Chapter 8: Findings and recommendations

In the previous chapter, the third research question was addressed: *What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?* In this chapter, a summary of the study is laid out and the implications for religious education identified. Recommendations will be made for the improvement of the evangelisation of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools and for further research.

The mission of the Church: Evangelisation

> Before he ascended to his Father, Jesus gave his disciples the mission to make followers of all people in the world. Baptise them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything that I have taught you, and I will be with you always, even until the end of this age (Matthew 28:19-20, New Century Version).

Since that proclamation, the Christian churches have not ceased to focus on their mission to convert, initiate and instruct those who listen to the message of Jesus. The word “evangelisation” was used to describe the process of telling people about the message of Jesus and instructing the initiates into the meaning of his message and how it applied to their lives.

In chapter 1, it was stated that the present study was undertaken to satisfy the desire to know what role the imagination played in the religious conversion of adolescents. The desire was personal and it was stirred by the many and varied

experiences of teaching religious education in Catholic secondary schools over a period of almost forty years. The use of creative strategies to engage the minds and hearts of students prompted questions about the role of the imagination in teaching and learning. Over time, this reflection led to the much deeper and more fundamental matter of the imagination's role in the religious conversion of adolescents. The findings of the study relate not only to the purpose of the study, that is, to describe the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents, but also to its context, which is the Catholic school system in Western Australia, and the qualitative methodology that was used to conduct the study.

The context of the study

Catholic schools are mandated to evangelise, that is, through their curriculum, to seek to convert their students solely through the divine power of the message that the Church proclaims. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) ushered in changes in the Catholic Church's reflection on how its mission ought to be carried out in Catholic schools. The sociological impetus for the changes in understanding was outlined in chapter 1. In summary, the Catholic Church had grown through a process that placed initiation and instruction before conversion. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2005) stated that in 2001 only about 15% of the five million Catholics in Australia attended Mass regularly. It was assumed that the degree of participation in the life of the Catholic Church was one measure of religious conversion and, in particular, of

Christian conversion. Given the Catholic Church's use of the term "new evangelisation" in the context of Catholic education, it was concluded that in Catholic schools, most students were being taught in through the curriculum about how to live as Catholics before they had accepted faith in Christ. The renewal of evangelisation that took place after the Second Vatican Council addressed this issue. The immediate background to the present study was the *Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia* 2001-2007 from the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia. The Bishops directed that all Catholic schools engage in the evangelisation of their students through a process that highlighted the importance of Christian witness and ministry of the word, which included primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis and the teaching of religious education.

With the permission of the Director of Catholic Education, principals of a number of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth were approached and access given to speak to the Year 12 students in their schools. The outcome of these approaches was the involvement of 15 students from four Catholic schools in the suburbs surrounding Perth, Western Australia. The participants contributed to the study through interviews and some participants wrote journals about their faith and about their experiences of religious education.

The power of Christian witness

The participants spoke and wrote about the significance of the witness of parents, teachers, adult mentors and their peers in their faith development. Most

of the participants acknowledged the importance of their parents' faith in their efforts to take responsibility for developing their relationship with God. While some spoke about the positive influence of their teachers on their faith, by far the most important Christian witness came from peers, particularly close friends who mentored them in the faith. In most instances, this happened in the context of Church-based youth groups.

The witness of peers was particularly significant in relation to conversion. Some participants attributed their enthusiasm for developing a closer relationship with God to the example of their friends and peers. Cecil reported that his faith was re-awakened by the witness of a peer during a Year 12 retreat. Elizabeth was encouraged to strengthen her relationship with Jesus through the witness of her best friend Katy. Mikaela modelled her faith on that of her best friend Joan. Other participants, such as Kevin, Luke, Frank and Sophie found support from friendship groups was a significant feature in the development of their relationship with God.

The significance of Christian youth groups cannot be over-stated. Of the 15 participants in the present study, seven were members of youth groups that were Church-related. All seven participants expressed appreciation for the contribution that their friends in the groups made to their faith. Rambo's (1993) outline of the process of conversion highlighted the importance of groups and advocates who validated the religious experiences that prompted conversion and provided friendship and support through the changes in outlook and behaviour

that accompanied conversion. Such were the experiences reported by Elizabeth, Kevin and Mikaela.

Ministry of the word: Primary proclamation

Christian witness invariably involves primary proclamation, that is, speaking about Christian salvation in the hope that it leads to conversion of minds and hearts. Holohan (1999) described primary proclamation as sharing beliefs about God's presence in creation, helping others to recognise that human fulfilment comes from and leads to God, and showing them that forgiveness and healing from sinfulness and sin comes from faith in Christ. The participants of the present study communicated their perceptions of primary proclamation.

It was evident that all but one of the participants recognised and accepted that God created the universe and that God "alone can satisfy completely" their deepest yearnings (*M09*, para. 47). While all the participants responded to questions about the relationship between God and Jesus, most described Jesus as God's messenger but did not identify him as saviour. Of the four participants who mentioned the forgiveness in the context of their Christian faith, only two, namely Elizabeth and Mikaela, provided extended reflections on the personal dimension of forgiveness in a Christian context.

Ministry of the word: Initiatory catechesis

In chapter 7, initiatory catechesis was defined and evidence presented of the participants' awareness of and appreciation for some of the various elements

that were listed as ways Catholic schools engage in catechesis, namely school Masses, prayer, participation in the Lenten programme known as Project Compassion, membership of school-based Catholic youth groups, such as the Young Christian Students movement, structured class discussions about religious and moral beliefs and values, and school retreats. Little was revealed about most of the elements listed. For some participants, senior school retreats were important events, however, as was indicated in chapter 7, the dominant perception was that retreats provided opportunities for personal and social development rather than Christian formation. Of the two references to Project Compassion, one was a criticism of the lack of concern shown by students for the needy. In general, while the schools attended by the participants engaged in initiatory catechesis, they did not have a strong influence on the participants' perceptions of their faith.

Ministry of the word: Religious education

Religious education was mandated by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia as the first learning area of the curriculum taught in Catholic schools. In general, the participants expressed appreciation for the efforts of their religious education teachers. They expressed confidence in their teachers' abilities to explain the Church's teachings in ways that they could understand. Broadly speaking, they perceived the subject to be about moral and ethical issues that were dealt with through discussion and debate. Only two participants mentioned conscience formation as a significant factor in living a Christian lifestyle. Only one

student stated that she reflected on what Jesus would do in her situation. Prayer was mentioned as a part of their personal faith but never as a class activity. The most significant references to prayer were in relation to the support given by peers in youth groups. It was not a significant aspect of the content of their religious education classes. In general, then, what the students appreciated related more to primary proclamation than to initiatory catechesis. It was concluded that this was more an indication of what was important to the participants at the time they were involved in the present study and not of what was delivered by the religious education teachers.

Methodology: A phenomenological study

To be able to describe the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the study, it was important to adopt an approach that allowed them to communicate their perceptions of their faith in God. Thus the study was phenomenological in intent and design. By means of semi-structured interviews and a journal-writing activity that explored the integration of faith and life from personal and educational perspectives, data was gathered and then categorised using qualitative data analysis software. The approach known as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to guide the analysis and the discussion of the results of the analysis.

The phenomena of faith development and religious conversion exhibited psychological characteristics that were examined using various theories that had been developed to explain aspects of human behaviour. Bowlby's (1969)

attachment theory was found to be useful in explaining aspects of the religious development of the participants in the present study. It was shown in chapter 5 of the present study that where there was parental support the attitude towards commitment to a relationship with God was positive. This was in keeping with studies done of the application of attachment theory to the faith development of adolescents and adults. It was found that where there was support from home for their stated beliefs, the participants were happy to remain in the relationship with God, as they perceived it to be. What was also found in the present study was the gradual emergence of the positive influence of peers who were friends and who had strong religious affiliations. This form of attachment proved to be critical to the experience of conversion as reported in chapter 5.

Statements made by a number of participants concerning the developmental aspect of their faith related to cognitive development. For instance, Luke commented that what he was taught in class did not always make sense at the time it was taught, but it did later on. Kevin described his conversion in terms of his growth in understanding. Frank also acknowledged the reality of cognitive development by referring to the relationship between having a greater understanding of life issues and maturity.

Piaget's (1950) concepts of equilibration, disequilibration, assimilation and accommodation provided a useful means for discussing the changes in students' perceptions of their relationship with God. It was found that conversion could be explained as the movement through accommodation from a state of disequilibration (the experience of a crisis of faith, in oneself, or in God) to a state

of equilibrium (or equilibration as Piaget called it) where there is a dynamic balance between one's created reality and what constitutes one's environment. When Kevin was interviewed he was in a state of equilibration. He spoke confidently of his faith in God and his mission to evangelise his peers at school. Stephen stated that his faith had plateaued; he was comfortable with what he believed about God and he resisted any change in his understanding about the sacredness of life that was put to him as Church teaching.

Piaget's understanding of human cognition also provided a way of understanding how catechesis works in continuing the process of conversion. A Catholic understanding of conversion emphasises the gradual and ongoing, lifelong process of conversion. The dynamic nature of equilibration and disequilibration was reflected in what the participants revealed about how their thinking about God changed. One example quoted in chapter seven was a Year 10 religious education lesson that Mikaela described in her journal. What her teacher said in class caused her to re-think her beliefs about the goodness of people. Her tendency to judge some people as bad and unredeemable was challenged and only by accepting her teacher's viewpoint was she able experience some peace of mind, that is, equilibration. Mikaela admitted that she became aware of the change in her attitude and her beliefs only when she was in Year 12. That the majority of participants did not acknowledge Jesus as saviour does not mean that they will not do so in the future. Some of the participants acknowledged that their religious education teachers made them think and it was shown that changes in their relationship with God came about through reflection.

The work of the imagination

In chapter 1, Bednar's (1996) definition of the imagination as the intellectual faculty that "unifies the processes of the mind and heart" (p. 169) was adopted. In chapter 6, the concept of the imagination was developed further through references to its connection with feelings, understanding and will and through relating it to the experience of the numinous in life. The work of the imagination was described as being like a dialectic "reaching back" into memory while "leaning forward" to compose a future that represents the best fit of past and present.

It was found that the participants constructed images of their faith based on memories of their relationships with significant others, such as parents, and best friends. Kant (2007/1781) described the action of the imagination as being almost unnoticed and often recognised only in hindsight when people acknowledge the differences between the reality they create in the present from the one they created in the past. For instance, the conversions described in chapter five reflected the power of the imagination constructing images of happiness that were part of a renewed commitment in faith to God. The adequacy or fit of the newly constructed image of faith demonstrated the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

Recommendations

Four general themes emerged from an examination of the very findings outlined above. The themes were used to guide the articulation of the

recommendations advanced below. The first theme concerned the faith development of senior secondary students. The second theme related to the continued development of Christ-centred curricula. The third theme highlighted the need for further teacher development in the area of evangelisation. The fourth theme was about the need for further research.

First recommendation: Regarding the faith development of senior students

That the religious education curriculum for senior secondary students includes a study of how faith develops; that students are provided with an understanding of the psychology of human development; and that the process of evangelisation, particularly the importance of Christian witness, primary proclamation and initiatory catechesis be expressed to them.

Second recommendation: Regarding the development of Christ-centred curricula

That schools develop curricula that enhance the value of Christian witness across the learning areas; that schools' evangelisation plans include the systematic development of peer ministry programmes, including establishing youth groups that evangelise; that the role of the imagination in faith development be a major pedagogical principle; and that the principles of equilibration and disequilibration be incorporated in the design of the pedagogy of faith that is implemented in each Catholic secondary school.

Third recommendation: Regarding teacher development

That school staff members be shown how to recognise in themselves the need for conversion and the signs of the Spirit at work in their lives; that they be educated to see their work in terms of new evangelisation; and that they understand the importance of the Christian witness to faith that they give to their students.

Fourth recommendation: Regarding further research

That action research projects be developed to promote a deeper understanding of how teachers can become more effective in their evangelisation of adolescents.

That studies of peer ministry in Catholic secondary schools be undertaken to establish a model of ministry that promotes evangelisation.

Concluding statement

The assertion that the Holy Spirit is the eye of the soul was made in chapter 1 of the present study. The Spirit seeks to guide the "blind but indispensable faculty of the soul," that is, the imagination as Kant (2007/1781) conceived it to be. Pope Paul VI (1975) drew these ideas together in his description of evangelisation as "the gentle action of the Spirit" (*EN*, para. 75). Through the imagination, the Spirit "stirs up the new creation, the new humanity of which evangelisation is to be the result, with that unity in variety which

evangelisation wishes to achieve within the Christian community" (*EN*, para. 75). The "new creation, the new humanity" is the outcome of the conversion of mind and heart and the product of the imagination. Thus it can be said that the role of the imagination in the conversion of adolescents is to gently — and in some instances suddenly and forcefully — move them to the realisation that they have been created by the Father, redeemed by the Son and transformed by the Spirit.