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The role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending  
Catholic secondary schools

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## Chapter 5: Adolescent faith and religious conversion

### Introduction

The first research question to be addressed in this study asked: *Is it possible to interpret students' disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?* Answering the question is the task of the present chapter. In the previous chapter, evidence was presented of changes in participants' relationships with God. The changes were perceived by them to have happened as part of the process of growing up and in some cases because of events in their lives that challenged their beliefs about God. The participants reported on the influence of their parents, family members, friends, youth groups, schools, teachers and the Church on their relationship with God. Most participants gave evidence to show that their beliefs were modified or changed to help them deal with changes in their lives. Changing what they believed about God changed their relationship with God.

There were 15 participants in the study. Four participants reported signs of religious conversion, that is, they reported changes in their beliefs about God and deepening relationship with God. These changes affected their prayer life. The remaining 11 participants showed varying degrees of change in their faith from unbelief in the case of Emily to those who reported only minor changes in their relationship with God.

The participants described themselves as active agents in what they perceived to be their relationship with God. Those whose accounts might be labelled "stories about religious conversion" did not experience a sudden life-

changing event over which they had no control, as happened with St Paul on the road to Damascus, however, one student did report feelings of euphoria when she recognised that God wanted her to become a Catholic and she accepted this as her call from God.

It is assumed in the present study that religious conversion can come about only through the precipitation of a crisis whose resolution has a religious dimension. Rambo (1993) called the second stage of his conversion model “crisis.” Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1987) used the word “crisis” to identify that which ushers in changes in human development. Fowler rightly observed that a crisis is “the point where things must change” (p. 102). He referred to the translation of the word “crisis” from Mandarin: two characters, one meaning “danger” and the other meaning “opportunity” (p. 103). The insight that Fowler shared was significant: for participants, such as Kevin and Mikaela, the crises that they experienced were opportunities for changes in the content and structure of their faith. For them, the danger lay in not embracing change.

Gelpi (1998) stated that the crisis that leads to conversion can be precipitated by a variety of catalysts (p. 13). Rambo stated that the catalysts for change may be “religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin” (p. 44). Köse (1996) noted in his study based on interviews with 70 native born British converts to Islam that the majority of more than 15,000 cases of conversion documented in research literature from 1899 to the 1950s (Christensen, 1963 and Starbuck, 1988/1911) were “a part of the inevitably intense social and psychological changes of adolescence that are essentially

a normal form of adolescent development” (p. 253). Drawing on more recent and extensive body of research literature (Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998; Starbuck, 1899; Ullman, 1983, 1989; and Zinnhauer & Pargament, 1998), Paloutzian et al. (1999) proposed that:

certain people, especially those who have had difficulties during childhood or adolescence (such as family stress or some insecure childhood attachment) or suffer from feelings of personal inadequacy, are particularly prone to conversion because they have personal or behavioural needs that are not satisfactorily met (p. 1060).

The truth of their proposition will be tested with the following discussion of the conversion experiences of Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. It will be shown that where home life is characterised by harmonious relationships, as reported by Kevin and other participants, there is no possibility of religious conversion unless a crisis is precipitated by other factors. For instance, the catalyst can be emotional distress, as was evident in the stories told by Kevin and Stephen, or separation distress, as was the case with Mikaela. The catalyst can be a form of cognitive dissonance associated with the emergence of formal operational thinking and mutual perspective-taking, as was the case with Elizabeth and Alexandra. However, as it will be demonstrated, not all crises lead to conversion.

In the previous chapter, three major themes were identified in the accounts given by the participants: changing relationships with God, significant influences, and owning faith in God. The three themes embraced the disciplines of theology, sociology and psychology. In this chapter, the

discussion of religious conversion will require a dialogue between the three disciplines. In the spirit of interpretative phenomenological analysis, every effort will be made to ensure that the integrity of the perceptions of the participants is not compromised.

#### Mikaela's conversion

Mikaela's accounts of her life are characterised by her admissions about the devastating impact of her parents' divorce on her self-esteem, her reliance on the support of her close friend, and the radical change in her relationship with God. Her decision to become a Catholic and the feelings of euphoria that accompanied her decision are offered as signs of her religious conversion. In the discussion that follows, which is structured around the three major themes identified in the data analysis, it will be shown that Mikaela was predisposed to conversion because of events that happened in her life and because of her psychological state. Her relationship with God reflected her relationships with significant others in her life.

St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is used as the model of what Richardson (1985) and Granqvist (2003) referred to as the classic conversion paradigm. St Paul did not seek conversion: it happened to him suddenly. He was subject to forces beyond himself and was a passive recipient of conversion which was radical and complete. His life changed and there was a total break with the past. In a real sense, he became a new person. Richardson described such conversions as "*once is enough* for a lifetime" (italics in original, p. 165).

By contrast, Mikaela was an active agent in her own conversion. In response to changed circumstances in her life, she sought conversion and the changes that she embraced lasted until her circumstances changed again. Richardson (1985) and Granqvist (2003) proposed the emergence of an alternative paradigm, of which Mikaela's conversion would be an example. In this paradigm, as Granqvist (2003) described it, "the conversion is portrayed as being gradual, and no particular change of the self is said to occur as a consequence of the conversion" (p. 175).

This is not entirely true of Mikaela. At the time of her second interview, which took place in the year after graduating from her secondary school, she had come to believe in herself and was prepared to make her own decisions. She confirmed her decision to commit herself to God, even though she had put on hold her preparation for reception into the Catholic Church. It will be shown that her outlook on life changed radically. She had arrived at the point where she was prepared to take responsibility for her relationship with God. Her hopes for the future reflected a stronger faith in God's power and mercy than evidenced by the faith of her childhood.

#### *Changes in Mikaela's relationship with God*

Renowned Catholic theologian and biblical scholar Carlo Martini (1982) defined conversion in terms of the impact of changes in belief and commitment on the one who experiences conversion. He wrote that a convert: must experience an upheaval of his or her mental world, a change of horizon, a "conversion." There must be a real transformation of subjects and their world. Those whose focus had previously been on themselves or

on a set of false values, even if of a religious kind, must now opt clearly for the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (p. 62).

In the present study, some participants reported changes in their perception of who God is and the work of God. Their statements suggest experiences not unlike those that appear to be the focus of Martini's statement which is similar to the seventh phase of religious conversion described by Rambo (1993). He stated that the *consequences* of conversion are "complex and multifaceted" (p. 142) and he referred to socio-cultural, historical, psychological and theological consequences of the act of conversion. Opting for God has consequences that touch every aspect of the convert's life.

Mikaela identified changes in her perception of God. In her first interview, she used the words "complicated" and "complex" to explain the changes that she had experienced: "It was complicated, now it's complex. Two different – complicated means, um, yeah, I didn't get along with him very well. Complex means it's very deep" (lines 35-38). She reflected at length on the meaning of the word "complicated": her relationship with God was once an image of her relationship with her parents: "I thought of God more like a parent" (line 18). The God of her childhood punished her for wrongdoing. Mikaela reported that her father acted in an abusive manner towards her.

When she was thirteen, her parents separated and eventually divorced. In her journal, she reflected on the impact of her parents' actions and wrote that "it was like being on a bungee jump that didn't rebound" (Mikaela's Journal, lines 18,19). The emotion in her choice of this image is evident also in her perception of God's role in her life. She wrote: "I didn't believe that God

existed and that if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life” (Mikaela’s Journal, lines 68-70).

What happened to Mikaela to bring about the change in her beliefs about God and her attitude towards God will be explained when the second major theme is considered. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that her relationship with God changed radically. She acknowledged the significance of the change with the use of the word “complex” which, for her, meant “deep.” According to Mikaela, her changed faith in God was expressed in a number of ways. For instance, the most significant feature of her conversion experience was her trust in God. In stark contrast to her experience as a child, she revealed in her journal that she wanted to trust God with her life. She wrote:

I want to be able to love God for the rest of my life and my life after death be with him in heaven if I am just that little bit worthy of it. I see that in my relationship with him how I have just begun to see what he wants me to see about my friends and the people around me, maybe even possibly my life. Through seeing what he wants me to do with my life, I can see that he has shown me what he wants me to do with my life. If I just follow him, I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I ever will. He knows more than I would ever realise. So if I follow his lead, my life will not only be a fairy tale but something better (lines 145-153).

She confessed her love of God, her faith in God’s mercy, and her hope for eternal life. Her reference to her life being better than a fairy tale stands in

stark contrast to her memory of what her relationship with God was like when she learned of her parents' decision to divorce.

Although Mikaela's statements do not convey awareness of the "horror and weight of sin" (CCC, para. 1432) that the Catholic Church associates with conversion, there is awareness of sin and forgiveness as well as the need to be faithful to God. Mikaela contrasted her understanding of sin and forgiveness when she was a child with her understanding as an adolescent who wanted to be faithful to God. Forgiveness had become very significant to her. In her first interview, she explained:

When you're very little, y'think "Yeah, I've done something wrong. He's never gonna forgive me for this." But I know that if I ask for forgiveness then he'll probably – he'll give it to me if I am truly repentful for what I've done (lines 24-27).

The Catholic Church teaches that being "truly repentful," to use Mikaela's words, and seeking God's forgiveness are signs of Christian conversion (CCC, para. 1428). These signs, as Pope John Paul II (1984) stated, must be understood "as concrete Christian values to be achieved in our daily lives" (para. 22) through "visible signs, gestures and works of penance" (CCC, para. 1430). In her first interview, Mikaela was asked about the role of the Holy Spirit in her life and how she knew the Spirit was present in her life. She replied with a story about forgiveness:

I'll give you an example. Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt yep – I'm gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them. That's the first thing that came into my head.

I wasn't angry. I wasn't disappointed as much as I thought I would probably would have been, but I actually thought, "Yep, I'm gonna go out and help them because they've obviously got a problem that can be fixed" (lines 117-124).

Memory is an unreliable witness. However, both interviews and her journal presented a consistent pattern of the relationship between her sense of well-being and her belief in God. This point will be developed in the next section.

#### *The influence of significant others*

Rambo (1993) stated that the context in which religious conversion takes place "encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion" (p. 20). Gelpi (1998), who used Rambo's model of religious conversion in his work on pastoral catechesis, also emphasised the importance of context in religious conversion. He identified personal circumstances, such as family, friends, ethnicity, neighbourhood and belonging to a religious community, as well as culture and the global village phenomenon as important aspects of context.

Adamson, Hartman & Lyxell (1999) drew on the research of Allen et al. (1984), Grotevant & Cooper (1986), and Youniss & Smollar (1985) to highlight "the importance for adolescent development of maintaining emotional closeness to ... parents, while simultaneously developing a psychological independence" (p. 22). They concluded from their own study that parents

“form a secure base from which the adolescent can explore her/himself and the world” (p. 29). Research carried out by Birgegard & Granqvist (2004), Granqvist (1998, 2002), Granqvist & Hagekull (1999, 2003) and Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) has shown that the religiosity of parents contributes significantly to the faith development of their children. In the present study, each participant’s context holds elements that are unique to the participant and, in some instances, predispose some to seek to change their relationship with God. In the case of Mikaela, her relationship with her parents, her close friends and the YCS group to which she belonged all contributed in significant ways to her experience of conversion.

The one area of context not alluded to by Gelpi (1998) is education. In the present study, the participants report the significance of their education in Catholic schools to the development of their faith in God. This aspect of the context of religious conversion was raised in Chapter Four of the study under the heading of “The impact of schools on participants’ relationship with God” (pp. 150-156). It will be addressed in detail in chapter 7 of the study.

#### Mikaela’s relationship with her parents

Mikaela was raised in a Christian family. Her parents took their two daughters to Church regularly. In her first interview, Mikaela reported that she did not enjoy going to Church – “... when I was little I was forced to go to Church” (line 9), however, she accepted it as part of family life. When her parents’ marriage fell apart, they continued the practice of taking their children to Church. It was reported in the previous chapter of this study that the effect on Mikaela of her parents’ separation and divorce was dramatic. She stopped

attending Church and stopped believing in God. Mikaela described this part of her life in her first interview:

When I was ten, my parents used to fight all the time and then that's when I really really hated Church because I didn't see any point in me going with them if they weren't even getting along, so then I stopped. And then thirteen, they split up and so that was even worse then, like she – they'd both go to Church they'd both go to the same Church and they'd act all happy families and at home they'd be separated and living in the same house. They'd be two different people. So then I just hated that – never ever – I vowed never to step into a Church ever again (lines 305-314).

Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) investigated the relationship between attachment to parents and attachment to God. They drew on the normative work of Bowlby (1969) and concluded that children's faith in God functions in much the same way as their attachment to their parents. Bowlby's normative criteria of attachment – proximity maintenance, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress – were reflected in statements made by Mikaela about the impact on her of her parents' separation and divorce. According to a taxonomy developed by Bartholomew (1990), attachment to her parents during the time of her involvement in the data gathering phase of the present study could be characterized as "dismissive," meaning she wanted to have nothing to do with them. Given this meaning, it is a term that could be used also to describe her relationship with God. In her journal, she wrote:

I used to shut myself away from the world and mostly through the hurt that I had felt as a result of my parents break up and the continual abuse that I suffered from my Dad's abusive and negative behaviour. Up until that

point I didn't believe that God existed and that if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life (lines 65-70).

Mikaela's "deconversion" reflected her poor relationship with her parents. Unlike Kevin, whose relationship with his parents helped him to deal with conflict at school, and Cameron, whose relationship with his mother especially, allowed him the freedom to explore his faith and to make his own decisions about religious practice, Mikaela lost faith in her parents and found that she could not turn to them for support when she experienced her crisis of faith. Bowlby (1969) established that children, whose parents provide them with a safe haven, experience a sense of security that helps them deal with separation distress brought about by death, or divorce. Unlike Stephen, who found support from his mother and father after they had separated and divorced, Mikaela found that she had no safe haven with either of her parents. Nor did she trust God.

#### Mikaela's relationship with her peers

Paloutzian et al. (1999) described stage four of Rambo's model of religious conversion as "the point of contact between the potential convert and a new religious or spiritual option" (p. 1072). Gelpi (1998) interpreted the point of contact to be "an advocate of a particular religious tradition" which could take "individual or communal form" (p. 14). Fowler (1981) used the term "sponsor" by which he meant, "the way a person or community provides affirmation, encouragement, guidance and models for a person's ongoing growth and development" (p. 287). He alluded to the role of the sponsor in the

initiation of people into the Christian community. Leavy et al. (1992) wrote about the need for trust and sensitivity in the sponsoring environment (p. 32ff) and described the role of the Catholic school in sponsoring the faith of its members (p. 154ff). These forms of mentoring, namely by an individual, a convert's family, by a faith community, and by the convert's school, were evident in the accounts given by the participants.

Mikaela lost faith in her parents and came to rely on her close friends for support and security. Because her friends also attended the Catholic secondary school in which she was enrolled, it was not long before she became engaged again in the search for God in her life because the environment she found herself in was built on faith in God and she felt secure there. She wrote in her journal: "I remember the day I began to believe in God heaps more was when I was invited to Mass by someone.... Through Joan and that other person inviting me my faith was re-ignited to some degree" (lines 71-72, 74-75).

For Mikaela, safety and security were guaranteed and experienced through belonging to the Church that her friends attended. She stopped going to the Church to which her parents belonged and chose instead to go to Mass with her friend Joan at the local Catholic Church. Her desire to belong somewhere led to her decision to become a Catholic. In her journal, she reported the positive effect of her decision. Before discussing this aspect of her conversion, it seems relevant to consider her perception from the perspective of her motivation. Flynn (1999) used Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation to identify an hierarchy of needs in the data gathered from

Year 12 students for his research into the culture of Catholic schools in Australia. Flynn concluded that values relating to happiness, self esteem and spiritual and religious meaning were appropriated by the students he surveyed in a pattern that reflected Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Mikaela's story of her relationship with her parents and the development of her faith in God also reflected the basic structure of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Her concerns were not related to physiological needs, but to other higher needs, such as those related to security, her social life, esteem and the desire for growth in her relationship with God. She perceived herself to be deprived of the sense of belonging that she had as a young child and she sought it with her friends and their Church. The search that she undertook reflected her need to think well of herself.

Mikaela relied on Joan whose friendship provided her with some stability and security. In her journal, she described the importance of Joan to her in the following way:

Joan though she didn't know it was the person I placed my getting Catholicism on. I needed her to help me to guide me and give me advice when a lot of my other friends turned me away from the right path (lines 36-39).

Mikaela's relationship with God was modelled on her relationship with Joan. The emotions she experienced when she decided to become a Catholic were associated with her decision which came about because of her relationship with Joan. Her stability and security were severely tested by two experiences, one early in her final year at school and the second in the following year. The

first was Joan's departure: she moved to the country with her family. Concerning this, Mikaela wrote in her journal:

... again I was swamped with feelings of mistrust, hatred, rebellion and no faith. I thought by Joan leaving me God was also leaving me. Abandoning me just like everyone else had done, he was just another person out to hurt me (Mikaela's Journal, lines 39-42).

Not only was her intimacy with God challenged by Joan's departure, it was also tested by experiences after leaving school. In her second interview, which took place in the following year, Mikaela reflected on changes in her relationships with her friends and how those changes impacted on her relationship with God:

The people who were friends within school changed a lot from what I knew them before. For some reason, they all just went different. And I found it really difficult to adjust and so when I adjusted to it I adjusted to be like them.... I wanted to be a sheep and they didn't go to Church and so I didn't go to Church. And they didn't totally, honestly believe in God. I still believed in him but I felt it harder to follow him because they weren't and I sort of felt like a sheep amongst a bunch of lions. And they were dictating how I, where I should be. And finally I thought, "Nup! I'm gonna go out on my own" and got away (Mikaela's Second Interview, lines 9-12, 19-25).

The self-reflection evident here was that of a person seeking to act independently of her peers. Mikaela wanted to be her own person and to act consistently with the beliefs and values she had chosen when she was younger. She expressed her hopes for her future in the following statement couched in the form of a chapter from her imaginary biography:

The floor I'm on right now is *Under Construction*: to rebuild my life and do the things that I planned to do when I was younger and find friends who are wanting the same things from life as I want and not trying to make me feel insignificant. To find God again in my life and instead of asking him for things just receive what he thinks is good for me (lines 49-53).

Mikaela's search for personal meaning and significance required her to step out on her own. She no longer had a close friend to rely upon, as had been the case with Joan. She had come to the realisation when she was in Year 12 that God was in control. The "backsliding" (a term used by Streib (2001) to describe the phenomenon of regression characteristic of deconversion), as she described it, was arrested by her without the aid of her friends.

Babin (1965) used the term "egomorphism" to describe the process of constructing a relationship with God that is based on subjective factors, including personality. It has been shown that Mikaela's relationship with God was egomorphic, but that did not make it any less real for her. It was stated in chapter 2 of the present study that religious conversion is a process with many stages. Mikaela's account of her faith journey illustrates the truth of this statement. While the focus remained on herself – after all, it was *her* faith journey she was sharing with the interviewer – she perceived changes in her relationship with God that were characterised by a movement towards other-centredness, the "other" being God. These changes were egomorphic, and consistent with the psychosocial development of adolescents as described by Erikson (1980); they might even be considered aspects of naturation, that were based more on her personal experiences and not on the historical revelation of Christ. Nonetheless, the conclusion that Mikaela perceived

herself to be closer to God at the time of her second interview has been justified through the analysis of the text of her interviews and her journal.

### *Owning faith in God*

Mikaela was sixteen when she made her decision to become a Catholic. This decision signalled a shift in her faith. The crisis that was her parents' separation and divorce had precipitated a change in her faith. Her rejection of God and of Church amounted to a dismissal of much that was characteristic of Fowler's Mythic-Literal stage of faith. For instance, in the Mythic-Literal stage, faith is received from significant others, typically the parents of the child. Mikaela turned from her parents to her friends, particularly Joan, for support and security. Their friendship reduced her feelings of anxiety. The desire to belong to a faith community was aroused in her by her friendship with Joan, by her participation in the religious activities that were part of the life of the Catholic secondary school she attended, and through her membership in the Young Christian Students movement (YCS). Mikaela adopted a set of beliefs and values that on the surface were consistent with those espoused by her friend, by her school and by her YCS group.

Mikaela's conversion brought with it moments of elation as well as times of conflict and emotional pain. As a result of experiences linked to her family, her school and her relationships with significant peers, her beliefs changed. In her journal, she described the former:

Finally after months of contemplation I decided to become a Catholic.

Though recently it has been put on hold so I can start TAFE, I'm sure that

it will work out. The “Catholic” idea was a sign that there was a God, that he did exist, because the idea seemed to come out of nowhere and felt so right at the time. I remember feeling worth and a sudden burst of energy and happiness when the idea or epiphany came to me (lines 79-85).

While her decision had immediate, pleasant consequences, there were unpleasant consequences as well. Her mother was displeased with the decision. In her first interview, Mikaela told a story about her mother writing a letter to her to be read while she was on her Year 12 retreat:

... when we went on Retreat I remember getting a letter saying asking why I wanted to join the Catholic Church and what was the difference. And I said, “Because it’s — it’s a personal choice and it’s taken me how long to decide on it.” But I had to think about things that I have to give up to be a Catholic and — I’m not missing out on much, but — um — yeah, I wrote back and I said because this is — it’s like a vocation. It’s something I want to do and I won’t stop until I do it. And I might have a few hiccups that — um — eventually I get over them. Like I’ve had a couple of hiccups in the last four weeks an’ I just thought: “Well, find, I’ll leave that there an’ I’ll just jump over that. I think well that hiccup wasn’t that big, but there is — yeah, there’s I — I can see some coming, I can see some huge hiccups coming (lines 442-455).

Paloutzian et al. (1999) stated, “the potential convert is constantly assessing the effects of the new religious option and deciding whether the new religion is relevant and viable” (p. 1072).

According to Fowler (1981), one consequence of religious conversion is the change in the contents of faith that he defined as “the realities, values,

powers and communities on and in which persons 'rest their hearts'" (p. 273). Mikaela reported changes in her perception of her relationship with God. As it was stated above, she described it as moving from being "complicated" to being "complex" (Mikaela's first interview, lines 28-46). She defined "complicated" as "I didn't get along with him very well." Mikaela explained the change as a shift in her perception of God's willingness to forgive her for wrongdoing. Her "complicated" God acted like a parent and she was concerned that God would not forgive her, whereas her "complex" God would always forgive her if she was sorry for her wrongdoing.

According to Mikaela, the perceived change in God's attitude towards her was reflected in her changed attitude towards others who wronged her. She told the story of her home being burgled on the day before the first interview: "Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt yep — I'm gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them. That's the first thing that came into my head" (Mikaela's first interview, lines 118-121). Martini (1982) contended that learning how to forgive is essential to experiencing God in community (p. 62). The context of his argument was his thesis that the New Testament revealed "an awareness that the experience of faith has its stages" (p. 59). He proposed a catechumenal stage in which forgiveness is a key learning which takes place in a Christian community.

*Concluding remarks*

Mikaela's story can be interpreted using Martini's categories of community and forgiveness. At the time of her involvement in the research programme, she had sought the assistance of the parish priest of the Church she attended. He had started to prepare her for baptism in the Catholic Church. She was in the catechumenal phase of preparation for entry into the Catholic Church and was participating in a process commonly referred to in the Catholic Church as RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). Even though she was not able to, or was not prepared to, name the influences on the change in the way she perceived God, it was clear from Mikaela's comments that she had experienced something that had led to the changes already detailed above.

When she was interviewed again in the following year, she had left school and was enrolled in a nursing course at TAFE (a college of technical and further education). She had withdrawn from the catechumenate. The change from the security of the Catholic school she attended to TAFE, the alienation from her friends, caused her to question the path she had chosen. Her faith was shaken.

Given the absence of a reliance on scripture or scriptural images in Mikaela's account of her life, the changes in her contents of her faith can be explained better using Babin's (1965) characteristic of egomorphism. He concluded that subjective factors, such as Mikaela's experience of her parents' separation and divorce, "profoundly influence the adolescent's

understanding of God” (p. 49). Like Erikson, Babin viewed adolescence as a quest for identity. Mikaela declared that she did not want to be like her parents. She experienced their unforgiving stance towards each other and she could not forgive them for the pain of insecurity that they brought on her. She replaced their love with the love of her friends, particularly Joan, who encouraged her to go to Mass with her. In this context, she idealised God as a forgiving father.

### Kevin’s conversion

Kevin experienced a form of religious conversion that came about through his quest for relief from experiences of low self-esteem. Even though he was born into a loving family, his parents were not able to help him avoid the negative experiences at school that dogged him. However, it was through participation in the Disciples of Jesus, the charismatic community to which his family belonged that Kevin formed a relationship with God. He attended the youth group that was conducted by the Disciples of Jesus and was converted. The support of his parents and the acceptance he experienced in the youth group predisposed him to conversion which was evident through changes in his relationship with God. As it was done with Mikaela’s story, the major themes identified in the previous chapter will be used to structure the discussion of his conversion.

#### *Changes in Kevin’s relationship with God*

In the interview, Kevin reported changes in his relationship with God. He described God as “like the supreme being sort of. He’s like the — like all-

powerful, like the — like master sort of thing. So like I'm his servant" (Kevin's interview, lines 5-7), however, his relationship with God was not always like this. Kevin gave an insight into his faith in his early teens:

I was like different from others an' so I was struggling with my faith then and — um — I was st- — starting to doubt because — doubt that I was any good in myself so I was — yeah, looking for other ways (lines 19-21).

His parents raised him as a Catholic and taught him how to pray, however, his relationship with God, as he perceived it to be, was shallow. It changed slowly over a few years. When the time of the interview was conducted towards the end of his final year of secondary school, he had become convinced that God had saved him from the negativity that had ruled his life. During the interview, he was invited to reflect on the relationship between faith and suffering. His response identifies his belief in the power of God in his life:

Interviewer: What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Kevin: Um — my faith impacted on this because if suffering — I would just take it, sort of take — take it instead of just not breaking down. I'd like believe that God had a plan an' that this was part of the plan. So, yeah, I would pray more that the — like in the process to give me strength to get past that pain.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever experienced suffering?

Kevin: Yes. Actually I have. More than one occasion where I've been really down, like I've been suffering emotionally and

s-so I — I — I was just — I call on the Lord to really — ah — get me through the rough times an' — yeah — so.

Interviewer: You mentioned a while ago that when you started in Year 8 people picked on you. Was there suffering there?

Kevin: Yes, um — Yeah, I've been — It took me a long while to get to understand that bit, but I feel that God has used that suffering to make me stronger in my faith, so I am stronger — a stronger person in that he has a big — a much bigger plan for me for that where I can use that strongness to overcome some of the stuff that he has planned (lines 108-123).

Kevin believed that his suffering was part of God's plan. His statement "It took me a long while to get to understand that bit" suggests that intellectual development is part of the suffering. He reported that he did not turn to God until he was in Year 10 when what he was being taught in the Disciples of Jesus youth group started to interest him.

In his apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of human suffering (*Salvifici Doloris*), Pope John Paul II (1984) identified the relationship between suffering and conversion. He stated: "Suffering must serve for conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject, who can recognise the divine mercy in this call to repentance" (*SD*, para. 12). The pontiff presented the teaching that conversion is the response to the call to repent which is the heart of the Good News. In this context, suffering is understood to be the result of sin and bears some relationship to conversion. Gutierrez (1987) named the relationship between sin and suffering the doctrine of temporal

retribution, that is, people suffer as a consequence of sin and their suffering can be viewed as a form of punishment for sin and as part of redemption. Pope John Paul II (1984) acknowledged the existence of the doctrine of temporal retribution, however, he also stated that there can be suffering without guilt and referred to the story of Job whose story is about the suffering endured by a just man. Such suffering served to strengthen goodness “both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God” (*SD*, para. 12).

The truth of this view was recognised in Kevin’s account of his suffering. He showed no awareness of his suffering being a form of temporal retribution, that is, as a result of his sin, or anyone else’s sin. He accepted that God caused him to suffer so that he would be strong enough to face even greater challenges in life. His explanation is not unlike that which Jesus gave to his followers. This is a point made by Pope John Paul II who quoted from the Gospels to demonstrate the truth that to be a follower requires suffering. In accepting suffering as the lot of a servant of the Lord, Kevin was announcing his conversion.

Evidence of religious conversion can be identified in changes in a person’s practice of praying to God. Kevin moved from being uncertain about God to being committed to being God’s servant. This was reflected in his prayer life. When he was a young child, his parents taught him how to pray. That is all he said about his childhood prayer. Clearly something happened to him because he eventually arrived at a time in his life when he would pray daily for about an hour “that probly be in the morning, so — um — in the

mornings, so I'm prepared — I can take school on s-sort of get the Holy Spirit to clear my head a bit so I can have more self-control" (lines 68-70). He believed that through prayer God would give him guidance. He described the structure of his prayer time in the following way:

I do the Sign of the Cross an' then I would call on God to — an' ask him what he would want me to do for the day. An' then I would — then I'd probly get into some Bible — reading the Bible and then I'd s-say a decade of the Rosary an' then to conclude. An' as well as writing in my prayer journal all the stuff I've been reading in the Bible that really speaks to me (lines 74-79).

At the time of his interview, Kevin was in Year 12. He had developed a personal relationship with God that allowed him to ask God for direction each day. Kevin admitted early in his interview that this change in his faith was his own choice. He was conscious of the changes happening to him because he sought a relationship with God that would help him live his life happily.

#### *The influence of significant others*

Kevin's conversion was not sudden. It was gradual and it was supported by his experiences of being loved and cared for by his parents and the members of the youth group to which he belonged. Just as Mikaela renewed her relationship with God through the support of her best friend, Kevin developed his relationship with God with the help of his peers in the youth group.

Kevin's story lends support to the findings of Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) who cited studies (Granqvist, 1998, 2002, 2003; Granqvist & Hagekull,

1999, 2002; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) that presented evidence of the correspondence between the religiosity of individuals with a strong attachment to their parents and the religiosity of their parents. Their review of relevant literature led them to formulate the hypothesis that “repeated experiences with sensitive caregivers also produce correspondence between a positive model of self/others and an image of God as loving and caring” (p. 1123). In Kevin’s case, it will be shown that the role of caregiver extended beyond the family to the youth group.

#### Kevin’s relationship with his parents

It was stated earlier in this chapter that Kevin was raised in a Catholic family. His parents were members of the Disciples of Jesus, a charismatic covenant community and taught him about God and Jesus when he was very young. They also taught him how to pray and their teaching was reinforced by what he learned through being a member of the Disciples of Jesus. He was able to recognise the significance of his parents’ influence on him: he described them as the ones who played “the most important role” (lines 222-223) in his faith development.

As happy as Kevin’s home life appeared to be from his account — he felt safe and secure — his parents were not able to shield him from conflict at school. The crisis for Kevin was the treatment he received at the hands of students at school. When he was asked about his experiences of suffering, he replied: “More than one occasion where I’ve been really down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally and s-so I — I — I was just — I call on the Lord to really — ah — get me through the rough times an’ — yeah — so” (lines 114-116).

He revealed that “in primary school I was sorta the outcast sort of thing” (line 140). Later in the interview, he explained how he had been teased:

like some kid'd start teasing me an then I — or — and then I'd be — like walk out and I'd come in and someone else would do something bad to the tea- — behind the teacher's back and I'd get blamed for it because I'd get into fights a lot an' so they'd got — so I'll get blamed for nothing an' so really didn't help me a lot when that was happening (lines 164-168).

In times of distress, he turned to his parents. In the interview, he described the different approaches they took to his suffering:

I was really down, like I'd come home an' I burst into tears and my Mum was there. She give me a hug and when my Dad came home, Dad says, “What's the matter?” Like, really stern. “What's the matter?” An' I — ah — when I told him, he — he was — ah — “Oh, I'll sort it out.” He was really action man sort of. He'd take action. He was just about to go over to teachers. Oh — yeah — an' it really encouraged me a lot. (lines 246-251)

His parents' protective behaviours (his mother's hugs and his father's promises to fight for his son's rights) did not change his situation at school. During his time in primary school, his faith was tested and found wanting, meaning God was found wanting. It changed significantly when he looked beyond his family for support and salvation. As Kevin recalled those times, his memories were of deep emotional turmoil and distress. His crisis was not short-lived; it extended over a period of some five years or more. During their childhood and early adolescence, both he and Mikaela did not credit God with the level of care that they sought.

### Kevin's relationship with his peers

Kevin's quest led him into a deeper involvement in the youth group and it coincided with his growing awareness of and interest in its religious dimension. Unlike "the other ways" to which he referred in his interview, his involvement in the youth group motivated him to continue to seek understanding of his own life world and his relationship with God. His growing interest in what was said to him in the youth group coincided with the development of his capacity for formal operational thinking. It is contended that the movement from concrete operational thinking into a way of thinking that was becoming more and more abstract was a significant factor in his religious conversion.

The changes in Kevin's faith in God can be viewed through the use of Fowler's model of faith development: Kevin moved from a Mythic-Literal stage of faith, with its emphasis on the unquestioning acceptance of the community's faith story, to a Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith, with an equally unquestioning acceptance of the community's mores. While he did not reject what his parents had taught him – it was consistent with what the youth group leaders taught their members – he widened the circle of teachers to include the youth leaders as significant others alongside his parents. His conversion was an intensification of the faith in which he had been raised, however, its influence was not necessarily cognitive. The emotional factor was significant. For instance, Kevin reported that his best friend in the youth group told him, "My be- — closest friend came to me said he had a strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right

thing” (lines 38-40). Despite his articulate rendering of his story and his ease with the theological interpretation of his experiences, Kevin’s story of his conversion focused on his emotional well-being.

Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) identified the two key functions of the attachment figure or primary care giver: first, “he or she provides a haven of safety and comfort to which the infant can turn in times of distress or threat”; and second, the haven of safety is “a secure base for exploration of the environment in the absence of danger” (para. 6). Kevin found that secure base not only in his family but also in the youth group to which he belonged and eventually in becoming a member of the Disciples of Jesus.

### *Owning faith in God*

At the time of his interview, Kevin claimed ownership of his faith in God. When he was asked about his beliefs about God, he replied: “My Mum an’ Dad have brought me up like that and I think it’s very valid what they have to say, so yeah, I’ve made that decision myself” (lines 11-12). Kevin became a member of the youth group when he was in Year 8, but it wasn’t until he was in Year 10 that he started to take notice of what they were trying to teach him about God. By the time he was in Year 12, he had been converted. He described the experience with the following words:

because I turn — was turning eighteen then, they asked if I wanted to go on a seminar sort of thing — um — to sort of discern or decide or make a decision if I wanted to join this community. And so I look — really looked into that and — an’ that was like the turning point literally in my life because — because like I felt God calling me to join this community (lines

32-37).

A conversion is a “turning point.” Kevin had been converted but he was an active agent in the process because he sought knowledge of how to deal with his low self-esteem.

One of the most significant features of his quest for God was his willingness to share his faith with others. Kevin spoke about his call to evangelise his peers at school. Gelpi (1998) explained the nature of the fifth stage of Rambo’s (1993) model of conversion in the following way:

The experience of encounter introduces the potential convert to a period of interaction with the advocate’s religious community. That community provides the potential convert with a new physical centre, with new social relationships, and with new ways of perceiving reality (p. 15ff).

Paloutzian et al. (1999) described this phase as a time when “new beliefs may be adopted, new rituals or behaviours attempted, new relationships cultivated, and new theological insights gained” (p. 1072). Kevin reported on aspects of his new-found faith. For instance, he revealed that sometimes God spoke to him: “When I’m praying I get sort of like a word, some like words that just come out, an’ I believe that’s God telling me stuff that’s called “prophetic word”, what I call the prophetic word” (lines 82-84). This happened to him within the context of his involvement in the Disciples of Jesus and was a consequence of his conversion.

Kevin also believed that his faith in God required him to share it with others. He spoke about how his faith in God made him different from other people. During the interview, he was asked about how his school had

influenced his faith. Kevin turned the question around so that he could respond by speaking about his desire to evangelise his peers. He said, “There are a lot of people — kids that don’t believe in Christ an’ so I feel compelled to like take a l-l- — like leadership role, so I’ll — ah — be a role model sort of thing for them” (lines 178-181). He reported that he sang in the chapel choir and was a Special Minister of the Eucharist. He appeared to be determined to maintain his relationship with God and to share his faith with others.

### *Concluding remarks*

Kevin’s attachment to his parents provided him with a safe haven from which he could explore the faith in which he had been raised. The security he felt at home was evident in the Disciples of Jesus, the charismatic covenant community to which his parents belonged. As his ability to understand the spiritual and religious world grew, he started to show an interest in the teaching he received whenever he attended the Disciples of Jesus youth group. But it was not the teaching that attracted him; it was the affirmation he received from the other members of the youth group, an experience so foreign to his experience of school. And so his attachment focus broadened to include those he met when he went to youth group meetings and who became his friends.

### Elizabeth’s conversion

In many ways, Elizabeth’s life is unremarkable. Her account did not include the sorts of conflicts experienced by either Mikaela or Kevin. Raised in a loving family, she learned about God from her parents and through being a

part of the local Lutheran Church community of which her father was the pastor. The story she told is about the re-centring and intensification of her religious faith that came about through her intellectual development and through the support of her parents and the Lutheran youth group to which she belonged. Fowler (1981) stated that the intensification of religious faith is not conversion because there has not been a change in the content of faith (p. 273). Granqvist (2003) expressed the contrary view that the intensification of religious belief and practice is a form of conversion. In support of Granqvist's position, there is evidence in Elizabeth's account to show that the intensification of her faith in God involved a re-centring of her beliefs to embrace aspects the mystery of Christian faith that she had avoided as a child. By means of the three major themes identified through the data analysis, Elizabeth's conversion will be discussed and the contribution of her story to understanding adolescent religious conversion considered.

#### *Changes in Elizabeth's relationship with God*

Through her interviews and the journal that she kept as part of the data gathering procedure for this study, Elizabeth revealed that her understanding of God was undergoing changes. During her first interview, she described God as caring and loving. God is one who helps, guides and forgives. She rejected the idea that God is "this force in the sky that dictates ... and that you have to appease" (lines 8, 9). When she was asked about her image of God, she responded by describing God as "a father-type figure" (line 29). She had grown up with an image of God being like a father. She continued with her description:

When I did journaling in RE, the same image of always came out of — like a hand, holding in a massive hand, or, um, or just like a — or even a mother or father holding a little baby, or on the shoulder — um, y’know, carrying, warm and safe. Um — well, y’know, the thing of guiding, with holding the hand, guiding and helping (lines 38-43).

It is worth noting that Elizabeth’s image of God belongs in a concrete operational system of thought. Its origins lie in her childhood. It is indicative of Elizabeth being located in Fowler’s (1981) Mythic-Literal stage, which he called “the faith stage of the child” (p. 69).

The argument for a revision of faith development theory, including Fowler’s stages of faith development, promoted by Heinz Streib (2005), states in part that a person can be in more than one stage at any point in his or her life. This is certainly the case with Elizabeth. While her “childlike” image of God has remained unchanged, she has decided to confront those aspects of revelation that unsettle her. She stated in her first interview: “I’m starting to make myself kind of look at the other aspects” (line 32). As it was with Mikaela and Kevin, so too, with Elizabeth: she was trying to understand God’s justice and mercy. During her first interview, she was asked to say more about her image of God being like a father. She replied:

Ooh, it’s — it’s gone from, um, from a thing of always, y’know, just having God there as a father to rely on, to — like I’m realizing now that you have to — um — that there’s other aspects that you’ve gotta work towards, or — like you’ve gotta try to be the best you can, not just keep saying “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” So, like, and trying to understand, whereas before I’d just

dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a — y’know — revengeful thing, trying to understand it more, or, you know, or explore something — (lines 70-77).

What she was experiencing was a form of cognitive dissonance that was brought on by her realisation that her past mental behaviours (“before I’d just dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a ...”) were inadequate.

Elizabeth’s admission is taken to be a sign that she had moved from thinking in a concrete operational way to adopting the system of thinking characterised by abstraction (formal operational thinking). Piaget (1971) referred to this as the process of “decentration” from self. Fowler (1984) described it as the epistemological act of balancing one’s views with those of others, sometimes referred to as “mutual perspective taking” (p. 33). He associated it with structural change from one stage of faith to the next, its earliest manifestation being in the change from Mythic-Literal faith to Synthetic-Conventional faith, to use categories developed by James Fowler (1981).

While the images that Elizabeth used to communicate her beliefs about God reflect the concrete operational thinking associated with childhood, her awareness of the paradoxical shows that she recognised her responsibility to develop and maintain her relationship with God. In a statement on the multiple dimensions of religious development, Streib (2005) drew attention to the debate about post-formal operations and research into cross-domain variance (p. 5). To summarise the argument presented in his paper and apply it to the

narrative given by Elizabeth: there is no doubt that there was more than cognitive development involved in what Elizabeth revealed through her statements about her relationship with God. What was evidenced in her interviews and her journal was her awareness of the transcendence of God.

Elizabeth's faith in God is Trinitarian, however, she claimed: "You can't try to understand (the Trinity)" (Elizabeth's first interview, line 87). Her justification for her position was her attempt to maintain the transcendence of God: "You wouldn't want a God you could understand, 'cause he'd only be as great as us" (lines 88-90). She believed that Jesus was a man, but "it's hard to think of Jesus in heaven as a man" (line 97). She struggled to explain the Holy Spirit. She said, "You can't describe it. Y'kinda know it" (line 120). Elizabeth was more comfortable with a question about her image of the Holy Spirit and she responded with "the flame image from the Bible" (line 125). Yet despite her protest about not being able to describe the Holy Spirit, she proceeded to use the analogy of strong emotions to explain the image:

It's like a thing of burning that like if you have this — like emotions can be real strong and like kind of control like if you're really, really angry they'd be — you start shaking and stuff, type of like a burning kind of thing in you — yeah — so the burning of the fire in you to be doing the God stuff (lines 127-131).

Elizabeth believed that the Holy Spirit dwelt within believers and made its presence felt. In her second interview, she said she believed it was like a "power to be able to do good things" (lines 56-57), however, she did not pray to the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth acknowledged in her first interview that she

prayed to God and to Jesus. When she was a child, she prayed every night. In her first interview, she said: “You say your prayers at night with your parents, but it’s not that much of a big thing” (lines 24-25). She continued:

But for as far back as I can remember, I’ve always kind of prayed when I felt upset, or in trouble, or like I needed help, but I think it – that got more meaning, or I felt that it actually worked more as I got a bit older (lines 25-28).

Her prayer life is much more complex than she reveals in the statement quoted above. The opening paragraph in her journal reveals as much. She titled her imaginary biography “Oxymoron” because of the contradictory nature of her experiences of life. When she thought about her childhood, she was happy; and when she thought about her future, she experienced fear. Her concluding statement is significant: “When one moment I feel so secure and sure about my faith in God, the next moment things seem so unfair and I question God and I don’t feel so sure about my faith” (lines 14-16). Thus her prayer was not only about mundane matters, such as “Thank you for the rain” (Elizabeth’s second interview, lines 89-90), but also existential issues, such as the presence of injustices, the existence of God, and her own insecurities.

Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) proposed that:

Regarding the safe haven aspect of attachment, one of the best documented findings in the psychology of religion is that believers turn to God in situations of distress. Such situations are diverse and include loss through death and divorce (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000, 2002; Loveland, 1968), emotional crises (James, 1902; Starbuck, 1899), and relationship problems (Ullman, 1982), all of which are likely to activate the individual’s

attachment system (Bowlby, 1969). In situations such as these, the most likely religious response is to pray rather than to visit Church (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975), suggesting that private prayer may function as a religious analog to attachment behaviors (see Kirkpatrick, 1999) (pp. 1122-1123).

Traditional teaching about prayer emphasises four purposes for praying: to praise God, to thank God, to seek forgiveness from God, and to ask for what is needed to live according to God's laws. Elizabeth's comments about prayer reveal her awareness of prayers of thanksgiving, penitence and supplication. Her acknowledgement of the change in her prayer life – "I think it – that got more meaning, or I felt that it actually worked more as I got a bit older" (lines 27-28) – suggests her greater understanding of the purpose of prayer. Such a change is consistent with the intensification of her beliefs about God and her deeper commitment to God: her conversion.

#### *The influence of significant others*

The investigation of Mikaela's conversion highlighted the impact of significant others, such as her parents and her close friends, on her faith development. It was a similar case for Kevin, however, whereas the divorce of Mikaela's parents precipitated her crisis of faith, Kevin felt supported by his parents as he explored his faith and made choices that led him into a deeper relationship with God and commitment to his Catholic faith. It will be shown that Elizabeth's parents, her siblings, and her friends in the Lutheran youth group to which she belonged, provided her with the support she needed to develop her relationship with God.

### Elizabeth's relationship with her parents and siblings

Elizabeth was raised in a Christian family. Her father was the pastor of the local Lutheran Church. Being a member of a worshipping community was the norm for Elizabeth. Her parents taught her about God and they taught her how to pray. In her journal, she expressed her gratitude in the following way:

I am so thankful to God for giving me my parents and brothers and sister. They have helped shape me into the person that I am and I believe that every good quality that I have is because of their great influence on my life. I am also very thankful for being born into a Christian family, who has taught me about our loving God all my life. It is the greatest birth gift I could imagine (lines 21-26).

She acknowledged the influence of her parents and her siblings. In her journal she also described her childhood by means of a chapter summary in an imaginary autobiography. She wrote:

#### *Chapter Two: Moulded Under Blue Skies and Sunshine*

This chapter represents my early childhood, which was very happy and loving (the 'blue skies and sunshine'). 'Moulded' represents my parents and older siblings who taught me about life and about being a good person. They guided and moulded me to be the best person I can be, and taught me without even knowing it with their great example. I am what my parents moulded me into (lines 27-33).

Her description of her childhood is significant for a number of reasons. Elizabeth recognised the signs of her own development. The love and care she received in her family provided her with her internal working model of herself as worthwhile. Her beliefs about God were a reflection of her internal

working model of a caring parent. As a child, she received knowledge and used what she was taught to construct a world that reflected the love of her family and the love of God.

Attachment theory can be used to clarify Elizabeth's relationship with God. Inge Bretherton (1992) outlined the work of John Bowlby and attachment theory. She stated:

If the attachment figure has acknowledged the infant's needs for comfort and protection while simultaneously respecting the infant's need for independent exploration of the environment, the child is likely to develop an internal working model of self as valued and reliable (p. 782).

Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) were of the view that "aspects of attachment function in a similar way for the believer in relation to God as they do for the child in relation to his or her parents" (p. 1122). In her first interview, Elizabeth described her mother as a "feeling type person" (line 440). She stated that she learned to trust in God from her mother. Her father was the thinker in the family. He taught her how to set a good example for others. His influence was evident also in her involvement in their parish. Elizabeth reported how she contributed to the Sunday liturgies held in the parish to which her family belonged. At the time of her first interview, she had been involved in the parish liturgy for at least three years, sometimes helping with the children's liturgy and sometimes helping with the singing by playing guitar. She did not appear to be enthusiastic about the experience and she readily accepted the word "duty" as a description of her involvement. She concluded her comments with "I like it and everything but I only go for the sermon" (Elizabeth's first interview, lines 436-437). The sermons were preached by her father.

In her interviews and in her journal, she provided examples of the impact of her parents and siblings on her faith development. For instance, she recalled her mother's tenderness and compassion. Her father challenged her to be open to the theology taught in her Religious Education classes. Her sister had a profound impact on her. She said: "I find a lot of her words coming out of my mouth" (lines 375-376).

#### Elizabeth's relationship with her friends

Even though Elizabeth retained the faith perspective given to her by her parents, she allowed herself to be influenced by her peers in the youth group to which she belonged. This is illustrative of the structural-developmental model that has been used to help explain the changes that happened in Elizabeth's understanding of her relationship with God. Fowler (1981) made use of the concept of "social perspective taking," proposed by Selman, to explain changes in knowing and valuing that he identified in the lives of those people he interviewed as part of his research into faith development (pp. 74ff). Heinz Streib (2001) made the following observation concerning the mutuality referred to by Fowler:

The widening of the interpersonal horizon allows the emergence of a new religious style that rests on the mutuality of relationships in one's religious group and prefers an image of God as a personal partner (p. 152).

This was the experience that Elizabeth had when she joined the youth group attached to the Lutheran Church. The "new religious style" adopted by her owed much to the influence of her close friends in the youth group. She reported in her second interview that she admired Katy who was her mentor in

the youth group: "... she keeps influencing me more and more, not like a lot, not just with God things, but the kind of person I am" (lines 31-33). Elizabeth modelled her prayer style on what she observed when Katy prayed:

In those situations when you're just talking to someone, that like, y'know, if you're worried about something, she'll just say, "Please Jesus, let blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" or whatever. And like that's really like made a difference to me that like I don't leave it 'til the night, or whatever, to think about it (lines 94-99).

### *Owning faith in God*

The story of Elizabeth's conversion would not be complete without reference to her awareness of her own psychological development. She refers to it in her journal in a summary of one of the chapters of her imaginary biography:

#### *Chapter Three: The White Fairy Visits Me*

The white fairy (at least I think she is called the white fairy) is the fairy from *Pinocchio* who turns him from a lifeless puppet into a real boy. Chapter Three represents my later childhood and early teenage years when I began to think for myself and be more independent of my parents. I was turned from a 'puppet' who did all my parents said and did into a being who could think for myself and make my own decisions. Of course, Pinocchio made many mistakes and needed Gepetto to teach and guide him. I still needed (and still do) my parents' guidance and support (lines 34-42).

Mutuality is an important aspect of Elizabeth's religious conversion.

Streib (2001) offered the following observation about its importance in considerations about faith development:

To be respected and loved by others is most important. Mutuality also is the soil in which altruism and over identification with others may grow. The unquestioned security in one's religious group or the dependence on their judgment reveals that it is difficult to transcend the ideological and institutional group limits, and if one religious home has been left, another will be searched for desperately (p.152).

In reality, Elizabeth did not leave her religious home. She became more involved in its life. As she perceived her life, she had not over identified herself with her religious community. Unlike Mikaela, she did not seek "to transcend the ideological and institutional group limits." She was happy to remain a part of a system that validated her self-concept and promoted her feelings of self-worth even though she was not entirely happy with every aspect of her religious life. There was still room for growth and development.

Elizabeth's growing ability to conceptualise and reflect helped her to accept the challenges of leadership in her youth group. It was her commitment to the group and the support and encouragement that she received from her close friends in the group that triggered her conversion. The intensification of her beliefs and the strengthening of her relationship with God brought her deep satisfaction.

### *Concluding remarks*

The religious conversion experienced by Elizabeth was triggered partly by her fear of the future, but mainly by her desire to belong in the youth group

that affirmed her and challenged her at the same time. She had been given a leadership role in the group and she was required to lead by example. She admired her friend Katy who was her mentor in the youth group. Katy's style of praying in a group was the object of Elizabeth's desire. To pray like Katy required her to be in a closer relationship with God and with Jesus. In her second interview, she reflected on the influence of Katy and others in her youth group and how her prayer life changed because of the challenge their way of praying posed for her. She stated: "That's really like made a difference to me that like I don't leave it 'til the night, or whatever, to think about it" (lines 97-99). So part of the change that was happening to her involved her prayer style. She moved from the morning and night prayers of her childhood to praying throughout the day. Her prayer became conversational in the style advocated by her mentor Katy and used by her in youth group meetings.

Crucial to understanding Elizabeth's conversion experiences has been the concept of mutuality. Her desire to belong in a wider community, which was born from her experience of a loving family, was satisfied by her involvement in the youth group attached to her Church. Streib (2001) intimated that mutuality can be a limiting factor in the religious development of individuals, meaning that the desire to belong can contribute to the creation of a religious ghetto mentality. Elizabeth was aware of this in herself. She explained in her first interview that she reacted negatively to the theology presented to her in her religious education classes: "When I sometimes come home from school real annoyed at something Catholic that some one of my teachers had told me, I'd go home and start saying it to Dad and he would defend the Catholics" (lines 461-464). What surprised her was her father's

defence of the right of teachers in a Catholic school to present Catholic teaching. She reflected on this admission in the first interview. Some months later during her second interview, she added: "... like 'cause of the Catholic thing, I really didn't even give it a chance – um – which like I probably should have and I could have like learnt something, or got something out of it, I'm sure (lines 121-124). The change of attitude indicated here points to the development of an openness that Fowler would propose as part of the movement towards a more mature faith and definitely a sign of conversion.

### Stephen's conversion

It can be argued that Mikaela experienced Christian conversion. Stephen's conversion is a different matter. It will be shown that his conversion is religious but not Christian. Stephen's parents separated and divorced when he was very young. He moved from the country to a beach suburb north of Perth and he lived there with his mother and younger brother. Stephen admired his mother and he described her as a "really, really good person". She was his "best mate." His relationship with his father was built on common interests and respect, such as surfing and cars. Whenever he stayed with his father, he was encouraged to go to Mass. He reported that his religious development underwent a significant change when he had to come to terms with a surfing accident suffered by one of his cousins. His "soul searching" led him to accept that God did not control such things but God did give people the strength to face adversity. As a prelude to, and in support of the discussion, the findings of research conducted by Pierre Babin in the 1960's will be outlined and applied to Stephen's sense of God through the use of the same

structure employed in the discussion of the conversions experienced by Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth.

### *The adolescent's sense of God*

In chapter 2 of *Faith and the Adolescent* (1965), Pierre Babin described three processes that characterise adolescents' sense of God. He used the word "sense" to convey the adolescents' lived experiences of relating with God. He named the first process "naturation" by which he meant "a mentality and expression in which God seems to be the term of man's efforts" (p. 24). He described two characteristics of naturation. First, concerning the influence of natural tendencies, naturation is evident in adolescents' understanding of God which is moulded partly by what is commonly deeply felt by people of all ages and cultures. Drawing on the theological insights of Karl Rahner (1959), Babin contended that adolescents tend to come to an understanding of God through reason, education, or what he called "natural needs" (p. 27) by which he meant basic psychological needs. Second, concerning the statements adolescents typically make about God, Babin stated that there was "no explicit link with the historical order of revelation as revealed by Jesus Christ" (p. 26). Thus naturation referred to the absence of any reference to revelation.

Babin called the second process "egomorphism." He used the term to refer to those findings of research conducted in the 1950s in France and Canada into the role of ego in adolescents' statements about their experiences of God. He defined egomorphism as "a mentality and form of expression in which one's concept of God or relationship with God seems profoundly determined by the psychosociological conditions of the subject's

personality” (p. 42). He stated that researchers concluded that subjective factors profoundly influence adolescents’ understandings of God. He reported the following characteristics of the influence of subjective factors: “On the one hand, they distort divine reality with the forms and demands of adolescent subjectivity; on the other hand, they greatly involve the adolescent’s personality in his understanding of God” (p. 41).

Babin’s third process, which he called “ethical sense,” refers to “the repercussion of moral behaviour on the sense of God” (p. 72). His research showed two characteristics of the ethical sense. First, adolescents’ relationships with God are greatly influenced by their need for “moral excellence.” Second, Babin reported that the moral response of adolescents was “a subjective demand of the reason or of the heart trying to reach God” rather than “a response to a call of grace, as the acceptance of Jesus Christ” (p. 73).

Babin’s three processes can be used to provide a psychological interpretation of the experience of religious conversion. His description stands alongside the theological explanation of the relationship between revelation and conversion found in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965) published by the Catholic Church as part of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965):

By faith man freely commits his entire self to God, making “the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals,” and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him. Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he

must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and “makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth” (para. 5).

How “the grace of God” and “the interior helps of the Holy Spirit” assist the convert is not explained. It is here that theology is helped by psychological theories and models, such as Babin’s description of the faith of adolescents, to explain how the Holy Spirit “moves the heart and converts it to God.”

### *Stephen’s changing relationship with God*

Stephen’s relationship with God changed over time as a result of his intellectual development and because of the circumstances of his life. When Stephen was interviewed for the first time, he was asked about his beliefs about God. He responded by saying that “God’s the creator of everything. He’s – um – the one who helps us do the right thing” (lines 4-5). In this response can be found two themes that ran through his interviews and the journal that he kept as part of his involvement in the study. First, Stephen displayed a passion for the environment. He interpreted the creative act of God in a moral sense, that is, he believed that people were given the responsibility and power to protect the environment. It will be shown below that his “need for moral excellence,” to use Babin’s phrase, was awakened in him by some of his teachers through the subjects he studied in secondary school.

Stephen expressed concern about people’s failure to do the right thing with respect to the environment. In his first interview, he stated:

Sometimes I believe that God is disappointed in the way we’ve been treating the earth, like that’s why there’s like natural disasters. There’ve

been more disasters, like natural disasters, recorded in the past two hundred years than in the previous thousand and, y'know, like just trying to let us know that we're not living the life we should be (lines 168-174).

It can be argued that these are the words of one whose heart has been moved and converted by the Holy Spirit and that the truth that Stephen recognises is that God expects individuals, organisations and communities to behave responsibly towards creation. But Stephen's faith is not expressed by him in this way. His faith is not consciously Trinitarian, that is, he was not aware of the Church's teaching about the Holy Spirit. When asked how he would explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who was not a Christian, he responded with: "I haven't really thought about what the Holy Spirit is. Is – Is that – D'ye mean like the Spirit, the power around us" (Stephen's first interview, lines 88-89)?

Even though he was uncertain about the meaning of the term "Holy Spirit," he was able to reflect on the relationship between God and the Holy Spirit and to describe the work of the Holy Spirit:

Um – the Holy Spirit like just through all the saints we've had all of the like marvellous people in this world – um – something has to be pushing them like help- like to believe in that sort of thing, leading them like they live.

The Holy Spirit could be like that (lines 100-103).

Throughout this part of the interview, and also in the second interview conducted some months later, the uncertainty communicated in the expression "could be like that" was evident. His focus was on God and not the Blessed Trinity. For instance, in the second interview he was asked to comment on his image of the Holy Spirit. He replied: "I've never really though

– this is not good. Last time I said that it was the – I can't remember. The Holy Spirit hasn't changed not greatly because I haven't thought about it enough for it to evolve (lines 49-52).”

Babin (1965) arrived at the conclusion that adolescents typically displayed an ethical sense based on their image of God and not on revelation. Stephen's ethical sense was founded on his growing awareness of what he believed to be the God-given collective responsibility for the environment shared by all people. This aspect of his beliefs will be reflected on in the following chapters from the perspectives of the role of the imagination in religious conversion and the contribution of education to the development of the adolescent's ethical sense. At this point in the discussion, it is considered sufficient to acknowledge it as an aspect of his belief in God.

Stephen's understanding of God was not derived consciously from revelation. In his first interview, he explained: “I didn't go to a Catholic school. I went to a public school” (lines 78-79). Consequently, when he was a child whatever he learned about God came from how he was raised by his parents. For instance, he went to Mass once a fortnight when he visited his father. Stephen stated that he learned the story of Jesus partly from going to Mass on those occasions, but mostly from what his parents taught him. He did not consciously seek to learn from the Church about God. During his first interview, Stephen declared, “I believe that I don't need to go to Church to relate with God, like I can talk to him any time I want” (lines 61-62).

His parents sent him to a public school for his primary schooling. Then he attended a Catholic secondary school. When he was asked about the

impact of Religious Education lessons on his faith, he focused on the debates held in Year 11 about life issues, such as abortion and stem cell research. He wrote with some passion in his journal about the debates and the position he defended was opposed to the teaching of the Church:

I agree with abortion, the reason being I don't believe a child should be brought into this life if the parents cannot provide a sufficient life for the child. The Church says we should give the child up for adoption, but I believe that is too hard for the parents. A mother should not have to hold the baby for nine months and give the child away (lines 79-83).

Stephen constructed his beliefs from a number of sources: from what his parents taught him, from attending Mass with his father, from what he was taught at school, particularly his secondary school, but mostly from his own thinking about what was happening in his life.

As it was noted with Kevin and Mikaela, Stephen's relationship with God changed because of crises in his life. However, while the crises experienced by Mikaela were precipitated by her parents' separation and divorce, as well as the loss of a close friend, Stephen's crises came from different quarters and appeared to be less dramatic. The first crisis occurred when Stephen was in Year 10, specifically, in a Year 10 Religious Education class. The word *crisis* is used here in the sense that Erikson (1968) used it: to describe turning points in the experience of living. For him, a turning point, like conversion, was "a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (p. 96). In chapter 4, it was reported that Stephen's attitude towards life changed when his teacher challenged him about his treatment of a fly (p. 170). In his second interview, he recalled an incident that took place in his

Year 10 Religious Education class: “This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, ‘It’s got as much right to live as you do.’ And I’ve never done it since” (lines 92-94).

Stephen then linked this experience to his understanding of Buddhism:

Mr Jones’ class last year would a been one of the biggest RE things. But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you just – But that’s what the Buddhists also believe. Like they don’t, they don’t kill flies, or anything. I’ve spoken to a – like someone that follows Buddhism only last month and they don’t own fly spray. Like they treat their animals with respect ‘cause they believe that it could be like your grandmother or your grandfather that’s done something bad that have to learn a lesson, so you treat them with respect ‘cause you never know who they are (lines 95-104).

Stephen’s faith changed over time. In his first interview, he reported that he moved from being “arrogant” when he was a child and “... if something bad had happened I’d like blame God....” to being open to the merciful presence of God in the world. At the time of the interview, he had come to the view that “He’s given earth and people like the will to do their own sort of – do what they want. So He – I understand he has a certain task for us all but it’s not his fault that certain things happen that we’ve done” (lines 35-40). His cousin Andrea’s surfing accident, which was the second crisis that he faced, precipitated a change in his beliefs. In his journal, he wrote:

The only time I have really changed in faith was the time of my cousin’s accident. I have always believed in God, but her dedication has strengthened my religious beliefs.

Andrea may have very well have drowned not being able to turn over to breathe as she was face down in the water, but one of her friends was clever enough to swim out and turn her over. Most kids would think that she was kidding, lying face down, but he had a feeling Andrea was not OK. I believe God was looking out for her. This even, in the beginning questioned my faith. I thought that if there was a god, why would he let this happen. After much soul searching I realised that God did not control this, but he did give Andrea the strength to get through this (lines 51-62).

Stephen's changed relationship with God can be seen as an expression of his growing awareness of human frailty. He moved from a position of arrogance – his description of his attitude towards God when he was a child – to recognising his own need for the help of a powerful spiritual being. This change in his awareness of God's presence in his life was reflected significantly in the changes that took place in his prayers. This point will be developed further in the next section. At this point it is sufficient to note that his prayers changed from being formulaic and repetitious to being more personal. Traditional teaching about prayer in the Catholic Church emphasises four ends of prayer: to praise God, to give thanks, to express sorrow for sin, and to ask for help. Stephen's perception of prayer emphasised just two of the four ends of prayer: thanksgiving and supplication. This was in keeping with his beliefs about God's role in the world.

Stephen's thanksgiving prayers acknowledged the power of God at work in his life and the lives of those whom he loved. This content of his faith remained unchanged in his life. What did change was his realisation that God

was not responsible for those things that caused him to suffer. As stated above, the greatest obstacle that he had to deal with was his cousin's surfing accident which left her a quadraplegic. He recalled that as a child, he blamed God whenever he suffered. Now he had come to consider the small signs of recovery experienced by his cousin as answers to his prayers.

Stephen's reliance on God was a sign of his religious conversion. He had come to recognise his own need for a powerful being in his life to help him deal with disappointments and those events over which he had no control. While his attitude towards God can be construed as the "submission of his intellect and will" to God, it was not in response to revelation as understood and accepted by the Catholic Church. By his own admission, Stephen regarded himself as more a Buddhist than a Christian in his beliefs. He had arrived at his own beliefs about God and they reflected his needs. As he stated in the second interview: "My religion is Catholicism, but my faith – like I said before, I have many beliefs of different religions, like Buddhism, reincarnation, so therefore I use them differently" (lines 86-88).

#### *The influence of significant others*

The most significant people in Stephen's life were his parents. Even though they had divorced and lived separate lives, Stephen still felt very much a part of their worlds. He enjoyed good relationships with his mother and father. They provided him with the stability and security that he needed to deal with issues that impacted on his relationship with God as he perceived it to be.

As a child, Stephen went to Mass with his father whenever he stayed with him. His father went to Mass every Sunday. Even though as an adolescent he became less regular in attending Mass with his father, Stephen believed that his father's influence was instrumental in the development of his faith in God. He stated in his second interview: "(It was) my Dad being a practising Catholic which led me to going to Church which like my faith evolved from that" (Stephen's Second Interview, lines 57-58). Stephen discovered that he and his father had similar interests: surfing and cars. He reported that in recent times he had grown closer to his father. He said, "Me and my Dad have become mates pretty much over the past two years. Like, he was my mate before that but he was like more of a father figure" (Stephen's first interview, lines 372-375). When he was asked about what brought about the change in their relationship, he responded with "Um – how much advice he gave me with my cousin's accident, so much good advice" (lines 381-382).

Stephen was influenced in the practice of his faith more by his mother than by his father. He described his mother as a "very, very good person" (line 411) who is "a really good role model and I try to follow in her path" (lines 402-403). Her relationship with the Catholic religion was presented in the following way: "Um – she's baptised, but she's not a practicing Catholic, although she does – I dunno, she lives the life of one, like just treats others with respect, has morals and she's like a good role model" (Stephen's First Interview, lines 276-279). In this description of his mother, Stephen emphasises the ethical dimension of his understanding of Catholicism. Also in his first interview,

similar ideas were expressed. For instance, when he was asked about how his faith in God shaped the way he lived his life, he responded:

Um – treat others as they would wanna – like as you would want them to treat you. Y’know, just live the Christian life, just have respect for one another and help out people when they need it, ask for help when you need it (Stephen’s first interview, lines 150-153).

Stephen’s idealism, of which his understanding of Christianity is a part, was linked to his respect for his mother and her influence over him. From the security he experienced growing up with her being both mother and father to him for most of his life – “my Mum’s been both” (line 375) – he was able to develop his understanding of how to make his way through life with integrity and then put it into practice.

Over time, Stephen developed a religious view of life. His relationship with God reflected his relationship with his parents. Using attachment theory, Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) researched the possible relationship between childhood attachments, religious beliefs and conversion. They posited two contrasting hypotheses about the nature and direction of an individual’s relationship with God. The first is the “compensation hypothesis” and the second is the “mental model hypothesis.” The “compensation hypothesis” suggests that belief in a loving, personal God can be a substitute for the absence of a loving relationship with parents or other primary caregivers. The “mental model hypothesis” states that a person’s relationship with God is built on earlier experiences of attachment, such as relationships with parents or other primary caregivers.

The latter has relevance to Stephen's case. The "mental model hypothesis," which Birgegard and Granqvist (2002) called the "two-level correspondence hypothesis" (p. 1123), is based on Bowlby's (1969) work on children's internal working models of attachment (often referred to in the literature as IWMs). Early relationships, such as Stephen's relationship with his mother, provide the basis for future attachment relationships, as in the case of Stephen's belief in God as a powerful creator who offers him support and strength as well as guidance. Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) reported that "perceived attachment to a primary caregiver appears to influence religious stability and change over time" (p. 638). Stephen's conversion was gradual. It reflected his intellectual development and his willingness to address crises in his life from within the social framework of his family. The role of his teachers and his secondary school will be dealt with in a later chapter.

The final comment concerning the influence of his parents on the development of his IWM of attachment on which his relationship with God came to be based comes from a chance meeting with Stephen. He had just returned from an overseas trip to Asia. He had been assisting a friend from his school days with filming the plight of endangered animals off the coast of Malaysia. He recalled his involvement in this present study and how his faith journey still engaged him. He was still working on his relationship with God.

*Owning faith in God*

In the area of faith development there are degrees of ownership of faith. As discussed in Chapter Two of this study, Fowler's (1981) stages of faith represent degrees of ownership of faith. In the context of this study, it is religious faith that is being considered. Stephen owned his faith in God. He took responsibility for his relationship with God which he developed through prayer and reflection.

One of the findings of attachment theory research into religious belief and conversion is the correlation between attachment and the practice of prayer. Byrd & Boe (2001) stated:

Although prayer has been frequently discussed as an attachment-related phenomenon (Kirkpatrick, 1995, 1997b, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992) and described by Kirkpatrick (1999) as "the most important proximity-maintaining attachment behavior directed toward God" (p. 806), to date no published study has investigated prayer as a function of attachment (p. 10).

Through their research, they found that non-avoidant people, that is, those who have secure IWMs, are more likely to engage in prayer to maintain closeness to God. This finding is consistent with the Stephen's perception of prayer.

It can be concluded from the analysis of the transcripts related to Stephen's case that he had made a commitment to placing his trust in God. Commitment was identified by Rambo (1993) as the sixth phase or aspect of the process of conversion. Gelpi (1998) described this phase as follows:

Every conversion involves a turning from something and a turning to

something else. The turning expresses commitment. Commitment provides an initial conversion experience with its culminating moment. The convert leaves behind an old past and an old self and embarks on a new future that promises to bring into existence a new self (p. 16).

Stephen's commitment to God was investigated by means of questions concerning the nature and content of his prayer. He was asked about the place of prayer in his relationship with God in both interviews. In the second interview, he stated:

I used to pray every night. Now I pray probably on, once, maybe twice a week, but the prayers are more in depth. Like as a child I just prayed like the same prayer every night. But now I actually thank God for certain things, ask him favours and so I suppose I look at God as a mate more so than someone you're just repetitive towards. So although it's decreased, it has also become – um – more personal (lines 62-69).

It was stated in the previous section that of the four ends of prayer (praising God, thanking God, expressing sorrow for sin, and asking God for help) Stephen showed awareness of only two reasons for praying: to ask God for help and to thank God for the help received. Stephen said that thanking God for his family and friends had always been a part of his prayer for as long as he could remember. In the present, God had become a friend, a "mate" he could turn to for help. In the first interview, he described his prayer as being "like a one-on-one with God, so you hear him and he hears you" (lines 112-113) and he stated that "the way I picture God is the way I ask him for help" (line 156). And the help he sought was with obstacles in his life and how to deal with them.

The commitment to God shown by Stephen is an aspect of conversion and it signals the change from deferring to authorities external to himself, such as his parents, his teachers, or the Church, to consulting himself as the authority. The move from external authority to internal authority is a characteristic of the change from one stage of faith to the next as described by James Fowler (1981) who described six stages of faith development. Fowler referred to a preliminary stage as primal or undifferentiated faith. He believed that this stage begins in the womb and is characterised by experiences of trust and love which form the basis for all later stages. The two stages of particular interest here are the following:

Stage Three: Synthetic-Conventional Faith is ushered in by the emergence of formal operational thought and the onset of puberty. Typically associated with adolescence, this stage is characterised by the emergence of a personal relationship with God within the framework of the development of relationships with others, including the beliefs of significant others, such as family, or close friends. At this stage, people's beliefs about God are derived from parents, family and friends. Authority is externalised and beliefs are largely tacit, that is, accepted without being consciously owned.

Stage Four: Individuative-Projective Faith, which can emerge in the mid- to late teens, is built on the conscious and critical examination of previous tacitly accepted belief system. No longer subject to the tyranny of the "they," people in this stage choose to act in a way that is consistent with their core beliefs. Authority comes to be centred in the self and not in the other.

Fowler (1981) contended that the movement from Stage Three to Stage Four is experienced as a form of religious conversion when the content of the person's faith changes. For instance, it has been shown that Mikaela's beliefs about God changed: she moved from believing that God was vindictive to placing her trust in a forgiving God. Likewise, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen reported that their perceptions of God changed significantly.

Stephen reported that his core beliefs underwent significant changes that signalled a move away from the teaching of the Church, particularly with regard to life issues, such as abortion and stem cell research. The most significant experience of his upper school years was debating these issues in his religious education classes. The debates as well as his research and reflection on the teachings of Buddhism helped him to form his own ideas about God. Thus making decisions for himself about what he accepted about God signalled a change in his faith. Rather than moving him away from God, he actually drew closer to God as he perceived their relationship. He used the word "personal" to characterise his relationship with God.

The change in faith experienced by Stephen did not happen overnight. It was gradual and volitional, that is, he was the active agent of his own conversion. This is not to say that conversion was his intention. It happened because of the quest for answers to questions that confounded him. In his journal he reflected on the surfing accident suffered by his cousin Andrea. He wrote, "I thought that if there was a god, why would he let this happen" (line 59). As he acknowledged in his first interview, when asked about the reasons

for the change in his relationship with God, it happened also because of his growth in maturity:

Ah – just maturity, like I don't have – I don't – I dunno, I sometimes put myself in like his position, not that he could, but what would you have done, like you can't watch everyone at the same time. I dunno, just a bit of thought on the matter (lines 45-48).

The “maturity” to which he referred relates to the development of mutual perspective-taking and self-reflection skills.

### *Concluding remarks*

Stephen is an idealist and a thinker. This is obvious from the story he told about his religious faith through the interviews and his journal. Unlike Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth, his focus appeared to be on the world, what was wrong with it, and how he could contribute to changing it for the better. Like Mikaela, his parents divorced, but there the similarity ends. He was young, about three years old, when they separated and divorced. It would seem that it was an amicable arrangement. Stephen appeared to be comfortable with moving between the two homes. He spent most of his time with his mother who never re-married. It seemed from his account of his life that his mother dedicated herself to her two children. She was his “mate” and his mateship with God appears to have been modelled on his relationship with his mother.

Unlike the other participants whose stories have been presented in this chapter, Stephen was open to religious influences from outside his Catholic upbringing. He was taken with concepts found in Buddhism, particularly the

notion of reincarnation. This seemed to fit well with his understanding of a transcendent and benign Creator who guided and strengthened those who believed in God. Stephen did not believe in a vengeful god intent on punishing people. Rather, he believed that God allowed people to suffer the consequences of their actions. Consequently, he placed emphasis on behaving ethically. For him to have moved from a position of arrogance, as he termed it, when as a child he would blame God for what went wrong in his life, to his present view of God who wants people to take responsibility for the world and for creation is clearly a sign of his religious conversion.

### Summary

The focus for this chapter was the discussion about the factors affecting religious conversion experienced by four participants in the study, namely, Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. These participants had been selected because the changes in their relationship with God that they reported were interpreted to be indicative of their recognition of those relationships deepening and becoming more intimate.

In the chapter, the contexts of the religious experiences of the participants in the present study were discussed using the major themes identified in the previous chapter, namely their changing relationships with God, the influence of significant others on their faith development, and their ownership of their faith. Insights into the religious conversion of the four participants were gained through the application of the findings of attachment theory as well as theological and psychological principles. Rambo's seven-stage model of religious conversion and the understanding of faith

development presented by James Fowler, the principles adolescent faith postulated by Babin and the overarching psychosocial principles proposed by Erikson, Piaget and advocates of attachment theory were used to clarify the position adopted in the present study with respect to religious conversion.

The stories told by the four participants suggest the following can be true of adolescents who experience religious conversion:

- Despite the formulation of theories of faith development, particularly the stage theory of James Fowler, individual differences are significant. These differences include the intellectual, emotional and social factors affecting the lives of adolescents. Family dynamics, psychological factors and emotional ties are likely to be significant in conversion.
- It is likely that conversion will take place, even gradually, only if there is a crisis, be it major or minor, which precipitates the desire for a deeper relationship with God.
- Attachment figures play a significant role in the religious conversion of adolescents. Where they provide a secure environment, and are themselves religious, then adolescents are more likely to be religious as well. In such circumstances, if adolescents are predisposed to explore their faith, then it is likely that conversion will take place and it will tend to be gradual.
- Attachment figures can include peers, particularly in youth groups sponsored by faith communities. Such groups provide the security needed for adolescents as they explore their beliefs about God and develop their relationship with God. In concert with their intellectual and social development, conversion is likely to happen gradually. Again,

individual differences are a significant factor. Each of the youth groups referred to in this chapter has its own ethos and its own pedagogy. Judging from how Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth told their stories, it is likely that youth groups have their own unique ways of helping their members grow in faith.

- Concepts belonging to structural-developmental theories, such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development, have proved to be useful tools for interpreting statements made by the participants about changes in their relationships with God. The increase in intellectual powers that comes with intellectual development provides part of the environment needed for religious conversion.
- The desire for personal meaning and significance is part of the intellectual development experienced by adolescents. This desire can be an agent in bringing about religious conversion.
- The emotional life of the adolescent seems to be critical in religious conversion and can be observed through signs of the desire to belong. The concept of mutuality proved to be a useful tool for explaining some of the experiences reported by Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth.

The opening statement of the chapter introduced the first research question of the present study: *Is it possible to interpret students' disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?* The question was answered in the following way: first, the findings of three researchers, notably James Fowler (1981), Pierre Babin (1965) and Lewis Rambo (1993), were used to provide a framework for the interpretation of the accounts provided by the four participants: Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and

Stephen; and second, the findings of research conducted into the relationship between attachment theory and religious beliefs were used to interpret the four participants' perceptions of the changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion. In the next chapter, the second research question — *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* — will guide the discussion of the role that the imagination plays in religious conversion.