but complementary perspectives, clearly contributed to the breadth and depth of the material that could be explored. Although similarities in the key ideas expressed were marked and numerous, there were differences in the ways that interviewees from each group responded to the questions that were posed. As they described the many responsibilities they held, their values, beliefs and aspirations, and the place of the church in supporting them as they reflected on these things, some of the midlife churchgoers spoke quite obliquely about their faith. Given the secularity of New Zealand society, this was unsurprising; many Christians in New Zealand are accustomed to eschewing “religious” language when speaking about their beliefs. The hesitancy with which some midlife participants spoke about their faith in God may also be attributable to other factors, and these will be explored in the next section. The clergy were asked to share something of their own experience of midlife and also to speak about the ways in which their churches were responding to the needs of midlife parishioners. As they reflected on their own midlife experience, which most members of the clergy considered included growth in their understanding of themselves and of their faith, several priests and ministers paused and commented on the complexity of this life stage. When speaking about the church and their congregations, clergy employed terminology that reflected their theological training and role in the church. The spiritual directors were clearly comfortable speaking about the inner journey at midlife, drawing freely on a wide range of resources, images and metaphors to explore some of the deeper questions of faith that their directees shared with them. As has already been noted, there were individuals within every group of participants who commented on the value of the interview process itself. Brian (spiritual director, 62) said, for example, “I’ve enjoyed talking to you, Anne. I didn’t know what to expect but it’s interesting when you begin to talk about these things. I began to make connections, you know.” This is a significant point. To be able to “make connections” by sharing one’s story with someone else is something that most people, at some point, find helpful.

Almost all of the interviewees who were invited to participate in this project came from three major denominations and three cities within New Zealand.444 As has been noted in

444 The exceptions were spiritual directors who came from other denominations, and one member of the clergy who worked in a combined cooperating parish. As has been explained elsewhere, several other people who came from other denominations, or for other reasons did not fall within any of the three selected sample groups, also gave up time to be interviewed, although their comments are not cited within the data chapters (Chapters Four to Seven).
the four preceding chapters, denominational affiliation made less difference to participants’ experiences and perceptions than other factors, such as age, gender, marital status and familial situation. Denominational differences that did arise were generally predictable. For example, some interviewees from Anglican and Catholic churches commented on the centrality of the Eucharist in the practice and experience of their faith, whereas those from Presbyterian churches (in which the observation of communion usually occurs less frequently) did not. Not only were there more similarities than differences in the perspectives of churchgoers from the three mainstream denominations selected for this study, but many similarities in perspectives were also shared by participants from parishes of quite different types, both within and across denominations. For example, midlife churchgoers from all church types – whether evangelical/charismatic, Anglo-Catholic, Catholic, or traditional or non-traditional Protestant churches – considered intergenerational relationships within congregations to be a particularly positive and important aspect of their parish involvement. Interviewees from parishes that were quite dissimilar also expressed genuine appreciation of contemplative services, opportunities for shared silent prayer, and personal retreats. It was noteworthy that midlife churchgoers appeared to value exposure to these forms of prayer even if they were not a part of their faith communities’ normal practices.

Participants came from Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin. Geographic location had some impact on the data that was gathered because interviewees from Christchurch had been affected by major earthquakes that occurred in September 2010 and February 2011. Almost all of the participants from Christchurch, at some point in their interviews, mentioned the earthquakes and the resultant stress, financial and physical impacts, or other tangible and intangible consequences for themselves or their families, members of their congregations, or their communities.445 Christchurch residents’ sense of vulnerability has been intensified and prolonged by the fact that in the first five years following Canterbury’s first earthquake there were over 10,000 aftershocks.446 Gail (Anglican, 41) said that when all the earthquakes were happening, she and her husband

445 “While research showed the third year post-disaster as the worst for mental illness, Canterbury was different because of the number of aftershocks and indirect issues like insurance problems. In this instance, it was more akin to the effects of a war,’ Child, Adolescent and Family (CAF) clinical director Dr Harith Swadi said.” Ashleigh Stewart, “Canterbury residents ‘most vulnerable’ five years after the quakes.” The Christchurch Press, 7 November 2015.
decided to put on a brave face for their daughters whenever there was an aftershock. Parents from all over Christchurch could have repeated this story:

The kids look to you and if you’re calm then they think, “Oh, I’m not worried.” So it worked, because they ended up sleeping through some pretty big aftershocks and we couldn’t believe it ... so we wouldn’t race in there ... but the stress of having to go, “Oh, don’t worry about that. That’s fine.” It was really tiring. So I was exhausted.

In April 2016, more than five years after the most destructive earthquake, Sandra (Anglican priest, 58) commented on the residual stress that was still discernable among her parishioners:

Certainly their faith is something that holds them strong through some of that life stuff. But it’s also challenged, I think, when, you know, you’re faced with personal stress, but, you know, citywide stress as well, I think. And a lot of hidden anxiety. I think there’s still people that just jump when something moves or makes big noises. You recognise how stressed people still are.

The extent and severity of housing issues faced by many people has also had an ongoing impact on thousands of families. Some midlife interviewees from Christchurch had been forced to move to suburbs that were far from their original neighbourhoods and parishes; some were travelling long distances to worship with the congregations they had been part of prior to the earthquakes. Several interviewees were attending church services in temporary premises because their church buildings had been seriously damaged or destroyed. Some had also been affected by the closure of their children’s schools. These losses were the source of real grief to those affected. One interviewee with adult children suddenly found herself with a “cluttered” rather than “empty” nest. Without suggesting that the events themselves were in any way desirable, some interviewees from Christchurch also identified positive consequences of the earthquakes, such as lessons they felt they had learned, strengthened relationships, and, in one case, improved business outcomes. People in midlife have been some of

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447 Data relating to Physical and Mental Health and Well-being, released in April 2017 by “All Right?” – a Healthy Christchurch initiative led by the Canterbury District Health Board and the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand – revealed that four fifths of respondents “agreed” that they valued others more now than before the earthquakes (81% in 2016, 83% in 2012). Over four fifths of respondents reported having a better sense of what is important to them now, compared with before the earthquakes (82% in 2016, 83% in 2012). More respondents reported that their faith, religion or spirituality had helped them to deal with the last few years (42% in 2016, 34% in 2012).

those most affected by the earthquakes,\textsuperscript{448} but people living in the Christchurch region have become very aware of how swiftly circumstances can change and how little control individuals have over many aspects of their lives. For Christchurch residents, dealing with the earthquakes and their ongoing consequences at individual and societal level cannot be separated from their “midlife experience.”

Several members of the clergy from Christchurch commented on the impact of multiple losses and disruption upon their parishioners, but the earthquakes had affected clergy deeply, also. Some of the clergy who had been present during and following the earthquakes, and were called on to support others in the immediate aftermath of the February 2011 earthquake, appeared to appreciate the opportunity to speak about the challenges they had faced during that period.\textsuperscript{449} Bernard (Catholic priest, 52) reflected on the connection between the earthquakes and his own midlife journey:

\begin{quote}
Heading into my fifties also happened at the time of the earthquakes when I dealt with a huge amount of sorrow and distress. I had a funeral every day of the week after the big shake ... I buried fifty-five people that year. I buried not just the sick and the elderly; I buried young mothers with children in the front row. I buried fit, healthy, active people. [\textit{He speaks in a tone of some disbelief.}] And whilst I think I’ve got a good level of detachment from that in my life, there’s an accumulated sort of residue from each of those experiences which does make an impact. It’s sort of balanced in my life by the great weddings I have, and the baptisms, and that side of life – I can see the full richness of it – but that particular year there was an imbalance. There was a lot of sorrow. There was a lot of distress. And you felt you were trying to hold up a huge number of people in the midst of all that uncertainty. You can do that for so long but then it’s difficult; you just don’t have the spiritual or emotional energy to do that any longer. It starts to take its toll.
\end{quote}

Many clergy in Christchurch are still working in very challenging situations. At the time the interviews were conducted, approximately six years after the 2011 event which caused the most significant damage to the central city, four of the Christchurch clergy who were interviewed were holding services of worship in temporary premises. Three of their churches had been destroyed and a fourth was awaiting repairs. In addition, one Anglican priest was serving in a church with a combined congregation because a nearby

\textsuperscript{448} “Canterbury District Health Board chief of psychiatry Sue Nightingale said a significant increase ‘we weren’t prepared for’ was the number of middle-aged women using mental health services. ‘It could be the family stressors looking after everyone else … but that’s pure speculation.’” Ashleigh Stewart, “Mental Toll of Quakes Yet to Peak,” The Christchurch Press, 7/8 November 2015, A 1.

\textsuperscript{449} The fact that the clergy from Christchurch spoke so openly in their interviews about these challenges suggests that, now that Christchurch is entering a period of greater stability, it could be timely for clergy to be provided with further opportunities to speak in confidence about the unprecedented, multiple, cumulative pressures they have borne.
church building could no longer be used. Only two of the seven interviews with Christchurch clergy took place in offices on church premises. It seemed that few of the ministers and priests from Christchurch who were interviewed had permanent private offices from which to work or meet with parishioners. It was hardly surprising that, in this context, clergy and churchgoers from Christchurch placed very high value on close supportive relationships within congregations (and on strategies for fostering these) and on stability and familiarity in forms of liturgy and worship. Like those from Canterbury, interviewees from Dunedin and Auckland prized close connections with other Christians. However, a desire for stability and continuity was rarely expressed.\(^{450}\)

The sample size of forty was adequate to provide a good foundation for addressing the key questions of this project, but, as has already been noted, greater diversity among the midlife churchgoers would almost certainly have thrown light upon further challenges and opportunities of midlife that were not raised by those who were interviewed. Inclusion of interviewees whose ages were spread fairly evenly across two decades, who were from three denominations (and who attended different kinds of churches within those denominations), and whose familial circumstances differed, limited the other forms of diversity that could be taken into consideration. For example, among the twenty midlife churchgoers it was possible to include people who were single, married (with and without children living at home), divorced, remarried, and widowed, but churchgoers with blended families and people living in same-sex relationships were not interviewed. Greater cultural diversity within the total sample would also have better reflected New Zealand’s population. At the 2013 census 74 percent of New Zealanders identified as European, Māori made up 14.9 percent of the population, and 11.8 percent were Asian.\(^{451}\) 77.5 percent of the participants in this project identified as New Zealand European (or Pakeha). One participant identified as being of Māori, Cook Island and European descent. Two members of the clergy (five percent of participants) who contributed to this research were born in Asia. Future exploration of the needs and

\(^{450}\) One minister from Dunedin, in fact, observed that, in his parish, midlife churchgoers seem to desire novelty in worship and in ministry. Speaking about people who had been members of the church for some time, he said, “There’s a bit of an un-critiqued ‘New equals good, old equals bad.’ So they would be looking for some new thing.” It is interesting to note this contrast, but the sample size was insufficient to justify drawing too many conclusions from it.

\(^{451}\) According to the 2013 census, “Nearly three-quarters of the population (74.0 percent) identified themselves as being of European ethnicity, which was an increase from 67.6 percent in 2006. This increase seems to be partly due to fewer people identifying themselves as ‘New Zealander’. In 2013, 65,973 people identified as ‘New Zealander’ on their census form, compared with 429,429 people in 2006. There was a media campaign in 2006 that encouraged people to give the response ‘New Zealander’.” Statistics New Zealand, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-about-national-highlights/cultural-diversity.aspx> (11 May 2017).
experiences of midlife churchgoers – in discussions held among clergy or within congregations, for example – might seek to redress these gaps or imbalances in the sample diversity.

A limitation of this research is that cohort effects are not addressed. A longitudinal study would be necessary to determine the extent to which the experiences and attitudes of the midlife interviewees related to their age and stage of life rather than the cohort to which they belong. It is very likely that the experience of midlife will be different for people born at different points of history. For example, it seems probable that comments made by midlife churchgoers about work, work-life balance, and retirement relate to cohort as well as age. Sterns and Huyck’s research relating to the role of work in midlife indicates that “the challenges of the middle years are influenced by cohort” as, at present, middle-aged employees are those most affected by organisations making the transition “from pyramid to more streamlined configurations through downsizing and restructuring.”452 Eriksen, Martinengo and Hill suggest that “longitudinal data are necessary to evaluate how work-family linkages shift over the life course” as “age differences may mask the fact that adults born during the Baby Boom generation may react differently to work conditions than Generation X adults will react when they reach the same age.”453 Given the multitude of types of work that now exist, and the fact that most young people today anticipate working in a series of jobs across their lifespan, Millennials (those born between 1980 and the mid-1990s) will have very different experiences of work from their parents. At midlife, their attitudes to work may be quite different from those who are in midlife today.

The institutional church has also undergone significant changes over the past four or five decades, and, just as churchgoers who are currently in midlife have been shaped by the changes that have occurred during their lifetimes, the faith of churchgoers who are not yet in midlife will undoubtedly be affected by changes occurring now. Edmund Gordon, Secretary for Catholic Education and the Director of Religious Education of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware, describes four different generations of adults within the Catholic Church in the United States at present.454 Those currently in midlife include some “Vatican II Catholics,” born between 1946 and 1964, who are portrayed as

having mixed views about authority and institutional commitment but who have, nevertheless, inherited much of their Catholic identity from the pre-Vatican II Catholics so that “the residue of an ethnic Catholic culture persists.”\textsuperscript{455} Some others in midlife are Generation X adults (born between 1964 and 1980). These church members are sometimes called “Christian Catholics” to emphasize “their lack of a strong Catholic identity” and their much looser connection to the institutional Catholic Church. They have had to create their own Catholic identity “out of bits and pieces they find helpful and meaningful.”\textsuperscript{456} Those coming of age now, who have “an even more tenuous relationship to the Catholic Church”\textsuperscript{457} will, in midlife, have a different relationship with the church than those who are in midlife now. It is also interesting to consider whether some of the questions relating to spirituality and personal identity which spiritual directors identified as being of import to middle-aged clients will, in the future, concern those whose spirituality is being formed within a societal context which is very different from that which shaped their parents. One spiritual director, Brian (62), spoke about the “beautiful spirituality” of some young people who are quite disengaged with church but who are very concerned about such things as the environment and inter-faith connections. They are “not as connected to the ritual” of the church as their predecessors, but Brian perceived that questions of “interior integrity” which interested his middle-aged clients were already of concern to younger people. He concluded, “Their midlife might be quite different.” There is scope for future research regarding these issues.

Middle-aged Christians who do not (or no longer) attend church were not interviewed for this project. Comparing and contrasting their experiences with the experiences of those who do attend church regularly would undoubtedly provide further insights into the support that churchgoers receive from their participation in the church.

**Supporting middle-aged Christians in life and faith**

In reflecting on how effectively the needs of midlife churchgoers are being addressed within the church, it may be helpful to recall some of the key points made by midlife

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{456} Ibid., 33. It seems probable that Gordon's comments, based on the situation in the United States of America, also apply within the New Zealand context. It is worth considering the influence that immigration has had on the Catholic Church in New Zealand, however. The “Catholic culture” of a significant proportion of those worshipping in Catholic parishes is shaped by their ethnicity. There is scope for further exploration of this topic.
\textsuperscript{457} Ibid.
interviewees regarding their church involvement. The following list summarises midlife interviewees’ comments about what they valued about church:

• Shared values and beliefs
• Having a sense of community, and of communion, with congregation members and with members of the wider church throughout the world or throughout history
• Several aspects of services of worship, including music and liturgy (of a range of types), teaching connected with life experience, and participation in the Eucharist/communion
• Relationships with trusted clergy
• Care of children and families
• Intergenerational relationships, providing opportunities to give and to receive
• Small groups, whether structured or unstructured, meeting regularly or occasionally, with a social or more explicitly spiritual focus
• Being able to contribute to parish life, using gifts and talents and drawing on life experiences
• Feeling supported when choosing to take on fewer or different responsibilities within the church
• Quiet, prayerful space – churches being open, contemplative services, silence, retreats, time for reflection
• Opportunities to learn and grow through participation in programmes such as marriage and parenting courses, DVD series, and theological education
• Practical and spiritual support at times of difficulty, received from people in leadership and from fellow parishioners
• Counselling, mentoring, or spiritual direction

This list is not exhaustive. Individual interviewees described a number of other ways that clergy and congregations supported them during their midlife journey – one spoke about the deep impact of a “very Christ-focused” form of healing prayer she and a few others in her church had been introduced to by the minister, for example – but the elements listed above were those that were most frequently mentioned by midlife participants, and also by clergy. It is interesting to compare the aspects of church that were valued by participants in this project with results from a survey conducted in an Episcopalian church in California, in 2012, which identified five reasons that people gave
for coming to, or coming back to, church.\textsuperscript{458} People said that they wanted help to find their way on their own spiritual journey; help to give their children a faith foundation to guide their lives; help to pray, worship and serve others; help to be in community and to be welcomed as they are; and support, companionship and care at times of need.\textsuperscript{459} Although these findings arose out of a strategic planning process relating to church growth, they also clearly reflect the needs and aspirations of participants in this project.

Findings from the interviews with churchgoers, clergy and spiritual directors could easily be summarised and synthesised using the five-pronged approach suggested above, or any number of other frameworks, but I would like to suggest that the aspects of church involvement which were perceived by participants to be of the most value in supporting churchgoers’ spiritual formation and personal development in midlife can be thought of in terms of three relationships or “connections.” These are:

1. Connecting with God
2. Connecting with one another
3. Connecting with the world

Discussion of the key findings from this research, and their implications, are grouped below under these three headings. This structure is intended to provide coherence to the material that is presented but it should be evident that it does not reflect the integrated manner in which Christian growth actually occurs. When individuals “connect” or meet with God, in prayer, it is not only their relationship with God but their compassion and concern for other people that is deepened. It is frequently in engaging with others and working in various capacities in society that people’s beliefs and assumptions about themselves, others, and God are challenged, and they grow in dependence upon God. Furthermore, in loving others, and being loved and supported by them, individuals’ appreciation and understanding of God’s love, and their courage and will to serve God, are strengthened.\textsuperscript{460} These things are interconnected.\textsuperscript{461}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{459} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{460} As the prayer book of the Anglican Church in New Zealand so beautifully expresses it: “We pray for one another, for our families and friends, through whom we learn to love and be loved.” A New Zealand Prayer Book: He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1997), 416.
\item \textsuperscript{461} South-West Baptist Church, a very large suburban church in Christchurch, has developed a logo which has a cross in the centre, with Self, God, Each Other and The World at four equidistant points around the cross. Members of the church’s “Life Groups” have access to a series of studies, called “Life Together,”
\end{itemize}
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Openness to God, one another, and the world are all, of course, central elements of Christian spiritual formation, irrespective of a person’s age. The fact that a number of the issues that were identified by participants are also of relevance to churchgoers in other age groups does not diminish their significance for those whose needs and experiences are the focus of this research. Participants in all three groups of interviewees clearly perceived the topics they raised to be of direct relevance to people in midlife, and their particular applicability to churchgoers in their forties and fifties will be highlighted as each is discussed.

**Connecting with God**

Findings from the interviews with churchgoers, clergy and spiritual directors confirmed that, for some Christians, midlife can be a pivotal period of spiritual exploration. Openness to “something more” in the spiritual life was a theme that arose repeatedly in participants’ interviews. Whether the sense that “there must be more to life and/or faith than this” emerged in response to major life events or was experienced as a more nebulous sense of uncertainty, or being “stuck,” many interviewees perceived that some shifts in their beliefs, or in their relationship with God, had occurred in their faith journey at midlife. The fact that churchgoers in midlife are likely to be navigating transitions in life and in faith, and seeking “more” in their spiritual journey, has implications both for church communities and for individuals within the church.

Significant questions about life and faith can arise in midlife, not only in response to external events, but also because of the inner work that is occurring in this life stage. Interviewees in every category considered midlife to be a period of “reflection” and “re-examination,” although some participants spoke at greater length about questions relating to life’s meaning and purpose than others. It was not always easy for interviewees who were in the process of “taking stock” of their lives and circumstances to express what they were going through. Nor was it easy for individuals in midlife to describe changes in their beliefs or in their relationship with God. Karen (Anglican, 52) said, “I am kind of reassessing things or, um, processing things. I just find it hard to describe what’s actually happening. … It’s confusing at times.” Later, she added, “I guess what’s probably frustrating or challenging um – particularly for somebody like me who likes things with no loose ends, nicely sorted and categorised and everything – it’s sort

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of a bit open and uncertain.” Of her faith, Karen said, “In some ways I feel more secure in what I believe, and in other ways I feel less certain.” With respect to faith, Karen's experience was similar to that of a number of other participants. Many of the interviewees who spoke of changes in their faith that had occurred during midlife were conscious that, while there was continuity in their faith journey, some aspects of their faith had become “less black and white.” A few admitted that over time they had reversed their opinions about certain issues. One Presbyterian minister, Greg (62), for example, spoke of his changed perspective on same-sex marriage and his deepening appreciation of matters relating to inclusivity. He felt that he had become “a lot more liberal” in his ministry. Greg described these changes, which had occurred over a period of some years, during midlife, as “very huge” for him.

Few interviewees linked changes in their relationship with God to specific events. At the age of thirty-six Judith (Catholic, 60) had attended a week-long retreat which proved to be a catalyst for disorientation and reorientation in her faith journey. She said, “It felt as though that everything I had ever believed and had known about God had been chucked up in the air and had come down reassembled. ... It was wonderful – and scary.” Judith explained that from that time she started thinking more broadly about God, not in believing things that were “unorthodox,” but that she started seeing God was “far more ...” Judith trailed off, apparently unable to find words for what she hoped to convey. For most interviewees the revision and reshaping of beliefs had occurred over a long period of time, in a manner that was “not necessarily dramatic.” Malcolm (Anglican, 52), for example, said, “I guess in my forties, actually, and now my fifties, um, I am more conscious of the spiritual aspect of life, and what that might mean.” Some interviewees stated that they had reached a point in their faith at midlife which allowed them to be less reliant on the authority of others and more open to different viewpoints or spiritual practices which were new to them. As Raewyn (Presbyterian, 47) put it, “Sometimes I think in my forties I have sort of changed a lot in my approach to Christianity. And I find that the thirty year olds are not really at this stage. ... I don’t know, um, just being more open to, well, possibilities, really. ... It’s hard to express.” The hesitancy with which some midlife interviewees spoke about their faith could, in part, be attributable to the formal interview context, but there was also humility in participants’ unwillingness to sum up “the spiritual aspect of life” too simplistically. In midlife they had come to accept that

462 Raymond Studzinski writes, “The religious quest in the second half of life is not necessarily dramatic. It may simply be a quiet, interior pursuit.” Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 12.
there was so much that they didn’t know. Letting go of “our limited concept of God” is part of “genuine spiritual pilgrimage,”463 as M. Robert Mulholland Jr., professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, points out.

For some midlife interviewees the desire for “something more” in the spiritual life was expressed as a wish to have a better intellectual grasp of the Christian faith or of their own denomination’s practices and teachings. Several of the clergy and midlife participants within the Catholic tradition felt that there was something of a gap in terms of education for those who had been members of the church throughout their lives, with many resources in Catholic education being targeted at primary and secondary schools or towards newcomers to the Catholic faith. One priest, Thomas (54), told me that he would love to see the focus shift from schools. He said, “People think that education in faith is what happens before you’re eighteen, and we have to come to see that education in faith is what has to happen for me every day that I’m walking on earth.” Sally (49) declared herself “still so clueless about everything to do with the Catholic Church” despite having been “born and bred a Catholic. ... Like Franciscans, I didn’t know they were still Catholics.” Sally also felt that she didn’t know her Bible very well. “That’s the sort of thing I would be more interested in,” she said. Bernard (Catholic priest, 52) observed that there was “a new sense of enquiry” among Catholic adults, but considered that, at the time of his interview, the church currently offered “nothing for people looking to re-examine their faith.” That being said, churchgoers from all three denominations who contributed to this research, including Catholic participants, were able to describe ways in which the church was helping them to understand their faith. A number commented on the positive impact of thoughtful sermons and on the usefulness of small group studies or educational DVD series they had attended at church. Nina (Anglican, 43), for example, spoke more than once in her interview about the importance of sermons in helping her to think theologically about life issues. She identified particular sermon topics as being “really relevant to life and really helpful.”

Many of the midlife interviewees, including Nina, had also participated in Bible studies or thematic studies within or beyond their parishes, and approximately a quarter of the midlife interviewees had completed short or long courses in theology at tertiary level. Midlife interviewees were enthusiastic about these experiences, and members of the

463 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 149.
clergy confirmed that at least some of their midlife parishioners had appreciated similar courses and resources that fed their faith.

The interviews with churchgoers, clergy and spiritual directors revealed that middle-aged Christians do not necessarily expect or require their parishes to be the sole context within which they build greater understanding of their faith or church traditions. By midlife, churchgoers are likely to be less dependent on the instruction of clergy or other church leaders than is natural earlier in life. Some midlife churchgoers are themselves church leaders to whom others look for guidance. But churchgoers in their forties and fifties are certainly helped to connect with God when clergy and church leaders are attentive to their specific interests and needs, well informed about resources and courses that are available, and willing to encourage them to pursue independently the forms of learning which are likely to be of benefit to them. It was quite apparent that many of the clergy who were interviewed for this project personally promoted what more than one priest called “theological extension,” either by running educational programmes within their parishes or by approaching individuals and encouraging them to undertake academic study at external institutions. This required time, commitment, and knowledge of parishioners’ abilities and needs – gained through listening to them – as well as current knowledge of relevant opportunities. Midlife interviewees were very appreciative of this kind of guidance. They also acknowledged that they felt some responsibility to be attentive to other parishioners’ needs and willing to offer similar support when appropriate. A number of midlife interviewees were very grateful to have learned a great deal about their faith from older members of their congregations, and to have been supported by them in word, prayer and deed. In the next section, more will be said about the importance of mentoring within congregations.

Many midlife churchgoers who are seeking deeper understanding of their faith may neither have the time nor the inclination to meet with another individual or a group. One spiritual director, Matthew (61), noted that while some of his midlife directees do attend courses, it usually because they have other reasons for doing so, such as training for ministry or, if they are already in ministry, because they are doing continuing education.

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464 It is not always easy for clergy to keep abreast of these. Andrew Dunn, a minister writing for Candour, a magazine for ministers within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, points out that spiritual directors can be “invaluable in assisting with resources for the journey” as they are often very well resourced, keeping up “a regular intake of books, articles, courses, tapes of speakers, visiting speakers, retreats, and their own growth in Christ.” Andrew Dunn, “Spiritual Direction,” Candour: News and Views for Ministers (February 2011): 18.
For his other directees in this age group, “What would be more common is that they would value suggestions of a reading so that they can do their own personal study, rather than do something formal.” Some parishes have libraries, and a number of churchgoers mentioned these during their interviews. Some ministers and priests use blogs to reflect on their own reading and thinking about Christianity, providing reviews of books and internet links for parishioners to follow.\footnote{Alan Jamieson is the pastor of South West Baptist Church in Christchurch. His blog frequently includes reflections on reading and resources. Such sites can have widespread influence. “AJ’s Blog,” South West Baptist Church, <https://www.swbc.org.nz/about-us/blogs/ajs-blog/> (18 May 2017).} Others upload sermons, as written files or podcasts, onto church websites. Such resources can be particularly helpful to those in midlife who have caregiving responsibilities, demanding roles at work, or other time-consuming commitments which have an impact on their ability to attend church services, or other courses or events, with any degree of regularity. Gail (Anglican, 41), a mother of two young children, told me that in this busy period of her life she “struggled” to attend a small group she was part of at church, and noted that “sometimes sitting down and reading can feel like a bit of a luxury.” Nevertheless, at various times she and her husband had both borrowed books from her church’s library, and had found them helpful. (During Gail’s interview Philip Yancey’s \textit{What Good is God? In Search of a Faith that Matters}\footnote{“The Perennial Gen: Growing Deeper Roots in the Dirt and Light of Midlife” is a website which invites readers and contributors to reflect on midlife themes. The midlife themes chosen for the latter half of 2017 are Friendships, Empty nesting, Vocation shifts, Health issues, Relationships with adult children, and Holidays – traditions, adjustments as family structure changes, memories. <http://theperennialgen.com> (12 June 2017). “Spirited Exchanges” provides “resources, support and connection with like minded others for people who sense their faith is changing and their relationship with church is being renegotiated.” New material is no longer being added to this site, but existing resources and links are still accessible. <http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz/page/3/whoweare.boss> (18 May 2017).}\footnote{New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013.} lay on a table in her living room.) For Christians who are grappling with midlife issues, or struggling to express doubts or ask hard questions at church, too, books, on-line resources and podcasts can be useful.\footnote{467} There were individuals from all three groups of interviewees whose focus was on experiential rather than rational knowledge; their desire was not to know more about God, but to know God more. For these people, a significant part of “connecting with God” during the midlife journey had been to explore different forms of prayer and worship. For some participants, this had involved changing denomination. Five of the forty participants had changed denominations at midlife, sometimes after a period of considerable struggle. Some other interviewees had not changed their primary church affiliation but had sought opportunities to connect with God in different ways by attending more than one church, or by attending different types of services within their
own parishes. There was evidence that beyond the formal services, liturgies, and sacraments of the church exposure to established spiritual disciplines – such as journalling, meditation, and a variety of types of prayer – helped some people in midlife as they explored ways to deepen their relationship with God. Ian (Presbyterian, 41) said, “I have come to really value and appreciate input from other people into how I spend my time with God.”

Matthew (spiritual director, 61) observed that some of his directees in midlife have benefited from finding “a framework that’s got some long-tested wisdom to it.” Ignatian spirituality is an example of one such framework. It is very easy to locate resources relating to Ignatian spirituality, with on-line versions of The Spiritual Exercises available to support people in prayer, and accessible guides to key themes in Ignatian spirituality being published on-line and in print regularly. With its focus on Biblical narratives and deepening relationship with Jesus through imaginative prayer rather than reason alone, its emphasis on “finding God in all things,” its practical teaching on discernment, and the scope for individuality within the clear structure of The Spiritual Exercises, Ignatian spirituality has broad and enduring appeal. It may also have resonance for middle-aged Christians today, regardless of their denomination. The prayer of Examen, which Ignatius of Loyola considered to be a tool of such value that he insisted that Jesuits pray it twice daily, encourages attentiveness and gratitude to God as well as consciousness of areas of life that still require transformation. As some of the spiritual directors who were interviewed for this project suggested, this “simple life-changing prayer” may be particularly helpful to Christians in midlife. People in their forties and fifties are frequently juggling many responsibilities and responding to many external pressures; the prayer of Examen provides a structure within which the person praying can reflect on all that has happened over the course of a day, and look ahead to


471 The Ignatian emphasis on imaginative prayer – on experiential as well as rational knowledge – seems likely to be helpful for people shaped by postmodernism. This is another topic which is well worth exploring further in future writing, but lies outside the bounds of the current project.

472 Manney, A Simple Life-Changing Prayer.
the next day, in the presence of God. Joanna Collicutt notes, “This pattern of anticipating in advance and reflection in retrospect (holy savouring) is a feature of the corporate daily prayers of all traditions.”

Introducing churchgoers to resources such as these may be extremely beneficial to some Christians in midlife.

It was evident from interviews with participants from all three categories that some middle-aged Christians enjoy exploring a variety of traditional spiritual practices as they seek to connect with God in different ways. Some begin to find renewed comfort in the familiar formal prayers of their own faith traditions. Others find praying the Psalms becomes a more meaningful practice. I asked Bernard (Catholic priest, 52) if he could tell me about forms of prayer that he considered particularly helpful for people in midlife, and how these are encouraged in the church. He described his own experience of prayer, explaining that priests follow the daily office, and that is a discipline that doesn’t change with age. But, Bernard added, the plaintive, melancholic psalms “do start to resonate more.” He said:

When you read them as a young person you thought, “Come on, get a life!” [We both laugh.] When you read them now you think, “Oh, yeah, they’re talking about me! I can just feel the Psalmist articulating my own thoughts. Thank you, Lord.” But that discipline [of following the daily office] stays the same.

Bernard said that, for priests, the sense of “holy repetition” of saying the daily office and daily saying the mass is important. He said, “The words gain a new significance, depth and resonance.” He then described further changes that had occurred in his own prayer during midlife:

I hope my prayer – I think it is – is becoming less active, more passive, more receptive, quieter, less noisy. I feel less a need to articulate my hopes and fears, desires and longings, and more a desire just for the Lord to come. ... So in fact the spiritual work becomes not trying to press on the Lord what I think he should know but in fact a sort of clearing of the decks so that the Lord can enter – because he longs to, and I provide the obstacles. I think you get better at that. ... Can you get “better” at prayer? I don’t know. That’s not quite right. You don’t get better at it. You get worse at it in a way! [He laughs.] And you recognise how bad you are at it. That’s what happens.

Jeannette Bakke, who is both a spiritual director and a faculty associate at Bethel Theological Seminary, Minnesota, observes, “At some point highly verbal prayer ceases

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to be as satisfying as it once was.”\textsuperscript{474} Matthew (spiritual director, 61) described his midlife directees’ preferred forms of prayer as moving “away from kataphatic to apophatic\textsuperscript{475} ways of doing things. So it’s less about what they’re doing and more just about surrender and silence.” James (spiritual director, 57) told me that, for himself, discovering the contemplative dimension of faith has been a “hugely significant part of deepening and encountering Christ in a radically more real and personal way, in the depths of being.” Some Christians are more drawn to these forms of prayer than others, but it is certainly more common for people to be attracted to “less noisy” prayer in mid to later life than in early adulthood.

Some churches place greater emphasis on supporting parishioners as they explore and practise personal spiritual disciplines than others. In some, small groups play an important role in encouraging close reading and discussion of Scripture. Some Anglican and Catholic parishes offer retreats in daily life, particularly during Lent or Advent, and, in these contexts, people who hunger for more in their relationship with God may be accompanied by another mature Christian as they explore unfamiliar forms of prayer. Retreats of this type sometimes provide churchgoers with their first introduction to the ministry of spiritual direction. This was the case for Nina (Anglican, 43), who told me she had “absolutely loved” attending spiritual direction in her early-to-mid thirties for a couple of years, once a month, finding it very helpful to have someone who would “walk alongside” and pray with her. Nina said, “It helped to nourish me, and yeah, build my confidence, I guess, in my own walk.”

There is a growing sense in some churches that more mature Christians could benefit from similar support. In response to the “upsurge in people seeking spiritual formation and desiring to discover a deeper meaning in their daily lives” the Catholic Diocese of Christchurch has recently established a group called “\textit{Whakakoingo o te Ngakau: The Yearning Heart},”\textsuperscript{476} which includes both trained spiritual directors and retreat leaders. The intention is that members of this group will continue to offer retreats in daily life within parishes and will also be able to encourage and enable more lay people to access


\textsuperscript{475} In the kataphatic tradition, words and images are used in prayer, whereas the apophatic tradition is a way of prayer, of being present with God, without images or words. Frederick G. McLeod, “Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?” <http://opcentral.org/resources/2015/01/13/frederick-g-mcleod-apophatic-or-kataphatic-prayer/> (29 February 2016).

spiritual direction. One Catholic spiritual director, Julie (60) explained the significance of this development:

For a long time, particularly in the Catholic Church, if you ever had a problem you’d go to Father, to the confessional, or to whatever ... so it’s taken quite a shift for people to realise that lay people can be trained, and experienced, but, not only that, really called to this work and serious in their faith. And that, you know, everyone has that invitation, [it] is there for everybody, to have a deep relationship with God. It’s not only for professed and religious.

Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), which is an ecumenical group, also promotes and facilitates regional retreats and offers training for spiritual directors throughout New Zealand. Its stated aim is “to enable people to develop spiritual resources for their life and work by deepening their relationship with God in Jesus Christ through spiritual direction, formation of spiritual directors, retreats and other experiences of prayer.”

Interviews with midlife participants confirmed, however, that the ministry of spiritual direction is not widely known, nor very well understood. Tony (spiritual director, 56) felt that spiritual direction somehow needs to be “normalised” so that people can say “of course” they are attending spiritual direction:

The more ministers, pastors and priests that have experienced it, the more likely they are to talk freely about it, and to offer it, or train for it, or encourage it, really, in their second or third level leaders, and so on, and just ordinary folk of the churches. That would be wonderful. ... If it’s seen as part of discipleship for people who’ve been around for a while then ... I think that would benefit a lot.

Many Christians “who’ve been around for a while” – namely, those who are in midlife, or older – obviously enjoy exploring new ways of connecting with God, and find it very helpful to be able to speak in confidence about their spiritual journey with another person as they do so. Spiritual direction does not appeal to everyone, as several interviewees indicated. Grant (Presbyterian, 55) said, “It’s not part of my make-up really.” On the other hand, Linda (Anglican, 58) declared spiritual direction to be “vital,” saying of her work in the church, “I could not do the job without it.” Between these two positions, a number of the midlife participants who had some experience of spiritual direction considered that this had been very useful at certain points in their lives, such as during periods of significant change, but not something they felt they needed to make time to fit in on an ongoing basis. If churchgoers are informed about this form of

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support, and able to access it, some may choose to avail themselves of it during times of transition, including during the life and faith transitions that are common in midlife.

People who were interviewed for this project frequently described having a sense of God’s presence as they engaged in quite ordinary pursuits. Several interviewees also described encountering God in creation. One midlife interviewee, Malcolm (Anglican, 52), said that he used to spend Sunday mornings cycling up in the hills away from the city where he lives. He said, “I’d go up and speak to God there.” Malcolm described road cycling as “quite a meditative thing to do. Working at a steady pace, in a beautiful environment, exposed to the elements, just with your own thoughts … I found that very, you know, good for other than physical reasons. It’s so beautiful up there.” Gail (Anglican, 41) found listening to worship music at home “a very powerful way” of connecting with God, especially when her children were very young and most of her time at church was spent out in the crèche. When a friend lent her a worship CD, during that period, “It was just amazing.” Other midlife interviewees, from a wide range of church types, spoke of restorative moments with God found in quiet places, including quiet churches. They also described becoming more attentive to God, and appreciative of God’s goodness, in “the little things in life” (Simon, Presbyterian, 48). As was noted earlier, a sense of gratitude for all the good gifts “that God’s created and given us the opportunity to experience,” as Simon put it, permeated many of the interviews. The image of Keith (Catholic, 47) sitting on his back deck with a cup of coffee, overlooking his veggie garden, feeling acutely conscious of the goodness of his life, epitomises this experience. Due to the aims of this research, the interview questions directed midlife participants to focus on the church’s role in nurturing their faith. This narrow focus was in some respects regrettable, as many beautiful stories of individuals’ awareness of God in daily life were communicated somewhat as asides. If churches and small groups can develop a culture where experiences of connecting with God are more openly spoken of – so that within the family of God it is more common to share and reflect on what Barry and Connolly call “the religious dimension of experience”478 – the faith of all would be further enriched. The church has a role in affirming and validating people’s sense of the “spiritual” in daily life.

The middle-aged interviewees who contributed to this project stated that they received helpful spiritual support from the church, but interviewees (from all three groups of

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participants) also felt that more opportunities for mature Christians to be extended in their understanding of their faith and to deepen in their relationship with God could be provided within parishes. As Grant (Presbyterian, 55) put it, in the church there can be “that gap in the middle” where people can “drift round a bit.” Given that so many participants expressed a deep desire to connect with God at both “head” and “heart” level, and that clergy and spiritual directors also identified that a hunger for “something more” is characteristic of many Christians’ faith experience in this life stage, it seems that the church could be more proactive about offering timely spiritual support to middle-aged churchgoers. Having said this, interviewees’ comments also revealed that, by midlife, long-standing church members are usually willing to assume greater responsibility for their own spiritual development and will frequently seek out for themselves the types of nurture and opportunities for growth they feel led by God to explore.

**Connecting with one another**

People in midlife have social, pastoral and spiritual needs which can be addressed when relational depth is fostered within congregations. While it may seem of most importance for churches to focus on the spiritual needs of their members, it is both necessary and appropriate that parishes should consider the social and pastoral needs of their middle-aged members and seek to address these also. As Jesus identified “love for one another” as the quality by which others would identify his followers (John 13:34-35), the building of close bonds between members of the church is not incidental to Christian discipleship but integral to it. Whether social, pastoral or spiritual concerns are the primary focus of any event or gathering, whenever churches support opportunities for people to build authentic relationships with one another, multiple needs will be addressed. Social gatherings can provide a foundation for friendships that become a significant source of stability and hope during times of challenge or crisis. Individuals who are struggling to cope with unwelcome change, or who are finding it hard to hold on to faith in the midst of some of the “big life experiences” that often arise in midlife, are much more likely to speak openly about these things to a person with whom they have already established a trusting relationship. Experiencing the love and care of other Christians when life is

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479 Tony (spiritual director, 56) identified, as “big life experiences” that often occur around midlife, marital or relationship difficulties, divorce, death, redundancy, and illness (specifically cancer) of oneself or a partner.
easy and when life is hard builds confidence, not only in them, but also in “the deep, deep love of Jesus.”

Social occasions “where people can actually have a bit of fun” (advocated by Murray, Anglican, 44) can be of value to people during this stage of life if, of course, they can make time to participate in them. Interview findings confirmed that some people in their forties and fifties can be under a great deal of pressure as they attempt to juggle competing commitments. Some people who are feeling over-stretched may choose to withdraw from involvement in church activities. Kristin Aune, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Derby, focuses on women’s busyness when she observes, “Something has to give, and often this is Church.” But many church members may be glad to attend events that are intended to help them simply to relax with others and be refreshed. In post-earthquake Christchurch, social events have been essential for the well-being of individuals, families, and church communities, particularly in cases where church buildings have been demolished and/or amalgamation of parishes has occurred at pace and under less than ideal circumstances. Phil (Catholic, 53), reflecting on the destruction of his church, his home, and his daughters’ school, and on his family’s sudden relocation to a different suburb, commented, “The social side of it’s been pretty devastating.” Rather than attending a church in their new suburb, Phil’s family travels some distance to maintain ties with Christian friends they have known for many years. Their church has worked hard to provide activities to build relationships and to create unity between members of two congregations that have merged. Phil said, “Now it doesn’t even need to happen. People are just part of the parish. It’s taken four or five years.”

Opportunities to connect with others can be particularly important to midlife churchgoers, as it is not uncommon for people to find themselves rather lonely in this stage of life. Sung-ho (Presbyterian minister, 53) pointed out that people in midlife “need more friends.” Another Presbyterian minister, Don (52), also identified “that

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480 The lyrics of the hymn, “O the deep, deep love of Jesus,” were written by Samuel Trevor Francis, in 1875. The hymn is commonly set to the tune “Ebeneser” by Thomas J. Williams.

481 Aune writes, “Various pieces of research suggest a pattern in women’s Christian journeys. ‘Home-centred women’ tend to stay committed to the Church, as the activities churches offer women (mother-and-toddler groups, for instance) fit around their lives, and provide them with social support. ‘Career women’ (in full-time employment) are least likely to be (or to stay) committed church members, primarily because they do not have time. A third group, the ‘jugglers’ (women combining part-time work with family life), may stay involved with churches, but are increasingly taking up alternative forms of spirituality, such as yoga, reiki, or healing groups, especially in middle age.” “Why Women Don’t Do Church Any More,” Church Times, 20 August 2008, <http://test.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2008/22-august/comment/why-women-don-t-do-church-any-more> (8 June 2017).
lontheliness thing” as an issue for some middle-aged people, “particularly for those who are single” but also for couples who are childless or whose children have left home. As the nest empties, parents can find that networks of support that had revolved around the common interests and needs of their children are lost, and it can be hard to maintain friendships or to establish new ones during this period of transition. Middle-aged men commonly have fewer social networks outside work than women, but in later midlife, as they move toward retirement, friendships can become a higher priority. As Janet Ruffing notes, “Older adults as compared to emerging adults place more emphasis on relationship and communion while younger adults are more concerned about their ability to act in the world.” George Vaillant also suggests that as people’s focus on achievement declines the need for community and affiliation increases. A number of clergy commented on these transitions and the place of the church in providing support for people to cope with them. Sandra (Anglican priest, 58) identified a range of social activities offered over a number of years in her parish that middle-aged male parishioners had appreciated. She felt it was particularly important to ensure that men have opportunities to mix socially because men may not have that much “talk-time” with their colleagues, and they need a place to “unwind and sound off if they need to, or encourage each other.” Another ordained minister, who was working in a role outside a parish, expressed the view that informal settings “where people are actually given space to talk about stuff, rather than to be talked at” are most helpful for people in midlife. Both male and female interviewees spoke appreciatively about opportunities for social interaction offered within their churches. These included Passionist Family Groups, church camps, coffee groups, working bees, film evenings, and even a church ukulele group. Many congregations are clearly very good at facilitating opportunities for parishioners to mix socially, whether or not they are particularly conscious of the potential benefits for their middle-aged members.

It was quite evident from participants’ comments that churchgoers in midlife frequently receive pastoral care within their church communities in social contexts as well as in environments that are more directly and explicitly focused on individuals’ concerns. A number of midlife participants spoke about the formal pastoral care networks that

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485 Interview with author, Christchurch, 30 November 2015.
existed in their parishes. A number felt that people in their own age group were generally just left “to their own devices” (Karen, 52) unless obvious crises arose. Some members of the clergy acknowledged that it can require creativity to offer meaningful support to people in midlife. Liz (Anglican priest, 55) told me that, in her experience, traditional models of pastoral care, such as home visits, do not always work so well for people in this age group. In this stage of life people are busy, their needs are diverse, and, unlike those who are older, they tend to prefer time-bound needs-focused meetings with clergy. Furthermore, as many participants pointed out, clergy and pastoral team members are often stretched in terms of what they can do to support parishioners, and people in their forties and fifties may also be reluctant to ask for help. This reluctance is clearly partly attributable to the fact that middle-aged churchgoers often feel that others’ needs should take precedence over their own. Several midlife interviewees expressed the opinion that the needs of children and youth and the needs of the elderly should be regarded as a higher priority within parishes. This belief may have been reinforced by individuals’ experiences of their parishes’ practices and ministry priorities.

Sandra (Anglican priest, 58) suggested that an effective way to extend pastoral care to people in midlife is to establish “a culture of trying to connect people through meals or coffees, or things like that.” Sandra contended that people in this stage of life “just need a lot of listening time and encouragement,” and this statement was borne out by countless comments made by interviewees, and by the interview process itself. Participants clearly appreciated being able to speak about their life experiences, despite the fact that, in the context of the research interviews, they received little encouragement or feedback other than follow-up questions and the interviewer’s genuine interest in what they were saying. It is easy to underestimate the importance of “listening time” as pastoral care. Thomas Hart, who teaches theology at Seattle University and is a therapist in private practice, writes, “There is probably no service we can render other persons quite as great or important as to be a listener and receiver to them in those moments when they need to open their hearts and tell someone their story.” To be able to talk about the frustrations and anxieties of parenting, or the sense of inadequacy and grief that may be part of caring for a sick spouse or a frail parent, or the pressures of work, or other concerns that are common in midlife, can be of inestimable value to a person carrying heavy burdens. People also appreciate being able to share moments of joy and discovery.

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and achievement. Debbie (Catholic, 51) explained, “All of the questions to do with the big changes in our lives, when you can talk to someone else about it – it helps.”

Conversations held over a cup of tea, while serving on a stall at a church fair, or while standing round a barbecue, can fulfill a far more important function than may at first be apparent. Bonds between parishioners, established and sustained within and beyond the organized activities offered by the church, are essential to people’s sense of connection with the church and to their sense of being cared for within the family of God. When Grant (Presbyterian, 55) said the Sunday morning set-up team he was part of at church was “like a men’s support group” he laughed, but it was clear that, having come to know each other very well as a by-product of their weekly work together, the men in this team had indeed formed close and trusting relationships. The confidence that Phil (Catholic, 53) expressed, that when people in the church were “in strife” members of the congregation would rally round to support them, was based on the assumption – and his experience – that this is how the church works. The whole community thus participates in pastoral care.

Connections between people within congregations can also be very significant in fostering spiritual growth. Many churches understand the value of mentoring within congregations, and some parishes have formal mentoring programmes within which intergenerational relationships are nurtured. The focus of these programmes is almost always on the needs of younger members. Churchgoers in midlife, who are often called on to offer guidance and encouragement, can find it very fulfilling to be able to “give back” to others in these contexts, as the interviews revealed. Phil, for example, felt that he and his wife were “actually doing something really amazing” in being mentors in a marriage preparation group. He said, “As we go on, we become that couple that were mentors to us, you know, when we were younger. ... We’re going to be them, in ten or twenty years, or a bit longer. It’s so cool.” Daniel Levinson, whose work on development in adult life has been so influential, claims, “Good mentoring is one of the special contributions that persons in middle adulthood can make to society.” But, he adds, “Given the value that mentoring has for the mentor, the recipient and society at large, it is tragic that so little of it actually occurs.”

There is certainly some scope for parishes to reflect on the capacity of their middle-aged members to play a more active role in mentoring others. It could be, as was the case in more than one interviewees’ parish,

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that the mentoring relationship has no explicitly religious component but simply involves teaching a younger person a new skill. Martin Macaulay, minister of East Taieri Presbyterian Church, Mosgiel, writes:

I believe life-on-life interactions are crucial in discipleship because of the nature of the truth we are seeking to pass on to others. A Christian disciple is not someone who simply understands and gives assent to doctrinal statements. ... When we are discipled we experience another dimension to learning that is beyond reading a book.\textsuperscript{488}

The relationships that may be forged between people of different ages, through multiple and varied interactions, may be of great value to both parties.

People in their forties and fifties commonly have a need and desire to be generative but they also need the encouragement and example of older and wiser counsellors and friends to support them as they continue their own journey of personal development and spiritual formation. Debbie (Catholic, 51) was one of a number of interviewees who stated that while it can be wonderful to have opportunities to act as mentors to others people in midlife also need to have “people who are further along” to support them. She said, “We need both in our lives. We need people we look to and respect and admire, and those who we encourage.” As it transpired, this theme emerged strongly in many interviews with the churchgoers in midlife. The importance of mentors in helping mature Christians to continue to grow in the understanding and practice of their faith – whether those mentors have received training or are simply people within congregations whose wisdom is recognised and valued by others – is supported by research from overseas as well as from comments made by participants in this project. When results from a qualitative study of the ministries and programmes of one of the most influential churches in the United States of America, Willow Creek Community Church, were released in 2007, church leaders were dismayed to find that nearly twenty-five percent of its members described themselves as “stalled” in their spiritual growth or “dissatisfied” with what the church was doing to help them grow.\textsuperscript{489} The data from the study suggested that the programmes offered by the church were not addressing the needs of “mature believers” who needed guidance in how to become “self


feeders.” These church members wanted mentors or coaches who could support their spiritual development, and to whom they could be accountable. More recently, author Michelle Van Loon asked readers of her blog who were over the age of forty if they were more, less, or just as involved in their local church as they had been a decade earlier. Van Loon received feedback from over 500 middle-aged and retired people that revealed that “there’s often a discipleship gap for older members.” She writes, “Anecdotally, most of the church leaders I’m in touch with admit they haven’t given much thought to what discipleship might look like for their older members (especially women) beyond maintaining the spiritual growth from their youth.” As a result, people in midlife, who need support and encouragement as they journey through later stages of faith, can often feel “marginalized both as disciples and disciplers.” These findings are echoed in comments made by some participants in the present project.

Many of the New Zealand churchgoers who were interviewed spoke of clergy, small group leaders and members, and “spiritual friends” who actively supported them in their faith journey at midlife. These relationships were indeed formative for them. In some cases participants described relationships within which accountability played a part. Raewyn (Presbyterian, 47), for example, who had received mentoring from a female minister, said, “I do find that it really is quite grounding to have a wiser person to talk to.” She expanded on her response, saying, “She’s good because, like, she challenges me if she thinks I’m being, you know, stupid.” Raewyn laughed, then added, “She doesn’t say that, but you know! ... It’s good. I appreciate that.” Other midlife interviewees expressed deep gratitude for the wisdom and guidance they received from older parishioners. It was striking that a number of the middle-aged women who contributed to this project found valued encouragement in their spiritual journeys from older women. Alison (Presbyterian, 59) expressed deep gratitude for the support of an elderly parishioner with whom she had prayed regularly for almost a decade. Alison also considered her prayer partner’s husband to be a supportive, prayerful friend. Alison said:

493 Ibid., 1.
494 Ibid., 2.
This person, she’s older than me and like, you know, they’re the saints of the church. Her husband was an elder and they’ve been there, done that, got the T-shirt. They’re just the most wonderful people. ... Sometimes it just all gets too much, and I’m the only person that knows the Lord in my family now, and ... they are rocks, absolute rocks.

Nina (Anglican, 43), spoke about the influence of an elderly woman she had met at church, with whom she had spent a lot of time. Her eighty-six year old friend, who is an avid reader, had given Nina books such as commentaries and study Bibles; Nina told me how grateful she was that she has been exposed to good authors. (She mentioned Tom Wright, Richard Rohr and Henri Nouwen.) The same friend had also introduced Nina to retreats. Nina said, “So she’s sort of opened a new world for me. ... She’s opened a new doorway which is quite different to what happens at church.” In return, Nina has shared YouTube clips with her friend – of authors speaking, for example – and her friend “just loved it.” Nina told me that she feels very blessed to have this relationship, but her friend says that she feels it is the other way round. Nina’s friend enjoys hearing about what is happening in the workplace and in the world, now that she has retired, and she has been very supportive when Nina has been dealing with workplace issues such as restructuring. She has prayed with her. It’s “been very lovely,” concluded Nina.

Relationships that help individuals grow in Christlikeness are important throughout the whole of life. It is a particular blessing when connections of this kind arise naturally between people within congregations – these can be a source of grace and joy to those involved – but most churches could be more proactive about providing contexts within which intergenerational relationships focused on the spiritual life might be developed. Some interviewees advocated establishing formal mentoring relationships within congregations. Sung-ho (Presbyterian minister, 53) pointed out that such mentoring is not just a casual conversation, but is intentional. It is not hierarchical, but it is respectful. As he put it, “Mentor means some kind of respect ... and expecting God’s guidance through sharing.” Sung-ho added, “Mentorship is a very, very important part of Christian life.” Both Sung-ho and James (spiritual director, 57) pointed out, however, that not all older Christians have the breadth or depth of faith experience to be well equipped to support others in their faith journey. James spoke of the scarcity of older people within his parish “who have done the deep journey.” He has sought to address the discipleship gap in his church by establishing a mentoring system based on Jesus’ model of working with twelve disciples. Louisa (spiritual director, 66) also suggested that groups could play a significant role in supporting spiritual development for those in midlife. She felt
that there could be a place for small groups that are willing to encourage “almost in-your-face accountability” by posing very direct questions, as John Wesley did when he opened meetings by asking, “How is it with your soul?” Louisa considered “those kinds of questions that we don’t ask so directly now but can get to the very heart of the matter” to be very constructive. She also suggested that some materials published by Renovaré⁴⁹⁵ could be helpful in supporting this model of discipleship in a group context. The potential benefits of closing the “discipleship gap” for mature Christians are significant, as interviews with participants in this project illustrated.

It is a challenge for churches to provide such nurture to individuals throughout all stages of life and faith that every member feels that he or she has opportunities to contribute and to be supported, emotionally, practically, and spiritually. Failure to ensure that people feel included, connected with others and valued within the church can cause individuals to become discouraged and disengaged, as a few interviewees pointed out. One midlife participant, Michelle (Catholic, 58), admitted that sometimes she feels “disappointed with church” because of its hierarchical nature. Michelle stated that she did not feel very well supported by the church because women are not acknowledged enough, and there is insufficient opportunity for women to make decisions or for women’s voices to be heard, even on issues like the use of exclusive language. Michelle said that sometimes she thinks, “You’re not representing me here.” She went on, “I can look beyond that – I know it’s important to look beyond that – but occasionally, if you’re just feeling a bit down-to-it, that sort of thing can really grate. ... I just think we’ve got a long way to go.” The issue of exclusion, and the use of exclusive language, was also raised by a Presbyterian participant, Alison (59), who felt that her parish was not yet as sensitive as it could be about language and events which unintentionally excluded people who were not married or part of families. Alison was widowed at the age of forty-one. She found the church, as an institution, to be “family orientated” and “couples focused.” Alison provided some examples of issues raised by mature single women in her parish, who told her, “We just don’t like going to the church picnic. It’s all people sitting together and we don’t know what to do. And we won’t go on church camp because it’s the same thing. It’s all family-focused activities and we don’t feel like we can participate in that.” Alison felt that she had been able to make a difference within her parish by establishing a supportive social group for single women, and also by helping

⁴⁹⁵ Renovaré is an organisation that was founded in 1988 by Richard J. Foster, author of Celebration of Discipline (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), among other titles. <https://renovare.org/groups> (13 June 2017).
members of the church leadership team to better understand the experience of those who come to church alone. Her church has recently started a group for new families that have joined the parish, “but they’ve never thought to do that for anyone else,” Alison pointed out. She has been able to raise examples such as these with her church’s leadership team, so that those who are single are not inadvertently excluded. Although issues relating to exclusion do not relate only to those in midlife, they certainly affect people in this age group.

**Connecting with the world**

Mindful of the truth that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas 2:17), the church rightly places a great deal of emphasis on acts of service. Christians who desire to cooperate with God’s work in the world can find abundant opportunities to serve in their local neighbourhoods or to engage with global issues through their congregations and in a wide range of community groups and mission organisations. In addition, most Christians have opportunities to serve others in many ways on an informal basis within their families, workplaces and communities. As the interviews revealed, many churchgoers in their forties and fifties feel enriched when they are able to be involved in established Christian ministries, or can offer their vision and energy to launching new ones. In addition to working in many capacities within their parishes, interviewees spoke of assisting with fundraising for other organisations, serving on school boards of trustees, cooking meals at the City Mission, and actively supporting food banks and charitable second-hand shops. Two interviewees spoke of their commitment to the “prophetic role” of the church. One described his involvement in “low level politics” in the community, and another was actively involved in working with the church to speak out about certain issues, such as euthanasia. Participants also described mowing lawns and doing odd jobs for neighbours, providing transport for acquaintances who needed to attend appointments, cooking and serving food at neighbourhood events, supporting children’s music programmes, and completing maintenance projects in schools. It was quite evident from participants’ comments that, in midlife, many churchgoers find fulfilment in responding to the needs of people outside the church by exercising their gifts and “playing to their strengths.” One midlife interviewee, Keith (Catholic, 47), described volunteering his time as “a stimulant.”

A number of participants relished opportunities to use their professional qualifications and skills developed over many years at work by freely offering to help people in their
own time. Murray (Anglican, 44) thought it was great that he could “contribute towards the community” by using his experience as an electrician. He said, “I love going out and helping people. ... If anyone’s stuck, electrically, they’ve only got to ask me and I’ll go and help.” Others regarded the employment they were engaged in throughout the working week as a key way in which they connected with the world and were able to serve others. It was very clear that, for the majority of churchgoers who were interviewed, and also for the middle-aged clergy who contributed to this project, people’s sense of identity and purpose was linked to their work. Many of the participants had spent some time reflecting on their work and, in their interviews, described shifts in their attitude to their work over time. Several interviewees had difficult choices to make as they contemplated their ability or willingness to continue in their present occupations, and thought about the time left remaining to accomplish goals as far as their work was concerned. Other midlife interviewees were enjoying greater autonomy at work than they had experienced earlier in life; several stated that they felt more excited about their work than had ever been the case before.

The challenge for the church is, as some interviewees acknowledged, to “value and honour” the work that parishioners do during the week (whether it is paid, unpaid or voluntary), to encourage and equip Christians to think theologically about their work, and to help them bring their beliefs and values to bear on issues and opportunities that may arise in the context of work. If the topic of work is rarely addressed at church, the secular notion that work and spirituality have little to do with one another is reinforced. It can also be problematic if churches expressly value the work of those serving in explicitly Christian contexts but seldom acknowledge the work of other parishioners. Nina (Anglican 43) pointed out that some Christians may unwittingly accept a hierarchy of various jobs’ importance in the kingdom of God, but when congregations affirm the value of everyone’s work it is “supportive of all of us once we go back out into the workplace.” Members of many congregations may in fact know very little about what other parishioners do during the week. Murray (Anglican, 44), who was so enthusiastic about supporting others by using his skills as an electrician, felt that there were a lot of other people within his parish with a range of professional backgrounds and work skills but “most people don’t cotton on to what other people do ... and what they can contribute.” He felt that this was a missed opportunity, both for the workers themselves and for those they had the potential to assist. Several interviewees suggested that fruitful discussions about work could be held within existing small groups at church, or
that parishioners working in similar fields could be encouraged to meet together occasionally to talk about ethical issues relating to their occupations or simply to share the peaks and troughs of their work experiences with other Christians.496 Others considered that prayers for people in various occupations could easily be incorporated into church services on a regular basis. One interviewee, Tony (spiritual director, 56), expressed gratitude for the fact that his professional role had been acknowledged in a church service; he felt blessed to know that there were congregation members upholding his work in prayer. This had not been the case in his previous parish, and the lack of connection between his work and worship on Sundays was a factor in his decision to move to a different denomination. Nina (Anglican, 43) was sufficiently interested in the connection between faith and work to have read books on the subject, and, among other works, identified Timothy Keller's *Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God’s Plan for the World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014) and Alistair Mackenzie and Wayne Kirkland's *Where's God on Monday? Integrating Faith and Work Every Day of the Week* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003) as useful texts. Given the wealth of resources on these issues, including the rich heritage of reflection on the themes of work and vocation which exists within the church, it would not be difficult for clergy and congregations to be more proactive about acknowledging and responding to the importance of work in people’s lives.497 This would certainly be useful to churchgoers in midlife.

Interviewees from all three participant groups expressed concern about a range of work-related pressures that may be experienced by people in their forties and fifties. Within any congregation, at any time, some middle-aged parishioners are likely to be making the transition back into paid work after years of caregiving. Those who have been in paid employment for some time may be feeling stuck in a rut and/or looking for more meaningful work, while some may be facing restructuring or redundancy. Some people in this age group might be seeking to reduce their work hours as they move toward retirement. Others in middle age may be flourishing in fulfilling positions within their workplaces or managing their own businesses; such roles can also have their challenges. A number of interviewees spoke of the costs to health and wellbeing if work

496 In such contexts, an open-ended question such as, “How do you think that being a Christian makes a difference to how you think about [X]?” may be a sufficient catalyst for constructive discussion. Justin Denholm, *Talking about Ethics: Negotiating the Maze* (Brunswick East, VIC: Acorn Press, 2011), 42.

497 Discussion of the Catholic teaching relating to “Human Work” as explained in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 134-164, for example, could be provocative and very fruitful.
is too demanding, physically or emotionally, or if a manageable balance between work and other priorities cannot be maintained. It was not surprising that for some interviewees finding an appropriate balance between the demands of paid work and care of families was an issue, particularly for those who had children living at home and those who were caring for elderly family members. Due to the pervasiveness of digital technologies increasing numbers of workers are unable to disengage completely from work even when at home. The right to participate in work and the need to rest from it are enshrined in church teaching⁴⁹⁸ and in Scripture,⁴⁹⁹ but, in an age of incessant activity and constant accessibility, carving out space and time for rest, reflection and recreation can be a challenge. It is hardly surprising that among Christians there is renewed interest in Sabbath observance, both as an act of “resistance” to multi-tasking, coercion and anxiety,⁵⁰⁰ and as a response to God’s gracious invitation to rest from work and be refreshed.⁵⁰¹ These are issues that midlife churchgoers could usefully explore, and revisit frequently, within their church communities.

A number of interviewees spoke of the busyness and exhaustion associated with care of small children, the challenges of raising teenagers, and the sense of helplessness experienced in caring for frail or dying parents. All interviewees clearly cherished their relationships with family members – those with children spoke of their sons and daughters with evident pride and love, and interviewees who had cared for parents in their declining years described that duty as a privilege – but they also acknowledged that some aspects of caring for family members can be hard. Interviewees with younger children were grateful for the support offered to their children by members of their congregations, whether that occurred in the context of formal programmes or was simply provided by elderly parishioners who made a fuss of their little ones and made the children feel special and very welcome at church. Participants with teenagers also expressed appreciation of the attention church members gave to their children, particularly when the teenagers’ emerging gifts and talents were acknowledged and genuine opportunities were provided for the young people to use and develop their

⁴⁹⁹ The Creation narrative is generally cited as a justification for rest for all workers (Genesis 1:1-2:3).
skills further. Far fewer interviewees spoke of targeted support for parents and caregivers themselves.

A number of participants pointed out that the church often invests a lot of energy and resources in families, and this was felt by most midlife interviewees to be appropriate. However, interviewees also suggested that parishes could exercise greater creativity in seeking to alleviate pressure on parents and to encourage them in their parental roles. When asked how the church could support her, as a midlife churchgoer, Gail (Anglican, 41) was initially stumped. She said, “You always think ‘What going to be good for the kids?’ but you put yourself on the backburner.” Then she suggested that some offers of babysitting from “grandparenting-type people” in the congregation would be helpful, as it would be nice to be able to go out with her husband sometimes. “Offers of babysitting would be fantastic; in a way that would allow middle-aged people to catch up with each other.” In most congregations it would not be difficult to find willing “grandparenting-type people” who could occasionally host a younger family for a meal, offer to look after children for an hour or two, or share some gardening or maintenance expertise with a family. This could prove to be a special commitment for older parishioners, especially for those whose own families might be living far away. Murray (Anglican, 44), whose children are now teenagers, felt that social events for the whole church family were helpful to parents with younger children, especially in the winter. He recalled needing to “get rid of that cabin-fever feel” when his children were small. He said:

> We were always looking when it was pouring with rain and kids were driving you nuts. You want to get out of the house and do something with them – that’s why families head to the malls. … You need to get out, you need to do something with them, wear them out so that you can relax.

Andrew (Anglican, 44) spoke of the value of parenting seminars. A few of these had been run at his church, provided by professionals, including child psychologists, and Andrew had appreciated receiving “general parental advice” regardless of the fact that the event offered “wasn’t anything to do with the church, other than the church facilitated the meeting.” Anglican vicar, Liz (55), had attended a day-long course which was about building resilience for health professionals and others in caring professions. She felt that providing a similar course relating to self-care “could be a gift” to offer “those in midlife who are often juggling a number of competing demands as well.” Something of this nature could be of help to middle-aged churchgoers caring for elderly or infirm parents. Other forms of pastoral support for caregivers – time to relax and talk with friends being
the most fundamental – were considered in Chapters Five and Six.\textsuperscript{502} Offering parents sufficient challenge and encouragement to make their own spiritual development a priority, among many other priorities, is also extremely important. Parishes do not have the resources or personnel to do everything that can be envisaged as being helpful to all parishioners, but the few examples provided by participants here, and those discussed in earlier chapters, suggest that there are some forms of support that could be offered to parents and caregivers that would not be expensive and could be beneficial to a cross-section of people within the church.

A particular challenge for individuals in midlife is that although fulfilment may be found in serving others at work, at home, at church, and in the community, in their middle years people need time to reflect on the meaning and significance of these activities, and to take stock of where they have been and where they are going. Most of the spiritual directors who contributed to this project, and many other participants, also, spoke of the importance of attending to what Gail Sheehy calls “the inner realm,”\textsuperscript{503} in midlife. Midlife interviewee, Michelle (Catholic, 58), said, “You get to a stage when you think, ‘Well, what actually gives my life meaning?’ You know, I guess prior to that you just lived your life and did all the things you did, but without necessarily reflecting too much on it.” Bernard (Catholic priest, 52) described midlife as a period of “re-examination” during which individuals feel drawn to explore questions such as, “What’s my life about? The activity: Is it worthwhile? Is it true? Does it have a meaning and purpose beyond this world?” Christians in midlife require time to ponder these and similar questions as they seek “a more congruent living out of their … inner and outer lives,” as Julie (spiritual director, 60) expressed it. By midlife, many individuals realise that being able to connect effectively with the world requires a “godly balance” between “contemplation and action; between detachment and engagement; between hard slog and flow,”\textsuperscript{504} as Joanna Collicutt argues.

Church leaders almost invariably encourage people to be actively involved in serving God in their parishes and in the community but interviews with participants revealed that clergy and congregations are not always as proactive about encouraging Christians

\textsuperscript{502} As several members of the clergy pointed out, there are helpful resources that clergy and church leaders can access which may build understanding and sensitivity around the needs of those caring for family members with dementia or who are nearing the end of life. For example, Joanna Collicutt, \textit{Thinking of You: A Resource for the Spiritual Care of People with Dementia} (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2017).


\textsuperscript{504} Collicutt, \textit{The Psychology of Christian Character Formation}, 156-157.
who have been journeying in faith for some years to make time for the “midlife work” of reflection. “I think they press them into roles,” said Maureen (spiritual director, 56). She went on, “To do the midlife work you need spaciousness. You need time, you need space, you need periods where you’re not doing.” Churchgoers can place pressure on themselves, too, feeling that they should remain committed to serving in positions within and beyond the church which they have held for some time, particularly if no reliever or successor is immediately apparent. However, individuals and communities can both benefit when people have some time, even if that time is short, to reflect, pray, and to be refreshed.505 Parishes might consider how they are currently supporting members who have reached a point where they feel they need to pause to re-examine what they doing. Parker J. Palmer writes:

First, we could lift up the value of “inner work.” That phrase should become commonplace in families, schools, and religious institutions, at least, helping us understand that inner work is as real as outer work and involves skills one can develop, skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation, and prayer. ... Second, we could spread the word that inner work, though it is a deeply personal matter, is not necessarily a private matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone.506

Many clergy and congregations certainly recognise the importance of inner work and strive to create opportunities for parishioners to engage in it. Reflection on the connections between the “inner” and “outer” world can occur in a multitude of ways, and, as Palmer suggests, can happen individually or be “helped along in community.” Three examples mentioned by participants may suffice as illustrations of the diverse approaches that churches within New Zealand are already adopting to assist parishioners to reflect on the roles and responsibilities they have in their homes, workplaces, or communities. First, some churches provide occasions for members of their congregations to speak to audiences about their work (paid or voluntary), either within the context of church services or at public events. The opportunity to tell others about connections between their work and their faith enables both the presenters and their hearers to reflect on the meaning and significance of what they do – and, indeed, to

“make meaning” through the telling of their stories\textsuperscript{507} – and to be strengthened and encouraged as they continue to serve God in the world. Second, many churches invite members to participate in small groups which allow those present to discuss and reflect on a wide range of issues that directly connect with the outworking of their faith in “real life.” In Chapter Five many examples were given of the diversity of form and function of small groups that currently exist within parishes, and their worth to midlife attendees. Third, retreats in daily life (which can take a variety of forms) are offered within some churches. In these contexts churchgoers are able to explore unfamiliar forms of prayer and then to share with others something of their experience of prayer and the connection between their faith and life experience. These retreats not only enable group participants to practice new spiritual disciplines and to make meaningful connections with other Christians, but also to renew their commitment to serving God wholeheartedly in all that they do.

\section*{Conclusion}

This project has identified avenues that parishes could explore in seeking to attend more directly to the pastoral needs of middle-aged members, in encouraging personal and spiritual development, and in helping individuals to connect with God, one another, and the world. The multiplicity of actions that might be implemented in response to the issues raised provide choices for parishes to consider and to select from; what may be helpful in one context, for a particular group of midlife churchgoers, may not be as helpful to another group in a different situation. Given that the significant transitions of midlife provide “fertile ground for spiritual growth,” as Brian (spiritual director, 62) pointed out, it would be fruitful for church leaders to make time to reflect together on the needs of middle-aged Christians. Together, clergy and lay people might generate further constructive ideas about how the “right formation” (Julie, spiritual director, 60) of midlife churchgoers might be supported more intentionally. Clergy and congregations must be selective about what they attempt to do to meet the needs of their members, given the limited resources available in any church, but it is not necessary to make wholesale changes to church programmes or practices in order to be more aware of the needs of middle-aged parishioners and to address their needs more effectively. If two

key lessons could be taken from this research, these might make a significant difference to Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican churchgoers in midlife.

The first is that middle-aged churchgoers need opportunities to speak with others about their lives, their circumstances and their concerns. According to Presbyterian minister and retreat director Andrew Dunn, “There is a shortage of listening in life today, whether between spouses, parents and children or in life in general, and not least in the church.” Findings from this project revealed that for churchgoers in midlife, who are so often called on to support others, the need and desire to be listened to may be acute. Anglican priest, Sandra (58) noted how important it is to have “a good listening ear” for both men and women who are in this life stage, who may be dealing with many significant issues, stresses, grief and regrets. Brian (spiritual director, 62) observed that talking to an attentive listener helps people in midlife to “sift through what’s happening for them inside.” Many interviewees – including spiritual directors and members of the clergy (70% of whom were also aged between forty and sixty) – spoke with heartfelt gratitude about times when they had felt heard by clergy, church members, spiritual directors or counsellors. For some churchgoers, simple enquiries about their welfare, made at church over a cup of tea, were enough for them to feel very well supported by other parishioners. Some found adequate opportunities to share their lives with others, at a meaningful level, in small groups and in social contexts within their parishes, particularly when intergenerational relationships were involved. Other participants appreciated opportunities to speak to someone privately. “To have someone just to give their time up to listen to me is just amazing,” said Raewyn (Presbyterian, 47). It can be an “utter relief” for some individuals in midlife, perhaps especially for those in helping professions (including clergy) or in familial situations that demand constant care of others, to be able to talk to someone who will listen for an hour. Henri Nouwen describes listening as “a form of spiritual hospitality” which allows those who are listened to “to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves.” When people within the church listen, people in midlife do feel valued and well supported.

509 Louisa (Salvation Army spiritual director, 66).
Listening is a ministry that can and must be exercised by all members of the church, not only those who are ordained. Given its importance, though, it is worth thinking about the training and guidance offered to clergy when it comes to effective listening, both during their initial formation and also while they are serving in ministry. One Catholic priest who was interviewed for this project emailed a response to an enquiry I made about this issue. He wrote, “Listening is not a skill which is taught formally at the seminary, however it is a common theme in pastoral reflections after the various pastoral experiences a seminarian is asked to undertake. However I know … it’s a skill which often comes with experience and maturity.” Some members of the clergy and some laypeople involved in leadership roles within the church naturally connect more easily with parishioners than others, and some need greater support to recognise the importance of listening and to develop listening skills. In The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry, Lynne Baab recognises the importance of listening within congregations, and asserts, “The ability to listen well is a skill that can be learned.” This truth is widely accepted and courses targeted at improving listening within the church are already being offered across a range of Christian denominations. For example, within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership is currently offering a practical learning course entitled “Listening in Mission.” In the Catholic Diocese of Auckland, the Religious Education Team is running interactive adult faith formation programmes in parishes which include sessions on “Listening with the Heart – Compassionate and Effective Communication.” Sue Pickering, an Anglican priest who has been involved in the training of spiritual directors in New Zealand for many years, has recently released a book entitled Listening and Spiritual Conversation: Singing God’s Songs in a Noisy World, which is also intended to help those involved in pastoral care to develop listening skills. In an increasingly “noisy world,” listening is a topical issue.

511 A psychologist who is also a churchgoer spoke about this issue with me. She regarded it as the “job” of clergy “to be the best they can be in relationships.” She added, “That’s what I consider their training should be about.” Interview with author, Christchurch, 6 August 2015.
The second key point to be drawn from this research is that churchgoers in midlife do appreciate – and may even crave – ongoing support to navigate the challenges and transitions of midlife and to grow in faith and in depth of relationship with God. It should not be assumed that middle-aged churchgoers are content to be “left to their own devices” (Karen, Anglican, 52). Findings from the interviews revealed that Christians who have been journeying in faith for some time are certainly likely to be less reliant on the authority and influence of church leaders than younger churchgoers, but they still want to share their spiritual journey with fellow travellers and to learn from those who are older and wiser than themselves.

In six of the twenty interviews with clergy and spiritual directors the word “permission” was used to describe the role that the clergy, congregations and spiritual directors can play in supporting individuals as they juggle competing demands on their time and also engage in the “inner work” of midlife, including navigating transitions in faith. Patricia (Anglican priest, 58) told me that she hoped her sermons connected with parishioners’ lives and gave them “permission” to speak openly about some of the challenges they were facing, knowing “that we all share some of those challenges, and that it’s OK.” Patricia also expressed a desire to encourage middle-aged parishioners to use their gifts and talents in a range of spheres. She said, “It’s enabling people to be open to the Spirit of God working ... in their lives, and giving that permission to, yeah, try something new!” Liz (Anglican priest, 55) used the word “permission” when speaking about spiritual direction, which she considered to be a context within which “a lot of people” in this life stage can have “great fun exploring things.” She added, “Often, when there are so many demands, that actually that chance to go in new directions, new places, permission- giving to have a bit of fun and to explore is really freeing.” Other participants noted that Christians in midlife may need to feel they have “permission” to reduce their involvement in church activities, “to take some time out, or back off a bit” (Sandra, Anglican priest, 58) without having to fight for “permission” to do that (Maureen, spiritual director, 56). The use of the word “permission” highlights the influence that churches can have in supporting or inhibiting the personal and spiritual development of mature Christians. Parishes that recognise that some churchgoers in their forties and fifties may be dealing with significant personal challenges and/or experiencing some equally significant developments in their faith, and are willing to “normalise these experiences and give people some pointers about where they can find help,” as Matthew (spiritual director, 61) put it, can certainly be places of care and spiritual nurture.
Participants commented upon the balance between the church’s care of people in this life stage and the responsibility (and desire) of individuals to seek opportunities for service, sources of spiritual nurture and meaningful personal support outside the church. Many midlife interviewees had attended retreats, courses, or spiritual direction outside their parishes, and at various times some had also accessed resources which addressed particular concerns and enabled them to explore questions relating to their faith. Midlife churchgoers felt well supported when congregation members, clergy or spiritual directors encouraged them to do these things; they did not expect or want their parishes to provide all that was needed for their ongoing development and spiritual growth. A number of the participants also described being aware of God’s generosity and goodness as they engaged in recreational activities – especially those that connected them to the beauty of the natural world – and as they spent time in silence. The fact that Christians in their forties and fifties may find spiritual nurture in a range of contexts does not lessen the importance of the church’s role in attending to the needs of members in this “rich and transformative period” (Julie, spiritual director, 60) of life. Without adding further to the busyness of midlife, churches can support middle-aged individuals in their ongoing formation by affirming and validating their faith as it is worked out in daily life and work, and by giving them “permission,” appropriate tools, and constant encouragement to reflect on “the religious dimension of experience.”

The specific ways in which clergy and congregations might do these things will differ.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging my indebtedness to each of the individuals who gave up their time to be interviewed for this project. I am very grateful to them for their openness in speaking about their midlife experiences, their willingness to engage with questions of some complexity, and the breadth and depth of understanding they brought to bear on the issues raised. Their comments have illuminated matters of import to many congregations in New Zealand. In addition to shaping my understanding of the issues explored, the interviewees have contributed to my own growth and development at midlife. I count it a privilege to have been able to conduct this research.

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Bibliography


Appendix A – Participant Consent Forms

[Reference Number: 15/044
[30 April 2015]

Midlife Spirituality in the Church in New Zealand

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?

For many people, midlife is a period of significant change. It is also a time of life in which reflection on values, aspirations and beliefs frequently occurs. Midlife has the potential to be a time of rich discovery, exploration and spiritual growth. It is the purpose of this project to examine the needs of Christians in midlife, to investigate how well these needs are being addressed within the church, and to suggest a range of practical responses to the issues raised. It is hoped that greater understanding of the issues facing numerous Christians in this life stage may have a positive impact on church members whose needs may be overlooked, and upon many people with whom they interact and influence.

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for Anne Shave’s PhD.

What Type of Participants are being sought?

Participants from three categories are being sought to participate in recorded interviews with the researcher, Anne Shave:

Twenty to twenty-five Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican church attendees between the ages of forty and sixty-five

Ten members of the clergy who are serving in churches that include parishioners in midlife

Ten spiritual directors

Ministers, spiritual directors and two academic supervisors have suggested some potential interviewees who fit the demographic requirements of this research. For practical reasons, participants will be restricted to people living in Auckland, Christchurch or Dunedin. There will be no compensation for the interviews, but findings of the project will be made available to participants.
What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour. These interviews will be digitally recorded. It is anticipated that most interviews will be conducted in person, although it is possible that in certain cases some may conducted by telephone or Skype.

There are no known health and safety issues and no anticipate adverse physical or psychological risks involved in participating. Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

Interviews will be digitally recorded and extracts from the interviews transcribed. The only personal information collected will be the interviewee’s name, age, denomination, ethnicity, and contact details. Only the student researcher and the supervisor will have access to the raw data. Any personal information held on the participants will be destroyed at the completion of the research. Participants may request a copy of the recording of the interview and may request that any of their responses be modified.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above 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 such as contact information may 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.

The results of the project will be a PhD thesis which will published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes questions relating to the needs of Christians in midlife in New Zealand, how effectively the church is addressing these needs, and what further support could be offered to people in this stage of life. 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. Consequently, although the Department of Theology and Religion 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 asked.

In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s). As stated above, should you wish to modify any responses you made during the interview, you are also welcome to contact the interviewer to request that this occurs.

Can Participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time before 1 July 2017 for any reason 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:

Student Researcher: Anne Shave or Supervisor: Lynne Baab
Department of Theology and Religion  Department of Theology and Religion

University telephone: 03 479 5358
Email address: shavea6@gmail.com  Email address: lynne.baab@otago.ac.nz

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph +643 479 8256 or email gary.witte@otago.ac.nz). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.
Midlife Spirituality in the Church in New Zealand

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 including digital recordings of interviews may 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 relates to the needs of Christians in midlife in New Zealand, how effectively the church is addressing these needs, and what further support could be offered to people in this stage of life. The precise nature of the questions which I 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. Should I wish to modify any responses I made during the interview, I am also welcome to contact the interviewer to request that this occurs.

5. I will not receive any reimbursement or payment for my interview.

6. The results of the project will 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)
This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph +643 479 8256 or email gary.witte@otago.ac.nz). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix B - Interview Questions

Group One: Midlife churchgoers

Midlife participants will be asked to talk about their experience of midlife, including its challenges and opportunities, and the changes they have experienced and observed in their circumstances, values, desires, beliefs and understanding of themselves and of God. They will be asked:

(a) Describe your involvement in church, including the roles and responsibilities you hold. How do you feel about your involvement?

(b) With a focus on particular “spiritual themes” mentioned by the interviewee — such as learning to cope with grief and loss, dealing with past grievances and guilts, or reflecting upon values and priorities — a participant may be asked: How effectively is the church helping you to deal with these things?

(c) Do you attend spiritual direction? If yes, can you provide examples of ways in which spiritual direction is, or has been, helpful to you?

(d) What further support or opportunities do you think could be offered (i) to Christians in midlife, and (ii) to assist clergy and congregations to meet the needs of parishioners in midlife?

Group Two: Clergy

Clergy will be asked to describe the parish within which they serve, and asked about their perception of the experiences and needs of people in midlife, firstly within their parish and secondly (if time permits) within their denomination in New Zealand. Certain midlife themes — such as the importance of transitions, changing roles and values, and different understandings of God — may be suggested by the interviewer. Priests and ministers will also be asked:

(a) If the priest or minister is in midlife or older: Would you like to describe your own experience of midlife?

(b) How effectively do you feel the church is addressing the spiritual needs of midlife attendees? What is already working well in your own parish? What supports your belief that parishioners in midlife are finding these things helpful?

(c) Are you aware of needs amongst midlife parishioners that that you think are not yet being addressed, or could be addressed more effectively? What has made you aware of these needs within your parish?

(d) What further support would you like to see offered (i) to midlife parishioners, and (ii) to assist clergy as you work with people in midlife?

Group Three: Spiritual Directors

Spiritual directors will be asked to give a brief description of their role, including some explanation of the spiritual tradition within which they have trained, the length of time they have practiced, and the approximate number of clients with whom they meet.
regularly. They will then be asked to comment on their perception of the experiences and needs of midlife Christians who attend spiritual direction.

(a) If the spiritual director is in midlife or older: Would you like to describe your own experience of midlife?

(b) From your experience of working in spiritual direction, what do you consider to be the most significant needs of Christians in midlife? What supports your belief that these issues are significant?

(c) How well does the church appear to be supporting Christians in midlife? What further support would you like to see offered to midlife churchgoers and the church communities from which they come? You may like to refer to aspects of spiritual direction within your answer.
Appendix C - Resources identified by Spiritual Directors

In their interviews many spiritual directors spoke about books and other resources that they considered related to the questions or issues being explored by some of their directees in midlife, or which they had themselves found thought provoking.

Frequently the spiritual directors simply identified particular authors as having written about relevant themes. This appendix lists, in alphabetical order, authors mentioned by spiritual directors. At least one work by each author is named. If a spiritual director did not explicitly identify this text, “Eg:” precedes the text’s title. In these instances it is possible that the named text may not be the work (or works) the spiritual director considered to be of relevance. Occasionally interviewees asserted that “everything” by an author – such as Henri Nouwen – was worth reading. The authors listed represent a wide range of theological perspectives.

Spiritual directors also observed that many useful resources, including blogs and podcasts, are now available on-line.

- The text most frequently identified by spiritual directors as being helpful to Christians in midlife, and to themselves, was the Bible.

- The second most frequently mentioned resource was the Prayer of Examen. There are many books about this Ignatian form of prayer. One helpful short book on the subject is Jim Manney’s, *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola’s Examen*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011. A range of introductory resources relating to the Prayer of Examen can also be found on the following website: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>

Resources mentioned by spiritual directors


Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: <http://www.myersbriggs.org>


“Pray as You Go” phone app. Also available on-line: <http://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>


Renovaré Institute Resources: <https://renovare.org/books>


