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

Richard Patrick Branson

University of Notre Dame Australia
2010

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

Richard Patrick Branson

Doctor of Philosophy
College of Education
University of Notre Dame Australia
2010
Declaration

This thesis is my own words and no part of it has been submitted for a degree at this, or any other, University. Due acknowledgement is made to the work of others used in this thesis.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the support of the staff of the University of Notre Dame Australia, particularly the teaching staff of the College of Education. They assisted me throughout the preparation of this thesis with timely advice. I acknowledge with gratitude the direction provided by my supervisors, Dr Wayne Tinsey, Dr Anthony Imbrosciano and Prof. Richard Berlach. I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Dr Anthony Imbrosciano whose patience and enthusiasm helped me to shape my research. Sadly, he fell ill and passed away on July 13, 2008. I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the 15 participants in the study. They called themselves Alexandra, Alyssa, Cameron, Cecil, Elizabeth, Emily, Frank, Glynna, Gunter, Kevin, Luke, Mikaela, Morgan, Sophie and Stephen. Their willingness to be interviewed, and in some instances, to keep journals made the study possible. Finally, this thesis would not have been completed had it not been for the encouragement of my wife Maryanne and our daughter Melissa. I am forever in their debt for their interest and patience.
Abstract

The mission of the Catholic Church is evangelisation, the purpose of which is conversion. At a diocesan level, the mission is carried out through the agencies of family, parish and school. Every Catholic school is mandated to carry out its part in the Church’s mission through its curriculum that incorporates both Religious Education and planned catechetical experiences. This study was devised to find out some students’ perceptions of their faith, the influences that they perceive on changes to their faith, and to describe how the imagination assisted their faith development and religious conversion. Fifteen Catholic secondary school students from four schools in the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia were interviewed in their final year of school. Some also kept journals and some were interviewed again in the year after they left school. The data collected was analysed using methods associated with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Conclusions were drawn about how the imagination assists faith development and religious conversion. The findings were aligned with the Western Australian Catholic Bishops’ Mandate Letter to the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) (2009) and recommendations were made to assist the evangelisation of youth in Catholic secondary schools.
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List of abbreviations used

AG  Ad gentes divinitus. Vatican II (1965)


CSTTM  The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium
  Congregation for Catholic Education (1997)


FC  Familiaris consortio, Pope John Paul II (1982).


IC  Inter oecumenici [Instruction on the proper implementation of the

LC  Lay Catholics in schools: witnesses to faith. Congregation for Catholic
  Education (1982).

M01  Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia
  2001-2007

M09  Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia
  2009-2015

RD  The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school. Congregation


The use of inclusive language in documents published by the Catholic Church is
a vexed issue. Out of respect for the authors of the texts cited above, the original
language has been retained. No attempt has been made to make the language
gender-inclusive.
Chapter 1: Evangelisation and the Catholic school

Introduction

The present study represents a personal quest for knowledge and understanding of the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. It was undertaken in the hope that the findings would be of use in the teaching of religious education and to the education system that belongs to the Catholic Church in Western Australia. The personal nature of the study dictated the narrative quality of the study; the ownership of the assumptions, the scholarship, the research, the analysis, the findings and the conclusions are the responsibility of the researcher.

This study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents emerged from reflection upon the practice of teaching religious education in Catholic secondary schools, over a period of almost 40 years. During that time, there were significant changes in the field of religious education in Australia (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Hamilton, 1981; Ryan, 2002; Ryan, Brennan & Willmett, 1996; Ryan & Malone, 1996; Treston, 1993). The personal experiences of the following changes and developments impacted on the researcher: the emphasis on creativity in teaching; the shift in focus from process to content in religious education; a growing awareness of the meaning of evangelisation and its goal of conversion; and the impact of technology on teaching and learning. It occurred to the researcher that the two strands that ran through the experiences named above were faith and the imagination. The study was born, then, out of the desire to learn about the role
that the imagination plays in the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic schools. For the purpose of the present study, the imagination was succinctly defined as the intellectual faculty that “unifies the processes of the mind and heart” (Bednar, 1996, p. 169). This is a key concept in the study and it will be developed as the study progresses. It should be noted at the outset that the definite article was attached—“the imagination”—to distinguish the intellectual faculty or power from the concept of “imagination.”

Faith is another key concept of the study. Fowler (1978) believed that God gave faith to every human person at conception. In this context, faith is primal trust between the tiny human being and the mother who bears the child in her womb. This human faith has the potential to become religious faith. The relevance of this understanding of faith can be found in the experience that is typical for most Catholic Christians who are baptised just months after their birth. Their Christian faith is received in Baptism as a divine gift long before they are capable of making the choice to trust God, that is, they receive the gift of Christian faith before they develop religious faith, meaning to be “in a trusting relation to the divine Being and Spirit from whom creation issues” (Fowler, 2004, p. 412). The movement from the human faith of the child in his or her parents and other significant persons to faith in God comes about through religious conversion.

The research intention

The aim of the study is to show the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. The participants will be Year 12
students from selected Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia. Because Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth are required to formulate evangelisation plans (M01, para. 19), the findings of the research will be used to generate a set of recommendations relevant to evangelisation in Catholic secondary schools. The recommendations will acknowledge the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

In line with phenomenological thinking, the study was based on the assumption that people construct reality, that is, the statements students made about their faith in God were constructed to make sense out of what happened to them in their lives. It was assumed that the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents could be recognised in the statements provided by the participants in the study. It was assumed also that inductive research methodologies would be appropriate for this study because they tend to reveal data that are both valid and reliable, provided sufficient care is taken to counter the effects of bias on the part of the researcher and the subjects (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006).

Background to the study

The present study draws together reflections on religious conversion, evangelisation, which has been described as “the fundamental duty” of all Christians (CSSTM, para. 3), Catholic education and the imagination. James (1960/1902) investigated the phenomenon of religious experience. He acknowledged the work of Starbuck (1899) who concluded from his studies of religious experience that religious conversion is a normal adolescent
experience. Gillespie (1976) drew on the work of Coe (1900), Johnson (1959), Pratt (1926), Starbuck (1899) and Stewart (1967) to develop his thesis that adolescence is the most favourable time for religious conversion because of the development of self that takes place in the teenage years.

Stories that revealed the drama of religious conversion, such as that of St Paul, or the definitive break with past beliefs, values and behaviours, such as that of St Augustine, pointed to meaning of the word “conversion” as a radical change of mind and heart. Conversion is a human intellectual activity involving the faculties of reason, memory, imagination and intuition. All four faculties play a part in the decisions people make, including those decisions affecting a person’s relationship with God. The present study was governed by the belief that the process of conversion begins in the imagination.

The two terms “education” and “teaching” go hand in hand. They are two related aspects of the work of schools. Dewey once wrote that education “testifies to a generous conception of human nature and to a deep belief in the possibilities of human achievement” (Kneller, 1958, p. 29). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977; 1997) emphasised the role of education in the development of the whole person. Catholic education is about the integration of faith and culture (CS, para. 38). The teacher guides the student “to a deepening of his faith and to enrich and enlighten his human knowledge with the data of the faith” (CS, para. 40). To be engaged as a teacher in the education process is a noble calling, which Groome (1998) described as “a sacred privilege and an awesome responsibility” (p. 34). In the Catholic school, teachers are called reveal the Christian message through
imitating Christ in what they say and do (CS, para. 43). The role of the teacher is vital to the process of integrating culture and faith as well as faith and life. The integration of faith and life is part of the process of conversion that happens throughout life, as people become what God wants them to be (CS, para. 45). What has been said of teachers can be applied to all those who work in a Catholic school.

In Australia, as in other parts of the world, the Catholic Church established its own education system that functions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Catholic schools and universities participate in the Church’s mission to evangelise the purpose of which is conversion. Pope Paul VI (1975) defined evangelisation in the following way:

… the Church evangelises when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs” (EN, para. 18).

According to Groome (1998), conversion, in the sense of “a deep change of heart and way of acting” is directly related to the “Church’s mission of education” (p. 43) as outlined above.

Catholic education is oriented towards the development of the whole person “freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being” (CS, para. 29). Such development is built on love, the sort of love that will, as Palmer (1983) stated, “implicate us in the web of life” and “wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy...” (p. 9).
These understandings of education propose a development, a movement towards an arguably more satisfying lifestyle, one that is marked by ever increasing integration of all human faculties and dimensions and the freedom that comes as a result of this maturation. The role of the Catholic school in the mission of the Church is to impart the knowledge that will contribute to the freedom that is promised to those who follow Christ. However, it is too easy for busy religious education teachers to view this mission in a “mechanical” way, that is, with little thought as to how it impacts on them personally and on their students. Moran (1981) challenged them to broaden their understanding of knowledge and freedom:

Religious traditions know that the knowledge education should be concerned with is not just the knowledge we can acquire but the knowledge we must listen and wait for - perhaps at prayer, perhaps in a nursing home. Religions know that the freedom we can hope for is not liberation from the earth or the dominance of necessity but acceptance of our finite selves in a dying and rising universe (p. 46).

Knowledge is of little use if the students do not also gain something of the passion that characterises, or at least ought to characterise those who evangelise. It is the passion of such evangelists who love God and seek to reveal that love to others in the hope that they, too, will fall in love with God, that turns knowledge into charism. As Moran (1981) proposed, this passion can have its source in the life of prayer and worship. It is a passion that is not dampened by patience and recognition of the limits of being human. Such passion and the freedom that comes with it are outcomes of religious conversion.
The mission to evangelise in the Catholic school is undertaken by the whole staff, from the principal to the gardener. Students receive the Good News of salvation in many ways; however, it is the divine power of the message the Church proclaims through its schools and elsewhere that will “save” them — if they want to be saved. In this context, the word “save” refers to the “development of man from within, freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being” (CS, para. 29). Catholic secondary schools provide students with opportunities to learn the meaning of their experiences “and their truths” (CS, para. 27). These opportunities include all aspects of the curriculum of the school, including religious education classes, prayer and worship experiences, retreats and reflection days, and involvement in service programs and events.

The religious life of the Catholic school is intended to be a rich tapestry of learning opportunities, which focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the Catholic faith tradition in which the school shares. It is presumed that some students will experience the nurturing of their lived faith, while others will learn about how Christian faith addresses issues in the lives of people and in society. Undoubtedly, there will be moments when the decision, no matter how small, is made by individual students to change, to adopt a way of believing and behaving that is religious, or more profoundly religious and hopefully, Christian and Catholic. The purpose of the present study is to describe how the imagination is involved in the mental activity surrounding these decisions and what contribution, if any, religious education makes to religious conversion.
The research problem

In the Catholic school, as in other environments, conversion happens "solely through the divine power of the message" (EN, para 18) that the Church proclaims. The "message" is the Good News of salvation that Jesus proclaimed and effected through his life and his mission, through his suffering and death. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus proclaimed his mission in the synagogue in Nazareth:

He opened the book and found the place where this is written: "The Lord has put his Spirit in me, because he appointed me to tell the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness." 4:17-19 (New Century Version).

Jesus lived in a religious state. The expectation would have been for every member of the Jewish community to be present in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In a real sense, he had a captive audience. Lohse (1976) described the synagogue as the centre of Jewish faith in each locality during the time of Jesus. People gathered there to worship, to learn, to litigate, to discuss and debate (p. 158). The Catholic Church of today presents quite a different scene. A significant proportion of those attending Catholic schools have been characterised as "not only indifferent and non-practising, but also totally lacking in religious or moral formation" and showing "a profound apathy where ethical and religious formation is concerned" (CSSTM, para. 6). Ang (2008) reported that 4 out of 5 Catholics in Australia do not attend Sunday
Mass. In *Pathways* (2008), the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes reported: “Now at 14 per cent each week, Sunday Mass attendance is declining and probably will eventually plateau at about 10 per cent.” The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (2001) stated: “Many students have little experience of the Church and its life. Many learn about the Gospel for the first time in our schools” (*M01*, para. 20). The conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that most Catholics in Perth no longer attend Sunday Mass regularly; and most Catholic students attending Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth are “unchurched”, that is, they do not contribute to the life of the Church through their parish. Is the message that the Church proclaims through its schools meant to attract young people into parish life? Is conversion a realistic expectation? Can Catholic schools evangelise effectively when apparently Catholic faith is not taken seriously? If conversion does happen, is it serendipitous? How can Catholic schools assist the religious conversion of their students?

Following the release of the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998), the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia produced the *Mandate Letter for all involved in Catholic Education 2001-2007*. Emphasis was placed on “new evangelisation” (*M01*, para. 23-26, 38, 41, 44) by which was meant the evangelisation of those who had been baptised but who had not experienced conversion to Christ (*M01*, para. 23). The Bishops instructed their parishes and schools to draw up evangelisation plans. They stated: “The handing on of Catholic beliefs and practices in the Catholic school needs to be planned so that this is done ‘explicitly and in a systematic manner’ (*CS*, para 50)” (*M01*, para. 19). The handing on of the faith is part of evangelisation and therefore,
is presumed to make a contribution to the goal of conversion (EN, para. 18). Catholic schools use a range of strategies, activities and events to hand on Catholic beliefs and practices to their students. Research has been carried out into the effectiveness of Catholic schools in carrying out their mission (Flynn, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2002). This study will focus on one small aspect of the effectiveness issue, namely, the experiences of conversion evident in students’ reflections on their faith. What role did the imagination play in their conversion?

Substantial and original contribution to knowledge

The Catholic Church has long recognised the imagination as one of the realms of the intellect. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) stated that Catholics need to use their imaginations in meditation “to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our hearts, and strengthen our will to follow Christ” (CCC, para. 2708). The place of the imagination in religious development was acknowledged in the draft religious education units developed by the Western Australian Catholic Education Office (1997) through promoting the use of such strategies as journal writing, role-play and creative writing, as well as activities that require students to research the life and history of the Catholic Church, to understand how the Church addresses issues in people’s lives and in society. Fowler (1981), Harris (1987), Parks (1986) and others have examined the relationship between faith and imagination. However, to this point in time, as far as the researcher has been able to determine, no one has researched the role of the imagination in religious conversion within the context of the Catholic secondary school. What
is the role the imagination in helping adolescents make life choices relating to their faith in God? What contribution can the Catholic school make realistically to stirring students’ imaginations so that they engage in reflection on their need for God? It is the purpose of this study to provide some modest answers to these questions and other related to them, such as the research questions outlined below.

The study will make use of Fowler’s (1981) stage theory of faith development, Rambo’s (1993) theory of conversion, and aspects of cognitive development theories, including Piaget’s (1950) concepts of equilibration and disequilibration, and Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory. These theories will be used to guide the analysis of data collected as part of the study; the framework for the analysis and discussion will be informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a recently developed qualitative approach that makes use of the phenomenological method informed by hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. It is hoped that the findings of the research will prove useful to religious education teachers and those responsible for the preparation of the evangelisation plans in Catholic secondary schools.

Research questions

The following questions will guide the investigation of the role of imagination in religious conversion:

1. Is it possible to interpret students’ disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?
2. What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?
3. What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?

Definition of terms

During the investigation of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents in Catholic secondary schools, the following working definitions of key concepts were kept in mind to guide the self-reflection that was integral to the research methodology.

Imagination
As stated above, the imagination is the intellectual faculty that “unifies the processes of the mind and heart” (Bednar, 1996, p. 169). This is a key concept in the study. This definition will be developed further as this work progresses.

Faith
Understanding the relationship between imagination and faith is fundamental to understanding this study, therefore, faith is defined as broadly as possible. At this point in the work, let it be understood as a person’s response to God’s self-revelation (whether God be recognised or not), a response that is like a “path marked by falls, struggles, repentances and new beginnings” (Rummery & Lundy, 1982, p. 37).

Revelation
Revelation is taken to mean God's self-communication. This is the meaning that is given it by the Second Vatican Council in Dei Verbum (1965).
Evangelisation
Holohan (1999) stated that evangelisation “is the process through which the Church cooperates today with God’s act of self-communication, calling human beings to conversion and to faith in Jesus Christ” (p. 16).

New evangelisation
The term was used by Pope John Paul II (1991) to describe the evangelisation of “entire groups of the baptised [who] have lost a living sense of the faith, or [who] even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (CT, para. 33).

Religious conversion
Religious conversion is taken to mean a radical, but often gradual transformation of a person’s faith whereby that person’s relationship with God is more intimate than before.

Religious education
To prevent religious education from becoming confused with faith development, and to assist discussion about the contribution of the subject to the mission of the Church, religious education is defined here as a form of the ministry of the word that hands on the Christian faith to students in such a way that it “makes the Gospel present in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation (GDC, para. 73)” (Holohan, 1999, p. 27).
Summary

In this chapter, the study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents was introduced and placed in the context of the mission of the Catholic church to evangelise and the mandate issued by the Catholic bishops of Western Australia to the Catholic schools in their State. The three research questions that gave direction to the discussion of the data in chapters 5, 6 and 7 were stated and key concepts were defined.

The next chapter will give consideration to the principal concepts of this study and how they are interrelated in the available literature. The theoretical framework that supports Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be outlined.
Chapter 2: A review of related literature

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the purpose of the study — to describe the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents — was introduced and its origins in personal experiences of changes in the teaching of religious education in the Catholic school system in Western Australia over a 40-year period were outlined. The link between adolescence and religious conversion in the context of the mission of Catholic schools to evangelise was considered briefly and the research problem was stated in terms of the forces opposing the acceptance of Christian faith. Using this framework, three research questions were derived to give direction to the study.

In the present chapter, the themes represented by the concepts defined in the previous chapter became the focus of the literature review: faith, conversion, the imagination, religious education, catechesis, and approaches to research. Due importance will be given to the theoretical framework that was constructed to support the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in the analysis and discussion of the data that was collected. The impact of Catholic education on the faith development of the participants in the present study will be examined using a methodological framework that embraces epistemology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, structural-developmental theories and cognitive psychology. These six aspects or dimensions will be referred to as “movements” to help
convey the sense of deliberation that lay behind the research design. Although the six movements were considered independently in this chapter, they were not in fact mutually exclusive. Given the nature of the subject under investigation, conceptual overlap would be impossible to avoid. This will be evident in the subsequent chapters in the present study.

**Faith**

Faith is a much-used word. It probably came into the English language via the Norman Conquest and was from the start linked to the notions of trust and belief (Hoad, 1996). While it pertains to the relationship between God and the human person, its domain is much more complex than is often assumed by those who use the word. The meaning of the word “faith” as it is used in the present study can be found in the Letter to the Hebrews (11:1-3):

> Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it. Faith is the reason we remember great people who lived in the past. It is by faith we understand that the whole world was made by God's command so what we see was made by something that cannot be seen (New Century Version).

As defined here, the word embraces what is called “human faith,” “religious faith” and, given its use in the Christian scriptures, “Christian faith.” These concepts require further investigation.

**Human faith**

Faith is a human reality. Segundo (1984) described faith as being “anthropological” (p. 32), that is, faith is experienced first in the relationship
each person has with his/her parents. Segundo engaged his readers in a reflection on the relationship between faith and trust and his analysis focused on the shortcomings of ideas about faith proposed by Pannenburg, who stated that “faith as a vital act is synonymous with trust, a trust that has to do with the fundamental and basic moments in any human life” (quoted in Segundo, 1984, p. 32). Segundo rejected Pannenburg’s understanding of faith as trust. He proposed that faith is a meaning-structuring act that is directed towards “certain specific persons as its object” (p. 33). It is initially and always anthropological, that is, rooted in the everyday experiences of human living.

In his book *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (1994), Avery Dulles critiqued Segundo’s position and found that his “theology of faith contains many questionable elements”; however, he did not reject his arguments outright, but found merit in his attack on “a too passive understanding of faith as an acceptance of ready-made truths, under the illusion that they are simply handed down from heaven” (p. 161).

James Fowler (1980) called faith “a human universal” (p. 53), that is, every human person experiences faith. He stated that its principal function was “the making, maintenance and transformation of human meaning” (p. 53). In his book, *Stages of Faith* (1981), he said, “We all begin the pilgrimage of faith as infants” (p. 119). He described the faith of the infant as “undifferentiated” (p. 119) and called it a “basic faith” (p. 121), which is formed through experiences of the love and care of parents or other primary care givers.
Fowler acknowledged the influence of Erik Erikson (1902-1994) who developed an eight-stage model of psychosocial development. The first stage, which occurs from birth to about one year, was called Trust vs. Mistrust. This is mentioned here for two reasons. Firstly, central to Fowler’s understanding of faith is the experience of trust. Secondly, The name Erikson gave to the first stage of his model suggests a dialectic. Fowler understood faith to be dynamic and subject to change, growth and development.

To convey to his readers the relationship between development theories and faith, Fowler (1981) constructed a fictional conversation between Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg. In his explanation of the first stage of his model, Erikson said, “Parents convey a sense of trustworthiness and rely-ability … by the quality and consistency of their care. … The child … feels an inner sense of trustworthiness and reliability that can balance the terrors of separation and abandonment” (p. 55). The words that Fowler put in Erikson’s mouth were reminiscent of ideas promoted by H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) and Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Niebuhr was influenced by Royce’s moral philosophy. He argued that morality was based on loyalty that is directed to the good of the community. Niebuhr’s understanding of faith reflected this orientation towards being other-centred. He proposed a form of faith that exhibited a triadic relationship between the self, others and the cause that united them. In *Meaning of Revelation* (1941), he described faith as:

... a dynamic interpersonal process in which there are not two terms simply, but three – the self, the other, and the cause; and in which there is
not one response (that of trust in the faithful, for instance) that maintains the structure, but where two responses are called for, trust and loyalty (quoted in Kliever, 1978, p. 87).

Fowler (1981) readily acknowledged his debt to H. Richard Niebuhr for the concept of faith as a triadic relationship. He constructed his theory of faith development on this understanding of faith and proposed that the “cause” consisted of people's centres of value. He explained what he meant: “We invest or devote ourselves because the other to which we commit has, for us, an intrinsic excellence or worth and because it promises to confer value on us” (p. 18). Fowler readily admitted that this centre of value can lead people away from what is of ultimate concern for all human beings and that this form of faith was illusory. Fowler is a committed Christian and his interest in faith development had its origins in his Christian faith. Even though he commenced his reflection with his understanding of human faith, it was evident throughout his writings that he understood that while faith was human it was also religious.

Religious Faith

Fowler (1981) discussed the relationship between the words “faith,” “belief” and “religion.” He stated that faith was often expressed through the symbols, rituals and beliefs of religious traditions (p.53). In Weaving the New Creation (1991), he defined religious faith as “the personal appropriation of relationship to God by means of a religious tradition” (p. 100). Fowler (1981) acknowledged the influence of Paul Tillich (1886-1965), H. Richard Niebuhr
and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) on his ideas about religious faith. In *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963), Smith pointed to the shifting meanings of the three words. He had also observed in *Faith and Belief* (1979) that the study of religious traditions revealed a variety of religious beliefs, but also marked similarities in the meaning of religious faith across traditions. He concluded that faith was “a quality of the person … an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbour, to the universe” and a way of seeing, feeling and acting “in terms of a transcendent dimension” (p. 139).

Groome (1991) held a similar view: “Religious faith of any kind affords a perspective for interpreting life, a way of making meaning out of existence, pattern out of chaos” (p.18). Smith (1979) also stated: “Faith is meant to be religious” (quoted in Fowler, 1981, p. 10). Niebuhr’s life and his theology illustrated well Smith’s understanding of the nature of faith. The loss of his father when he was only seventeen, the death of two students under his care at a youth camp, a nervous breakdown in 1944 led Niebuhr to conclude that evil could be conquered only by faith, which required him to walk the way of the Cross, with the commitment of Christ, in the face of relativity.

In Niebuhr’s theology, relativity stood in opposition to what was ultimate, total and infinite, that is, the divinity, which was the object of religious faith. The concept of ultimacy, noted in the theology of Niebuhr, was found in the theology of Tillich (1951) who defined faith in terms of “ultimate concern” which he related to the Shema, a Jewish statement of faith (Deuteronomy 6:4). Tillich quoted the words of Jesus: “The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all our heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all
your strength” (Mark 12:29-30 New Century Version) and stated that “ultimate concern” had no other referent than what is “ultimate, unconditional, total, infinite concern” (p. 12). Dulles (1994) recognised that Tillich, like Niebuhr and Fowler, held that everyone has faith, “for it is impossible to stifle completely the relationship to the unconditional that lies at the heart of human existence” (p. 122).

Fowler (1981) argued for a different understanding of the “ultimate concern” of people. He wrote: “Ultimate concern may be invested in family, university, nation, or church. Love, sex and a loved partner might be the passionate center of one’s ultimate concern” (p. 4). He constructed his understanding of a person’s “centre(s) of value and power,” on the recognition that what is shared in relationship is a mutual concern that can become of ultimate concern (p. 18). It was stated earlier in the chapter that Fowler recognised that when the ultimate concern did not pertain to a religious tradition, then faith was not religious in its character.

Fowler’s understanding of religious faith was criticised by Dulles (1994) for the following reason: liberal theology — the category in which he placed the theologies of H. Richard Niebuhr, Smith, Tillich and Fowler — attempted to ground faith in human experience and the human condition and placed the origins of faith in the human search for meaning and significance. His position reflected the teaching of the Catholic Church: faith is grounded in God’s self-communication and God’s invitation to each person to be in relationship with the divine (CCC, para. 93).
Christian faith was the third form of faith identified early in the present chapter. The name suggests that it is the faith that relates to the Christian tradition. The discussion that follows will present a Catholic understanding of Christian faith. The Catholic Church teaches that people are made children of God by faith and baptism for the purpose of giving praise to God in the celebration of the Eucharist (SC, para. 10). This Christian faith is both individual and communal and its goal of union with Christ can be achieved only through faith, the sacraments of faith and through “the cycle of celebrations in which, throughout the Church’s year, the paschal mystery of Christ is unfolded” (IC, para. 6). The Church teaches that “… 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” (DV, para. 5). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) gives the following characteristics of Christian faith: Faith is a grace freely given by God (para. 153, para. 162), a human act (para. 154, para. 155), is intelligible (para. 156-159), a free act (para. 160), is necessary for salvation (para. 161) and the beginning of eternal life (para. 163).

Writing from within the tradition of the Catholic Church, Groome (1991) stated that faith is God’s gift. It “reaches first to the inner core of a person and disposes toward a relationship with God” (p. 18). He emphasised the role of the Christian community in the development of an individual’s faith. Groome also stated that faith is “holistic,” that is, it involves the whole person and is not merely an intellectual assent to a body of truths. He described it as “a
threefold dynamic of historical activities: *believing, trusting* and *doing* (author's italics) God’s will" (p. 18).

Holohan (1999, p. 13) used documents of the Catholic Church to give the following outline of Christian faith: firstly, since Revelation is God’s act of self-communication, then faith involves the commitment of one’s self freely to God (*DV*, para. 5); secondly, since Revelation presents God’s truth, then faith involves the free assent to these truths (*DV*, para. 5); and thirdly, because the climax of Revelation was the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, Christian faith involves conversion to him and the commitment to discipleship (*GDC*, para. 53). Concerning the origins and development of Christian faith, Holohan (1999, p. 14) stated: firstly, Christian faith is a gift from God received through Baptism (*CCC*, para 153; *GDC*, para. 55); secondly, it “moves a person from within to wonder, to question, to seek greater understanding” (*CCC*, para. 158; *GDC*, para. 92); and lastly, for Christian faith to grow, it needs to be nourished through participation in the life of the Church (*CCC*, para. 162; *GDC*, para. 95, 96, 105, 122).

The understanding of faith that is presented by the Catholic Church stands in marked contrast to that presented by Fowler (1981) and the theologians from whom he has drawn his ideas about faith. Whereas the Catholic Church teaches that faith is a gift from God that presupposes revelation and is given in Baptism, Fowler's view is that faith is a “human universal” that develops from birth under the influence of human and divine initiatives (1981, p. xiii). The two understandings are like two sides of the same coin. They represent two contrasting theologies. Despite their
differences, both understandings of faith are relevant to the present study: to be human is to respond to God’s invitation to be in relationship with God who takes the initiative in forming the relationship. The present study of the role of the imagination in religious conversion assumed that the following understanding of faith is true: God gifts people with faith and in Catholic schools, students are engaged in the systematic study of faith that is Christian and Catholic, the faith gifted to people through Baptism. As it was stated in chapter 1, and developed later in the present chapter, faith can develop and deepen, that is, the person can be drawn into a deeper and more intimate relationship with the Triune God through conversion.

Conversion

From the outset, this study was designed to cater for the possibility that some participants would not be Christian, nor even religious. Indeed, one participant regarded himself to be more Buddhist than Christian. Another was antithetic towards religion. For this reason, the more general term “religious conversion” was chosen as the focus. As a concept, it embraces forms of conversion related to the different religious traditions as well as non-confessional religious awareness.

Gillespie (1979) referred to the work of Christensen (1963), an American psychiatrist who described religious conversion as an hallucinatory experience that was sudden, intense and brief in its duration. This study presents a contrary position, namely, that religious conversion can be experienced in many ways that are not always sudden, intense or brief, but can be almost
imperceptible and over a long period of time. In support of this view, Conn (1986) stated: “Conversion is a highly confusing and controversial issue today largely because the term ‘conversion’ refers not to one reality but to an enormously wide range of very different human realities” (p. 7). Similarly, the Catholic theologian Rahner (1975) argued for a broader understanding of religious conversion: “Conversion to faith is always a process with many stages and these need not necessarily follow the same course in every individual…” (quoted in Rummery & Lundy, 1982, p. 34). These cautionary words need to be borne in mind later when the process of conversion is discussed.

James (1842-1910) published *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. It was based on the text of the Gifford Lectures that he delivered in Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902. The opening sentence of Lecture IX revealed his understanding of religious conversion:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities (1960/1902, p. 194).

James proceeded to explain the various physiological and psychological dimensions of religious conversion that he derived from accounts of experiences of religious conversion. Other researchers have considered the relationship between spirituality and conversion. For instance, like James,
Coles (1990), Hardy (1966; 1979), Hay (1979), Hay & Morisy (1985) and Robinson (1983) reported on profound experiences that changed people’s lives. Hay, Nye & Murphy (1996) reviewed literature published on the theme of children’s spirituality. They offered criticism of the cognitive theories of faith development, such as Fowler’s (1981) theory of stages of faith development. They cited studies that explored biological (Hardy, 1966; 1979; Hay, 1994), cultural and linguistic influences (Nye & Hay, 1995) on spirituality. By extension, these influences might also be considered in studies of the role of the imagination in religious conversion; however, such consideration is beyond the scope of the present study.

Lonergan (1904-1984) stated in his book *Method in Theology* (1971) that “Conversion, as lived, affects all of a man’s conscious and intentional operations. It directs his gaze, pervades his imagination, and releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of his psyche” (p. 131). Babin (1965) considered religious conversion as an adolescent experience of giving “life a direction and meaning in relation to transcendent values” (p. 122). Working from within his theory of faith development, Fowler (1981) defined conversion as:

a significant recentering of one’s previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action (p. 282f).

Fowler’s definition does acknowledge the catalyst for conversion that was evident in Gillespie’s (1979) model and also in Moran’s (1983) model of
religious development. Moran considered the relationship between
development and conversion. He proposed a three-stage model of religious
development and named the stages as *simply religious*, *acquiring a religion*,
and *religiously Christian* (or some other religious faith tradition). People
experience conversion in the movement from one stage to the next and also
within the second stage. Moran characterised conversion as the experience
as “dis-belief,” that is, as recognition that what was believed in the past is no
longer tenable (p. 146).

Westerhoff (2000) proposed a similar idea of conversion. In his model
of faith development, conversion is recognised in the movement from “faith
given” to “faith owned” (p. 36). The former type of faith is that which is
nurtured in the child by parents and by the Christian community. Westerhoff
described nurture and conversion as a unified whole, but in tension, almost
like a dialectic. He stated: “The converted life is a revolutionary existence over
and against the status quo” (p. 37). Conversion is that experience of coming
to make personal choices about what to believe and how to live out those
beliefs.

According to Lonergan (1971), people experienced conversion in the
intellectual and moral realms and both were causally dependent on religious
conversion. A similar understanding was expressed by Groome (1991) who
also referred to “social conversion”, which is that form of conversion that can
be observed in people who become “conscientised” and become active in
relation to social justice issues (p. 130f). There are parallels that can be drawn
between Westerhoff’s (2000) understanding of conversion and that proposed
by Groome. The radicalising of faith that was identified in Groome’s (1991) and Westerhoff’s (2000) understandings of conversion is reminiscent of themes found in liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1973). Boff & Boff (1986) stated: “Liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor” (p. 3). Recall that in chapter 1 the imagination was defined as the intellectual faculty “that unifies the processes of the mind and heart” (Bednar, 1996, p. 169). It is presumed that the imagination can create a world in which justice reigns. Likewise, it seems reasonable to propose that the imagination has a role to play in intellectual, moral and social conversion, all of which are aspects of religious conversion.

*Christian Conversion*

Christian conversion is the goal of evangelisation. Pope Paul VI (1975) used statements like “transforming humanity from within,” “interior change” and “seeks to convert … both the personal and collective consciences of people” to signal the Church’s commitment to the religious and Christian conversion of those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed (*EN*, para. 18). Pope John Paul II (1991) stated the Church’s mission more succinctly when teaching about its missionary activity: “The proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith” (*RM*, para. 46). He described the nature and condition of Christian conversion as:

- a gift from God, the work of the Blessed Trinity … expressed in faith which is total and radical … (It) gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from ‘life according to the flesh’
to ‘life according to the Spirit’ … accepting by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple (RM, para. 46).

The Catholic Church based its call to conversion on the message of John the Baptist who was “baptising people in the desert and preaching a baptism of changed hearts and lives for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4 New Century Version).

The Church has identified three expressions of conversion: fasting, prayer and almsgiving and then listed some of the actions associated with Christian conversion, among which were “gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right” (CCC, para. 1435).

The ways believers experience conversion is reflected in the Catholic Church’s understanding of the process of conversion which has been outlined as follows: Conversion requires first an interest in the Gospel. This is a prelude to conversion, which is the second phase. The third and fourth phases include profession of faith, the commitment to prayer and the reception of the sacraments, as well as the practice of carrying out charitable works (GDC, para. 56). Martini’s (1982) description of the four stages of Christian maturity reflected the teaching of the Church about Christian conversion. He identified conversion as the starting point and called it “the catechumenal experience”. It is characterised by a crisis of faith that is resolved by “a change of horizon” and a “real transformation of subjects and their world” that is brought about through placing God, revealed through Christ, at the centre of their world (p. 62). Even though Martini’s view pre-dates the release of the General Directory for Catechesis (1998), his ideas about conversion are consistent with those
found in the Directory. The conversion experience that he described was both religious and Christian. The language he chose reflected ideas about the process of conversion also found in the writings of Conn (1986), Fowler (1981, 1991, 1996), Gelpi (1993), Lonergan (1971), Moran (1983), Rambo (1993) and others.

The process of conversion

Gillespie (1979) outlined the phases of religious conversion as being: (1) pre-conversion, with questioning, tension, anxiety, and stress; (2) crisis, with the sense of a greater presence, higher control, and self-surrender; and (3) post-conversion, with its relief, release, assurance, harmony, peace, and ecstatic happiness (p. 36f). Other writers described similar processes. For instance, Fowler (1981) described a seven-stage theory of faith development and proposed that the movement from one stage to the next could be considered conversion. He outlined his position in a lecture he gave at Boston College: “To become Christian means the conversion of our human faith towards Christian faith, and development in Christian faith involves the gradual conversion, by formation and metanoia, of our human faith toward faith mediated by companionship of Jesus Christ” (quoted in Osmer, 1992, p. 138). Fowler (1981) described conversion as a process embracing three movements that led to the transformation of a person’s relationship with God by means of their imagination: Firstly, some experiences were revelatory, that is, they revealed God in ways that promised to be more fulfilling. These experiences acted as a sort of “solvent” to dissolve or disintegrate the old images of the human-divine relationship. The old became foreign, strange and
distant. It was no longer desirable. Secondly, the imagination constructed new images by which to understand and relate with God. Fowler proposed that Jesus’ life and ministry provided a paradigm for this step in the conversion process. Thirdly, people developed and lived out a new chapter in their pilgrimage through life with these new images of their relationship with God (p. 276ff).

In *Faith Development and Religious Education* (1986), Dykstra discussed Fowler’s understanding of religious conversion outlined a four step process: Firstly, there occurs an increasing sense of frustration with the inadequacy of the way meaning is constructed: the way one views reality is no longer satisfying. Secondly, there is an awareness of personal competence and a readiness to imagine or construct a new way of making meaning of life’s experiences. The third step is seen in a person’s willingness to struggle towards a new way of viewing life. The final step is evident in a person’s act of appropriating new content and applying a new way of thinking about life (p. 264).

Rambo (1993) described the process of conversion that took into account aspects not dealt with directly by Gillespie, Fowler and Dykstra. For instance, he placed the process of conversion within the quest for meaning and purpose in life. He described the individual’s quest as “an ongoing process, but one that will greatly intensify during times of crisis” (p. 56). Secondly, he emphasised the role of the “advocate” or sponsor whose interaction with the potential convert can be crucial to the process of conversion (p. 66). Thirdly, he described the parts played by rituals, rhetoric and roles in building what he
called an “encapsulated world” into which the potential candidate is invited (p. 104). Fourthly, he documented the characteristics of the process of commitment experienced by converts and listed them as “decision making, rituals, surrender, testimony manifested in language transformation and biographical reconstruction, and motivational reformulation” (p. 124). These aspects of the process of conversion will be examined in some detail in chapter 5 of the present study.

Religious conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. God works through those who proclaim the good news of salvation \( (EN, \text{para}. \ 18) \). The presence of God in the world is not haphazard. Dulles (1984) drew on the work of Michael Polanyi and “situates religious conversion within the framework of a logic of discovery” (p. 42). The “logic” of religious conversion is identifiable, even if there are different perspectives and differing understandings of it. Some theologians have identified structures or progressions within the experience of religious conversion. For instance, as stated above, Martini (1982) used the New Testament to describe religious conversion as a journey and outlined four successive stages of conversion. In the present study, it was not uncommon to find in a family some members who were “churched”, that is, they were active in the life of their parish, and others who chose to reject religious practices, such as going to Mass on Sundays.

While some conversions are sudden and dramatic (Gillespie, 1979; James, 1960/1902), generally speaking, religious conversion is not an instant event, however, it is no less dramatic in its effect, even over a long period of time (Babin, 1965; Lonergan, 1971). Conversion has been referred to as a
“continuing” process that is lifelong (GDC, para. 56) and “a dynamic process … which advances gradually…” (FC, para. 9). Amalorpavadass (1983) stated that it was “a gradual but total transformation” (p. 342), a view also expressed by Fowler (1981, 1984).

The focus in the teaching of the Catholic Church is not just religious conversion, but rather, Christian conversion. Recall that it was stated above that Pope John Paul II (1991) made this very clear in his reflection on the missionary activity of the Catholic Church: “Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple” (RM, para. 46). Faith and religious conversion are related. Faith, understood as trust and loyalty, is the outcome of conversion. The focus now shifts to what prompts a person to adopt a radical change of heart (conversion) with respect to the relationship that is their ultimate concern (to use Tillich’s (1951) expression about faith). As explained above, Fowler (1981) argued that it was the imagination that prompted the change in a person’s relationship with God.

The imagination

Disparaged by some philosophers, regarded with suspicion by some religious groups and feted by poets and artists, the notion of the imagination has had a troubled history. Yet it can be shown that it plays a significant role in promoting change. It does so by means of mental images derived from memories of objects and experiences, and by bringing together previously unrelated ideas, memories and experiences. Thus the imagination constructs mental images of the real and the possible. Central to the present study is the
notion that the imagination constructs the new to dispel the frustration and disillusionment experienced with the old.

The history of ideas about the imagination began in ancient Greece with Plato and Aristotle. While Aristotle (384-322 BC) credited the imagination with intellectual and ethical status, Plato (429-347 BC) regarded it with suspicion and denigrated its role in the search for truth. He described it as the lowest form of knowing. The *Republic* (circa 380 BC), his most well known work, recorded an argument between Socrates and a number of other people. In Book Seven, Socrates recounted the allegory of the cave in which he described the imagination as knowing that is shadowy and related to opinion rather than truth. The imagination, this view contended, did not deal with reality and so it could not be trusted.

In his philosophy, Aristotle referred to the imagination as *phantasia* to identify the process by which images were presented to the human mind. The Latin translation of the Greek word *phantasia* is *imaginatio*. Aristotle recognized the work of the imagination in people's efforts to recall objects not present (Thomas, 2002) and associated the imagination with desire: anything not immediately present to the senses must be communicated by means of an image of what is desired. In this context, desire is morally neutral.

In contrast to Aristotle's position, an ethical motif ran through the early history of the use of the concept of the imagination. It was present in both the Greek and Jewish understanding of the role of the imagination and, as will be shown, it influenced the Christian understanding of the nature and function of
the imagination. In the Jewish culture, the word *yetzer* was associated with the imagination. Blanchard (2005) wrote: “In traditional Jewish terms, the human imagination, our *yetzer*, good or bad, is our human self — creating alternative possibilities for responding to our personal situation” (p. 1). There are two forms of the word: *yetzer-ra* and *yetzer-tov*. The former term relates to the inner desire to satisfy needs and it can be inclined towards evil if not kept in check by *yetzer-tov*, which can be defined as the inclination towards the good.

The word *yetzer* relates to the divine act of creation. This meaning was considered by Kearney (1988) in his discussion of the Jewish understanding of imagination. He identified four characteristics of the imagination. As the Jewish use of the word *yetzer* suggests, it is *mimetic*, that is, the imagination is the human imitation of the divine act of creation. The imagination is also *ethical*: it has a significant role to play in choosing between good and evil. It is *historical*, that is, it is involved in determining possibilities that provide alternatives to the present and the past. Finally, the imagination is *anthropological*, which means it is an activity that is proper to people and is related to their freedom and development. Kearney’s description of the imagination provided a useful framework for determining the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. For instance, it will be shown that the participants’ images of God revealed their creative imaging in anthropological terms of the God of their childhood and even of the God of their adolescence. Second, the participants were encouraged to engage in a form of narrative theology, that is, they constructed from memory the story of
their relationship with God. With those who had experienced some form of religious conversion, there was evidence of the ethical dimension of the imagination at work determining their relationship with the world and with significant others in their lives.

Keane (1984) identified imagination as “a non-discursive type of human learning and experience” (p. 21) and created an epistemological framework that contrasted the work of Plato, Augustine and Kant with that of Aristotle, Aquinas and Newman. His purpose for doing so was to find a basis for developing an “imagination-oriented moral theology” (p. 21). He argued that Aristotle, Aquinas and Newman “provide a stronger basis for an ethics of imagination” (p. 21). Since ethics relates to changes in beliefs and values, his ideas were relevant in a consideration of an epistemological framework for religious conversion. As noted above, Kearney (1988) also presented an argument for a relationship between the imagination and ethics. In the present study, it will be shown that the imagination functioned to create a religious ethic that maintained each participant’s life world.

Sutherland (1971) drew attention to the disputed status of the imagination in philosophy (p. 1). For instance, the proponents of the English empiricist tradition did not view the imagination was not viewed favourably (Sutherland, 1971). Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the English philosopher, statesman and essayist, once wrote "Imagination was given to man to compensate him for what he is not; a sense of humor to console him for what he is." Yet he gave the imagination a place as part of rational behaviour when people try to decide whether to take action or not: “For sense sendeth over to
Imagination before Reason have judged; and Reason sendeth over to
Imagination before the Decree can be acted; for Imagination ever precedeth
Voluntary Motion” (Sutherland, 1971, p. 5). He seemed to be ascribing to the
imagination a “filtering” function. A contrary view was expressed by English
poets of the romantic era. For instance, in the Preface to his 1815 Poems,
William Wordsworth (1770-1850) distinguished between invention and
imagination. He described the value of the imagination as “giving insights into
what is described” and assigned it as essentially an intellectual activity.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was passionate about changing
people’s understanding of the nature and function of the imagination. In his
Eleventh Lecture, he outlined the role of the imagination and stated its
importance: “The imagination is the distinguishing characteristic of man as a
progressive being…” (Walsh, 1959, p. 25). Coleridge identified understanding
and reason as two functions of the human mind and the imagination was the
intellectual faculty that united them. Coleridge referred to it as a “completing
power” and he coined the term asemplastic from the Greek “to shape into
one” to describe its function (Bate, 1968, p. 158). In The Statesmans Manual
he defined the imagination as:

that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in
images of the sense, and organising (as it were) the flux of the senses by
the permanent and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a
system of symbols, harmonious in themselves and consubstantial with the
truths of which they are the conductors (Bates, 1968, p. 160).
In effect, Coleridge highlighted the synthesizing role of the imagination. He posited its existence in the human desire to see things in their entirety and to discover their organizing principles.

Coleridge distinguished between primary and secondary imagination. The former he related to moral will. Salingar (1970) stated that Coleridge believed that the source of religious faith and of genuine perception were one and the same, namely the “divine spark” in each person. In an oft-quoted passage from his Biographia, Coleridge defined primary imagination as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (p. 189). In summarising Coleridge’s view of imagination, Bate (1968) stated that it was “a process of realisation” that unified reason and understanding (p. 159).

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a contemporary of Coleridge, believed that people were able to have an immediate and intuitive feeling of God. He came under the influence of members of the Romantic Movement and in 1799 published his most important work on the philosophy of religion: On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers. Like Coleridge, Schleiermacher believed that the role of the imagination was to link God and people and so he argued for the primacy of the imagination in constructing reality, which it could do independently of the senses. The proposal that the imagination is the human faculty that provides access to God is a theme that can be found in scripture, literature, philosophy and theology. The breadth of this reflection is reflected in the writings of twentieth and twenty-first century writers, including Walsh (1959), Fischer (1983), Bausch (1984), Green (1989),
Hart (2003), Eckman (2005) and Levy (2008). It will be considered in greater depth in the section on religious imagination in this chapter and also in chapter 6 of the present study.

Kant (1724-1804), who was another contemporary of Coleridge, thought differently from him. Green (1987) called Kant an “epistemological reformer” and stated that he “helped to establish imagination as an important locus in modern philosophy” (p. 13). Harris attributed the popularity of the concept of *Einbildungskraft* to Kant – it was a concept that he borrowed from the psychological theory of Johann Nikolaus Tetens. In her work on the imagination, Warnock (1976) quoted Kant’s definition:

> What is first given to us is appearance. When combined with consciousness it is called perception. Now since every appearance contains a manifold, and since different perceptions occur in the mind separately and singly, a combination of them *such as they cannot have in sense* is demanded. There must therefore exist in us an active faculty for the synthesis of this manifold. To this faculty I give the name Imagination (p. 28).

Kant was a man of his time. He shared with earlier Enlightenment thinkers the conviction that religion is essentially concerned with rational ideas – specifically with moral ones. Green (1989) stated that he defined religion as the “recognition of all duties as divine commands” (p. 13). Kant distinguished between pure rational faith and the historical phenomena known in the Enlightenment as “positive” religion. He drew a distinction between the pure motive of rational faith and empirical faith. Kant used images, such as the
kernel and the husk, as well as inner and outer concentric circles to communicate the difference between the two forms of faith and religion. He identified the latter form of religion as imagination.

According to Paton (1951), Kant associated the imagination with understanding, of which it is the servant and a manifestation of understanding derived from the synthesis of experience. But understanding can be purely intellectual, that is, transcendental, as well as empirical (p. 537). That is why Kant identified two forms of the imagination to correspond to the different forms of understanding. Warnock (1976) interpreted Kant’s view in this way: the imagination lies between concepts that people have and sense experience. It joins these two elements and brings order to sense experience “according to certain rules, or in certain unchanging forms” (p. 30). The imagination also has the power to construct images that act as blueprints for future images; it enables people “to think of certain objects in the world in a new way, as signifying something else” (p. 197). Hart (2003) used “reordering, redescribing, transforming” as descriptors of the work of the imagination (p. 3).

Religious imagination

In *Models of Revelation*, Dulles (1985) wrote about the creative power of the imagination. In his explanation of his fifth model of revelation, which has its origins in nineteenth century idealism, he stated that Hart, an American theologian, “stresses the involvement of the imagination in the revelatory process” (p. 103). Dulles defined imagination as “the power by which we anticipate and construct our future …” (p. 104). Within the framework of this
model of revelation, Dulles also examined the ideas of Eugene Frontinelli, an American pragmatist philosopher. He stated that Frontinelli held that the imagination was “the organ through which ideals are constructed and possibilities are apprehended” (p. 104).

Dulles (1985) described Hart as one who saw imagination as essentially cognitive, whereas Frontinelli considered it to be non-cognitive. However, Hart stated that imagination was not cognitive. Nor could it be considered to be non-cognitive. He believed that it was “the irenic faculty of the mind, mediating between the active and passive phases of mental operation, conforming the mind to the object and the object to the mind” (p. 319). For Hart, the imagination was an operational faculty that engaged in a “plurality of operations” (p. 319).

Harris (1932-2005) lectured internationally about religious imagination. In *Teaching and religious imagination* (1987), she took Wheelwright’s (1982/1968) four functions of the imagination and interpreted them in a religious sense, thus providing a structure for reflecting on religious imagination at work in the lives of the participants in the present study. Harris (1987) considered the imagination from the perspective of *valuing*, which carried with it “a sense of subjective involvement and participation in what [people] esteem or find desirable” (p. 11). Implicit in her statement was the existence of religious faith, that is, the valuing of and commitment to a personal relationship with God.
Fowler (1981, 1984), Leavey et al (1992), Treston (1993) and Bednar (1996) also wrote with conviction about the relationship between faith and imagination. They placed the imagination in the role of servant to faith and emphasised its active role in faith development. Fowler (1981) described the relationship between faith and imagination in a generic sense: “In faith, imagination composes comprehensive images of the ultimate conditions of existence” (p. 30). Parks (1992) was critical of Fowler’s failure to develop the contribution of this relationship to faith development theory (p. 111); however, there is sufficient in his reflection on synthetic-conventional faith (1984, p.59) to provide insights into the role of the imagination in faith development.

In his description of the movement from synthetic-conventional faith to individuative-reflective faith, Fowler drew attention to the change from a tacit faith to one that was explicit. There were echoes there of Bate’s (1968) comment about Coleridge’s understanding of the role of the imagination in constructing reality: the imagination assists in the awareness-raising activity of the mind. It is suspected that some adolescents have already begun this part of their faith journey by the time they reach the final year of secondary school.

Bednar (1996) wrote about the contribution of Fr William Lynch, SJ, (1908-1987) to understanding the relationship between the imagination and faith: “it is the task of faith to imagine the real” (p. 79). Treston (1993) agreed with this view of the imagination and identified the purpose of the relationship between the imagination and religious education: “The role of imagination in religious education is to open our consciousness to new horizons of being and God imaging” (p. 12). Keane (1984) lent weight to this argument by stating
“Imaginatively, we can be open to experiences of faith and trust in God, experiences that would not be possible at the level of systematic philosophical or theological discourse” (p. 25).

In their research into Australian adolescent girls’ religious faith, Leavey et al. (1992) made statements that suggested that some adolescents use their imaginations with greater skill than others. Concerning one student, they reported: “Deeply immersed in her religious culture, she uses a variety of images derived from that culture and possibly from her own inner experience” (p. 145). About another student, they wrote: “She can integrate images both from the Catholic tradition and from an understanding of nature to produce what she calls her ‘simile or parallel to God’” (p. 145). Elsewhere they commented on yet another adolescent’s religious faith implicitly in terms of imagination when they described that person’s faith as being “enlarged with the new perspectives born of advanced competencies” (p. 145).

Both Keane (1984) and Harris (1987) affirmed the view of Paul Ricoeur (1978) who described the imagination in terms reminiscent of Kant’s productive imagination. Keane (1984) summarised Ricoeur’s understanding of imagination in three points: the imagination “enables us to form vision, to see reality as a whole on a conceptual level”; it helps us “to form pictures or figures … out of which our vision can spring”; and it helps us “suspend judgment in conflictual situations … and find new meanings in reality” (p. 58). Drawing on Ricoeur’s views, Harris (1987) described the religious dimension of teaching in the following way: “For we teachers, at our best, can shape and reshape subject matter in order to present, to institute, and to constitute what
is, has been, and might be humanly possible” (p. 3). Embedded in her statement was her understanding of the imagination as the power to shape reality. It is that power, so stated Bednar (1996), which “produces things as a synthesis of both meaning and presence” (p. 59).

The imagination draws together in an intelligent way the disparate elements of a person’s life that impact on their relationship with God. It proposes new images of the relationship that promise a greater sense of trust and value. How does the Catholic Church provide opportunities for those new images to be formed and the imagination to be stirred? One area for investigation is how the two elements of religious education and catechesis are incorporated in the lives of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia.

Religious education and catechesis

The evangelisation process has two elements, one being Christian witness and the other being the ministry of the word. It is the latter that is of particular concern in the present study. Ministry of the word refers to the use of human words by any baptised believer to speak of the works of God and of those whose lives reflect faith in God (GDC, para. 50). This is the context for considering religious education (and catechesis) as an essential element in the present study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic schools.

The school subject referred to as “Religious Education” in Western Australian Catholic education curriculum documents is intended to contribute
to the Church’s mission of handing on the faith by imparting knowledge of the faith. It is part of the process of evangelisation outlined in the previous chapter. In 1971 and again in 1998, the Catholic Church published general guidelines for the teaching of religious education, titled *General Directory for Catechesis*. A brief history of the origins of the two documents was presented in the introductory chapter of the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998). The first directory — *General Catechetical Directory* — was published as an outcome of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Its contribution to the growing understanding of the catechetical work of the Church was stated and the missionary thrust of the Church was acknowledged. The significance of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the theme of evangelisation in the contemporary world in 1974 was stated and the work of Pope Paul VI, who published the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelisation in the Modern World) in 1975, was noted with due deference. The work of Pope John Paul II was outlined succinctly. Reference was made to the twelve encyclicals that he wrote, “which constitute in themselves a synthetic corpus of coherent doctrine with regard to the renewal of ecclesial life decreed by the Second Vatican Council” (para. 5).

This considerable global effort over a period of nearly forty years was in response to changes in the world. The impact of “crises, doctrinal inadequacies, influences from the evolution of global culture and ecclesial questions derived from outside the field of catechesis” on religious education and catechesis (*GDC*, para. 2) required a response from the Church that would provide direction for its members. The Introduction also stated that the
document represented a serious attempt to address and keep in balance two requirements: the first being “the contextualisation of catechesis” in evangelisation as envisaged by Evangelii Nuntiandi; and the second being “the appropriation of the content of the faith as presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church” (GDC, para. 7).

In giving consideration to what The General Directory for Catechesis (1998) stated about the nature and purpose of religious education, it should be noted that the document’s authors referred to “Religious Instruction” (GDC, para. 73). In Australia the term “instruction” has connotations that are different from the meaning given to the word in Europe (Holohan, 1999, p. 9). As a consequence, while the Church in Australia has adopted the language of the new directory, it has retained the use of the term “religious education.” Regardless of the term that is used, the focus is on learning the content of the faith.

Religious Education

In a book intended for teachers new to the task of teaching religious education in Australian Catholic schools, Ryan and Malone (1996) explained that the term “religious education” entered the common language of Catholic schools in Australia in the 1970s. They described it as “an umbrella term that covers all aspects of student learning about religion, as well as the processes of becoming more religious” (p. 7). Treston (1993) described the subject as “a meeting point between religion and education, and implies a conversation between learning and the whole experience of the phenomenon of religion” (p.
Concerning the impact of religious education on the learner, Treston observed that it “empowers participants to think religiously and to acquire skills to analyse religious questions” (p. 12). Holohan (1999) limited the use of the term to denoting the curriculum taught in the classroom. He used the term “catechesis” to refer to what happens outside the classroom, such as liturgical celebrations, retreats, community service and the activities of Catholic youth groups, such as Young Vinnies and the Young Christian Students movement. The distinction between the two forms of evangelisation, that is, religious education and catechesis, will be discussed below.

Religious education is “a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines” (GDC, para. 73). The focus is on having students able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the teaching of the Church (RD, para. 69). Religious education engages in dialogue with the other disciplines that together with it make up the curriculum of the Catholic school. The Bishops of the Catholic Church in Western Australia mandated their schools to teach religious education. The importance they placed on this educational endeavour was illustrated clearly in their Mandate (2001), hereafter referred to as M01. They acknowledged the validity of the concept of “learning area” promulgated by the State Government. Given the primacy of the teaching of religion in Catholic schools, the Bishops directed that religious education be the first learning area of the Catholic school curriculum so it was placed at the head of the eight learning areas addressed by the curriculum designed for all schools in Western Australia. Thus, in the curriculum of Catholic schools in Western
Australia there are nine learning areas and religious education is the first learning area. In their letter, the Bishops identified the principal function of religious education: “It aims to share Catholic faith by promoting knowledge and understanding of the Gospel as it is handed on by the Catholic Church…” (M01, para. 43). The context of this statement needs to be understood in order to appreciate what it means in terms of curriculum and pedagogy.

The Catholic Church’s analysis of the state of its missionary activity led to the formulation of new concepts that have changed the shape of religious education in Australia. Pope John Paul II (1990) introduced the concept of “new evangelisation” to identify that aspect of the Church’s mission to evangelise which involved communities of baptised Christians who had “lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (RM, para. 33).

The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia acknowledged the reality of new evangelisation. They recognised that teachers in their schools would be promoting faith in students who had little or no interest in the Church (M01, para. 24). A paper written by Bellamy & Castle (2004) based on the results of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) conducted in 2001 showed a 13% decline in Catholics attending weekly Mass. In 2001, 15% of Australia’s five million Catholics attended Mass weekly. A study of youth spirituality in Australia (2003-2005) identified confusion about what to believe and a lack of interest in organised religion (Hughes, 2005).
The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (M01, para. 44) addressed the relationship between religious education and new evangelisation. They described religious education as part of their strategy to promote the religious awakening of the students attending Catholic schools in Western Australia. Catholic schools were mandated to “ensure that students understand the foundational Christian belief that Jesus Christ is Saviour, as well as the Christian Promise of Salvation” (M01, para. 44). The religious education curriculum was to provide students with the opportunity to learn about the implications of the promise of salvation for their lives and how their deepest longings could be satisfied by the Gospel message (M01, para. 44).

One of those consulted by the Bishops in the preparation of their Mandate was Fr Gerard Holohan (currently the Bishop of the Diocese of Bunbury, Western Australia). Following the release of the General Directory for Catechesis (1998), the National Catholic Education Committee (NCEC), acting on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference Education Committee, published a monograph written by Fr Holohan, who was at the time a Deputy Director of Catholic Education in the Western Australian Catholic Education Office (CEOWA) and Director of Religious Education. His monograph was titled Australian Religious Education – Facing the Challenges (1999). He applied the language and categories found in the Directory to the teaching of religious education. He asked the question, “What is religious education?” and then answered it: “Religious education seeks to help students to learn the teachings of the Gospel (and) to develop ‘a sense of the nature of
Christianity’ and of ‘how Christians are trying to live their lives’ (*RD*, para. 69)” (p. 27).

**Catechesis**

Pope John Paul II defined the word “catechesis” as “the whole of the efforts within the Church to make disciples” and he stated that it involved the education and instruction of its members, thus building up the body of Christ (*CT*, para. 1). The making of disciples is a formative process and not just instructional. The belief of the Catholic Church is this: “By meeting Jesus Christ and by adhering to him, the human being sees all his deepest aspirations completely fulfilled” (*CT*, para. 55).

Catechesis is the responsibility of the whole Catholic community (Saker, 2004, p. 10). The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (2001) acknowledged the need for Catholic schools to be involved in catechesis, particularly for students whose families do not participate in parish life (*M01*, para. 39). They identified the ways that schools offered catechesis: “school and class liturgies, school and class prayer, retreats and Easter and Christmas celebrations;” they included ways of celebrating Mary as a model of Christian discipleship, “the lives of the saints and martyrs” and the use and appreciation of “Christian symbols, practices and customary signs of respect, particularly for the Eucharist.” (*M01*, para. 47). Holohan (1999) included the liturgical year, homilies, sacramental programmes, social service groups and specific actions arising from reflection upon ways of imitating Christ (p. 37).
Catechesis is an interactive process involving those who proclaim the Gospel, those who hear the word of God and the Holy Spirit who stirs the hearts of all who seek union with God. "It is a life-long process of initial conversion, formation, education, and on-going conversion. Through word, worship, service and community, it seeks to lead all God's people to an ever-deepening relationship with God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. To this end, catechesis takes many forms and includes the initiation of adults, youth and children as well as the intentional and systematic effort to enable all to grow in faith and discipleship. Religious education is part of this effort.

Religious education and catechesis are considered to be distinct, yet complementary. Holohan (1990) placed religious education in the context of catechesis when he defined it as "a form of catechetical instruction that is concerned with developing in students 'a living, explicit and active faith, enlightened by doctrine'" (p. 6). Saker (2004) described the difference between religious education and catechesis: "Catechesis is the faith development of the student whereas religious education aims to instil the knowledge component of faith development" (p. 9). The history of religious education in Australia is about the confusion between religious education and catechesis, a confusion that seems to be pervasive in some sectors of the Catholic school system in Australia (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006).

In his monograph, Holohan (1990) provided a more detailed statement of the differences between religious education and catechesis by means of a table (Table 2) that features nine points of difference (p. 32).
Table 1

The differences between catechesis and religious education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIM</th>
<th>Catechesis</th>
<th>Religious Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To promote maturity of Christian faith</td>
<td>To promote understanding of Christian beliefs and practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCESSSES</td>
<td>Formation</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>Reflects the divine pedagogy</td>
<td>Catholic educational pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCATION</td>
<td>Mature family, parish and Catholic school faith communities</td>
<td>School community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READINESS</td>
<td>Depends upon stage of conversion</td>
<td>Depends upon religious learning readiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINCIPLES</td>
<td>Catechetical principles</td>
<td>Catholic educational principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECEIVERS</td>
<td>Groups at same stage of conversion</td>
<td>Students within the same school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCULTURATION</td>
<td>Gospel presented in an inculturated way</td>
<td>Content inculturated in a context with the same systematic demands and rigor as other school disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPTH</td>
<td>Needs to be appropriate to the receivers' level of conversion</td>
<td>Same depth of knowledge as other school disciplines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After Holohan (1999), p. 32.

Holohan (1999) also provided an historical overview of the differences between the two forms of evangelisation. The Second Vatican Council drew a distinction between “doctrinal instruction in schools” and “catechetical instruction.” Pope John Paul II was emphatic about the distinction and the General Directory for Catechesis (1998) repeated his statement: “… there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and catechesis” (GDC, para. 73). Holohan continued:

Its importance is so great that religious education and catechesis have been made the responsibilities of different Vatican Congregations – religious education being the responsibility of the Congregation for Catholic Education and catechesis, the Congregation for the Clergy. (p. 30)

Holohan outlined areas of agreement and difference between religious education and catechesis. Catechesis presupposed a commitment freely made to learning about the mystery of Christ. It was built on a willingness to
learn about and be nurtured by the revelation of Christ that is “stored in the depths of the Church’s memory and in Sacred Scripture, and constantly communicated from one generation to the next by a living active traditio” (GDC, para. 66). On the other hand, religious education did not require faith commitment on the part of students but it was included in the curriculum because the Church wanted to promote Christian faith and conversion of minds and hearts to a deeper commitment to Christ.

Religious education is an educational activity and is distinct from catechesis, which has as its objective faith formation of individuals and communities. But religious education also complements catechesis: both are activities of ministry of the word, which joins with Christian witness to form the evangelisation process. It will be shown in later chapters that both religious education and catechesis are used by the imagination in the experience of religious conversion.

Approaches to research

To arrive at a research method that will do justice to this study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents, a number of factors were considered. First, there were the different approaches to research that have emerged over time. Second, there were the antecedents to be considered, that is, the research already conducted that was relevant to the present study, for instance, previous research into Catholic education, particularly with respect to evangelisation. These were like other voices, apart from those of the participants in this study; once introduced here, they will be
invited back at a later stage to participate in the interpretation of the data. Third, there was the question of knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the participants in the research. The research method adopted would have to allow for the opportunity to scrutinise the characteristics of the ways people know things and to draw conclusions about the role of the imagination in how knowledge is received and processed. To this end, the work of Belenky et al. (1986) was examined and their model of four ways of knowing was adopted. Fourth, the method would have to allow for the interpretation of the data. This led to a consideration of hermeneutics. Fifth, there needed to be a way of allowing the participants’ perceptions of their personal religious life to emerge and to be accepted without judgment, which suggest a phenomenological approach to the design of the research, one that draws together hermeneutics and phenomenology. Sixth, the interpretation of the data would be undertaken with the assistance of understandings derived from theories of human development. These factors were considered to be like movements that came together to work in harmony for the purpose of showing the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. The method that facilitated this approach is called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Contrasting research methodologies

There were two basic approaches to research that could have been used to explore the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents: quantitative inquiry and qualitative inquiry. The differences between the two approaches reflect the decisions that are made about what is
worth researching. The fundamental difference lies in the position adopted by the researcher: quantitative research views reality from the outside (Bryman, 1988), whereas qualitative researchers typically try to “walk in the shoes” of those who participate in their research projects (Burgess, 1988). It can be like an intimate sharing between the participant and the researcher, or a “dialogue with difference” (Barnacle, 2005, p. 48), or, as Finlay (2006) has described it, a relational dance.

Another major difference between the two approaches is the issue of verification. It is commonly accepted that the results of quantitative research methodologies can be verified through replication studies (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). On the other hand, qualitative research methodologies do not provide answers that are easily defended because of the epistemological assumptions that underpin such methods, namely, that there is no objective reality, and that the knowledge that is produced through the research process is context specific (Ary et al., 2006; Heaton, 2004; LeCompte, 2002; Lyons, 2008). Reliability and validity are much more crucial than verification in qualitative research (Allan, 1991). In the present study, replication was not considered to be of concern because the purpose of the research programme was to show how the imagination assisted faith development and conversion, but not how often. The study was not concerned with the frequency of responses, or other such quantitative measures.

The belief that behaviour is context-bound underpins the efforts of qualitative researchers (Ary et al., 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 1985). This belief was echoed in Catholic Church documents on evangelisation and education
(Christian Education, 1965; The Catholic School, 1977; Lay Catholics, 1982; The Religious Dimension of Education, 1988; The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1997; and the Mandate of the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia, 2001, 2009). For instance, the work of evangelisation is contextualised. Consider some of the sub-headings used in part 1 of The Religious Dimension of Education (1988): “Young people are well-informed” (RD, para. 8); “… but they lack religious and moral points of reference” (RD, para. 9); “Many young people find themselves in a radical instability” (RD, para. 10); “… and are deprived of good human relationships” (RD, para. 11); “They are worried about the future” (RD, para. 12). These factors were derived from research and those who are responsible for Catholic education in a particular locality are urged to conduct their own research to determine the characteristics of the lives of the youth they educate (RD, para. 7).

Qualitative research is descriptive. Qualitative researchers assume that human behaviour is influenced by spiritual and social factors, including its historical, political and cultural dimensions. When they study human behaviour in a “qualitative” way, they take into account this context (Ary et al., 2006). The dimensions of human behaviour contribute to the meaning and significance of lived experience of both the researchers and their subjects. On the other hand, as Ary et al. (2006) explained, quantitative researchers typically engage in “context stripping” when they analyse their data (p. 453).

As will be made clear below in the description of the research design, qualitative research is more concerned with process than with outcome. The
focus is on understanding human behaviour and lived experience rather than
on the frequency of particular behaviours. Bogdan & Biklen (1985) stated:
“questions developed to guide a qualitative study need to be more open-
ended and concerned with process and meaning rather than cause and effect”
(p. 156). Rather than entering the research situation with a pre-determined set
of factors, as is common in quantitative research designs, qualitative
researchers typically allow the factors to emerge (Ary et al., 2006).

In qualitative research, understanding and insight emerge out of the
data. Researchers use an inductive process that can be described as being
like doing a jigsaw puzzle (Bogdan & Biklen, 1985), or like a “discovery
process” (Marton, 1988), or moving up conceptually (Green, 2005). Allan
(1991) commented that in the early part of a qualitative study, it could take on
a messy and impressionistic character. On the other hand, it can be highly
stylised, like a dance, and be enthralling and absorbing to the observer.

Finally, qualitative research is concerned with meaning, both the
meaning that the researcher brings to the project, and the meaning that the
participants gain from their experiences that they share with the researcher.
Many of the forms of qualitative research are designed to communicate the
meaning people give to their experiences by facilitating the task of
understanding that experience from the participant’s perspective, thereby
making it possible for others to understand the experiences from the
participants’ perspectives. As with a symphony, the process of illumination
can be understood as a series of movements (Figure 1).
Movement one: Researching Catholic education in Australia

The research context of any field of study is complex and varied. Many studies of religious development have been undertaken. The researchers have used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies designed, in many instances, to add to the body of knowledge about the religious development of adolescents in a classroom, school and cultural setting. For instance, Fahy (1992) used a Christian faith scale designed to give measures of “the unique effect of classroom religious education upon faith measures when compared to home, peer group, personality and other school factors” (p. 106). Francis, Kay & Campbell (1996) compiled 27 reports on empirical research in religious education, most of which employed quantitative methodologies. Those studies that employed quantitative methods presented participants with a pre-
determined number of variables to which they could respond in a limited number of ways. Their responses could then be analysed statistically to provide conclusions that could be verified through replication studies.

A major focus of research into Catholic education in Australia has been the effectiveness of Catholic schools, particularly in the transmission of knowledge of the teachings of the Catholic Church and its culture. Flynn (1972, 1979, 1982, 1993), Fahy (1992), Flynn & Mok (2002) and, more recently, Saker (2004) made use of quantitative methods to gather data for analysis. Their research was conducted for the purpose of interpreting Catholic education and with a view to suggesting ways of improving on what was already characteristic of Catholic schools in Australia.

Marist Brother Marcellin Flynn (1932-2004) collaborated with Magdalena Mok to publish Catholic Schools 2000 (2002) that documented the findings of Flynn’s longitudinal study of Year 12 students in Catholic schools in Australia (1972-1998). In the Preface, they reported: “Catholic schools today have not only survived the many crises of past decades, but have a renewed sense of vitality and vision” (p. xi). Quantitative methods were used to gather data and analyse it. Questionnaires and multilevel analysis of the data provided them with a clear view of the effectiveness of Catholic schools in Australia. Qualitative techniques were also used. Saker (2004) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data from 133 Catholic university students enrolled in Education courses at a Western Australian University. His conclusions highlighted the deficits of Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia in providing effective religious education.
Movement two: Epistemology

In his study of the effectiveness of Catholic schools, Fahy (1992) stated his hopes for the use of quantitative research methods in determining the effectiveness of religious education: “Only the ultimate mystery of God can give meaning to the faith journey of the parents, staff and students of Catholic schools but the empirical procedures can at least track some of the footprint edges of that journey” (p. 31).

One “footprint edge” is knowledge of Catholic beliefs and practices (Fahy, 1992), however, it is not knowledge in the form of statements from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), but knowledge that is the product of students’ perceptions of Catholic beliefs and practices. The study of women’s ways of knowing, by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) provided a descriptive model that was consistent with the epistemological framework of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Belenky et al. used a qualitative methodology to establish a four-stage model of ways of knowing: received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge. Their analysis of transcripts of interviews yielded many conclusions, one of which was particularly pertinent to this study. They stated: “At the positions of *received knowledge* and *procedural knowledge*, other voices and external truths prevail” (p. 134). The philosophy of Catholic education places knowledge as the aim of the Catholic school (*CS*, para. 37; *RD*, para. 69). Knowledge that is owned in this way is constructed knowledge and Belenky et al. (1986) described it as the “effort to reclaim the self by attempting to integrate knowledge that they felt intuitively was personally
important with knowledge they had received from others" (p.134). The movement from received and procedural forms of knowledge to constructed knowledge in the realm of religion would or could act as a sign of religious conversion.

In this study, the researcher wanted to give participants the opportunity to respond more freely to questions about aspects of their religious development. Their perceptions of their religious life were considered to be more important than their knowledge and understanding of aspects of Catholic faith because it was believed that data collected about perceptions of personal faith would reveal signs of the imagination at work helping the participants to construct their beliefs about God and their relationship with God. These purposes required a qualitative method, that is, one that focused on meaning ascribed by the participants to their experiences. The method would have to accommodate the role of the researcher as interpreter and be open to the participant as the interpreter of personal experience. The method that was sought would encompass the use of hermeneutics.

Movement three: Hermeneutics

In Greek mythology, the god Hermes mediated between Zeus and the mortals. He was responsible for taking messages from Zeus down to mortals and explaining them. This was not an easy task. First, Hermes would have to question Zeus in order to make sure he understood what Zeus wanted him to tell the mortals. Then he would have to find the right words to convey Zeus’ message. In other words, Hermes had to “interpret” Zeus’ message to the
mortal. Palmer (1999) described Hermes’ action as bridging “an ontological gap, a gap between the thinking of the gods and that of humans” (p. 2). So the Greeks came to use the word *hermeneus* to refer to those who interpreted messages.

In Egyptian mythology, Thoth was considered to be the heart and tongue of Ra. Thoth translated Ra’s will into speech. He was credited with the invention of writing and the alphabet. The Greeks realised that Thoth was similar to their god Hermes. In time, they came to merge the two gods. One of Thoth’s titles was “three times great.” It was translated as *Trismegistos* and used to describe Hermes Trismegistos (the thrice powerful Hermes) who became the author of all human knowledge. Both the Greeks and the Egyptians came to believe that knowledge can be “captured” in written texts and released only by divine mediation.

Aristotle used the word “hermeneutics” in his work *Peri hermeneias* (“On Interpretation”). His approach to interpretation was essentially logical and carried out for the purpose of distinguishing truth from falsehood. The word and its cognates were used throughout the ancient Greek world to denote various types of interpretation: *oral interpretation*, *translation*, and the *exegesis of texts*. It is the third form of hermeneutics, which is the exegesis of texts that is of interest in this study.

The word gained currency in the sixteenth century when scholars, having translated the Bible into English, then had to interpret it for those who were confused by what they were reading. The Reformation brought with it the
battle for the right to interpret the Bible without the aid of Tradition. Central to Luther’s argument was the belief that all that was needed for interpretation of the Scriptures was the text itself. Thus the science of hermeneutics was born out of the struggle to ensure that the Bible was not interpreted in ways based on personal whim or fancy.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) has been credited with being the founder of modern hermeneutics. He rejected the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment and was drawn to romanticism, the influence of which is seen in his understanding of hermeneutics. Schleiermacher believed that the creative power of feelings was paramount. He emphasised the importance of lived experience. This was evident in his favourite analogy of the hermeneutical process: the intuitive understanding between two friends.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1989) stated that hermeneutics developed along two paths: one was theological and the other was philological. Both paths were related to the battle to escape from the stranglehold that the Catholic Church had on scholarship in all its forms. As a field of study, hermeneutics came to be linked closely with theology. Eventually, hermeneutics were being applied to both law and literature also. By the nineteenth century, it was being used in all fields of study. For many scholars, it was the cornerstone of all academic disciplines (p.165).

The focus in the present study is on the interpretation of the words used by the participants to tell their stories of faith. The interpretation will happen in a “hermeneutic circle” which holds more than the text and the
interpreter. The voices mentioned earlier as contributors (in the sense of ideas impacting on the act of interpretation) to the second movement will be part of the circle.

Movement four: Phenomenology

Creswell (1998) described five traditions within the field of qualitative research methodologies, one of which was phenomenology, which as Hammond, Howarth & Keat (1991) stated “involves the description of things as one experiences them…” (p. 1). Phenomenology is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “the science of phenomena as distinct from being (ontology).” Thus it could be said that phenomenology is the study of phenomena, that is, appearances. As Finlay (2001) stated, it is the study of “the way things appear to us through experience, or in our consciousness” (p. 1). It is a study of perceptions of reality, rather than reality itself.

Phenomenology was the child of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), an Austrian mathematician and philosopher. It was the outcome of his attempt to turn philosophy into a science and he argued that it rightly had its place alongside ontology. Burch (2002) stated: “Phenomenology strives systematically for essential insights, for demonstrable universality, and for theoretical self-transparency, seeking to communicate, not just ideas and information about everyday experiences and matters of concern, but also the manner of our participation in truth” (p. 194). The significance of Burch’s statement will be clarified in the comments about bracketing that will be made later in the chapter.
Husserl took the notion of intentionality from Brentano, who was his mentor. Brentano understood intentionality to be the main characteristic of psychical phenomena. It distinguished psychical phenomena from physical phenomena. In Husserl's philosophy, intentionality was essential to consciousness: if we are conscious, we have to be conscious of something. The phenomenological method derived from his philosophy was founded on the belief that all mental and spiritual realities exist independently of the physical world.

Therefore, in coming to understand another person's perception of what is real for them, it was necessary to “bracket” the physical world (of which the researcher’s memories as well as attitudes and emotions are parts thereof) so as to focus attention on the perception itself. This means putting aside the parts in order to look at the whole of a person's experience (Mott, 1993, para. 8). Willis (2001) referred to bracketing as “attempting to focus on the phenomenon and allowing it as it were, to ‘declare itself’” (p. 11). Bednall (2006) highlighted the complex reality of the researcher's efforts to bracket personal involvement in what is being researched.

Research design: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The search for a way of describing the role of the imagination in religious conversion has arrived at the meeting of the movements described above: qualitative research design, hermeneutics and phenomenology. The methodology that allowed for this meeting is known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a recent development in qualitative
methodologies that was designed for use within the field of psychology by Jonathan Smith (2007, 2008). Its application has been widened to include research in health, clinical and social psychology, and also in education, both in the United Kingdom and in other countries, including Australia.

This research approach is a form of hermeneutical phenomenology (Bar-Tzur, 1999; Conroy, 2003; Laverty, 2003). IPA focuses on the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ perceptions of their lived experiences and it deals with the meanings those experiences hold for them. Because their accounts of their lived experiences are central to the research process, the method is phenomenological in nature. At the same time, it is also interpretative because the researcher has to enter each participant’s world indirectly by means of his or her own understanding of what that world might mean to the participant. Thus each account requires a detailed analysis to arrive at a faithful perception of the participant’s experience.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to give their own account of their experiences. It also gave the researcher the freedom to ask questions in order to understand better what the experiences mean to the participant. This flexibility and attention to detail required that the interviews be taped and transcribed verbatim before being analysed in detail. It was the researcher’s task to recognise the themes that framed and gave shape to the experience for the participant.

The method of analysis that is associated with IPA has a number of steps: Firstly, one interview transcript is read a number of times with the
intention of uncovering the themes that are inherent in the text of the transcript. Initially, the themes are taken straight from the text. Secondly, the themes are examined to determine if there are any underlying themes that draw together themes that have already been identified. The image of a hub with spokes would be an appropriate way of describing the building of superordinate, or major themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 67ff). Thirdly, the major and minor themes are applied to the other texts until the researchers are satisfied that there are no further themes to be identified. Lastly, the texts are subjected to interpretations drawn from the texts. In the present study, the bringing together of the qualitative analyses of the religious life of fifteen participants made it possible to describe how the imagination functioned in their worlds.

The task of researching the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents has brought together diverse worlds: history, philosophy and research methodologies. Their meeting helped to define the task with greater precision and led to the adoption of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the research method for this study. The analytic dimension of IPA was enhanced by including aspects of structural-developmental theories of Piaget and Fowler as well as insights gained from studies in cognitive psychology in the hermeneutical circle that was created for the interpretation of the text of each participant’s story.
Movement five: Structural-developmental theories

The fifth movement consisted of selected theories belonging to the structural-developmental paradigm that were brought into the hermeneutic circle to assist with the interpretation of the participants' perceptions of their experiences of God. As the name “structural-developmental” implies, central to the paradigm is the notion of human development exhibiting a stage-like character. Piaget’s (1958) theory of cognitive development, Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith development, Kegan’s (1982) model of human development with its emphasis on adult development, Kohlberg’s (1969) theory of moral development and Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of human needs: these are but a few of the theories and models belonging to the structural-developmental paradigm. The understandings of human development found in the writings of Piaget and Fowler were significant influences on the interpretation of the data gathered for the present study.

Streib (2004) offered a critique of Piaget’s reliance on the notion of invariant sequential stages in cognitive development (p. 2). He cited studies by Bjorklund (2000), Gerrig & Zimbardo (2004) and Subbotsky (2000) that pointed to the inadequacies of a rigid model of development, such as that used by Piaget. However, there were aspects of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, particularly his concepts of assimilation, accommodation, equilibration and disequilibration that proved valuable in the present study. They are not dependent on the validity of his arguments that have been used to explain cognitive development.
Although Fowler (1981) chose to work from within the structural-developmental paradigm, and has been criticised for the inadequacies of his theory, Streib (2004) has highlighted Fowler’s readiness to acknowledge that faith development is subject to more factors than those acknowledged in his original work (*Stages of Faith*, 1981). Even so, according to Streib, Fowler’s theory and faith development theories in general, are “restricted to the analysis of cognitive operational structures in faith” (p. 4) and a single-mindedness in the search for evidence of stages of faith (Day, 2001). These limitations were not an issue in the present study because the decision was taken to include Fowler’s faith development theory in the hermeneutic circle for his focus on cognitive structures. What was of particular interest was the movement from Stage 3 (synthetic-conventional faith) to Stage 4 (individuative-reflective faith). It will be shown that the terms Fowler used to name these stages in his theory of faith development reflect characteristics of the faith described by some of the participants in the present study.

*Movement six: Psychology of religion*

Finally, the sixth movement became a complex set of steps in a dance with the psychology of religion. The search for interpretative “tools” uncovered Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory and information processing theories. These were placed with the various theories of conversion that were alluded to earlier in the chapter, particularly Rambo’s (1993) description of the process of religious conversion. These theories will play an important role in the interpretation that will take place in chapters 5, 6 and 7.
The participants in the present study reported on the changes in their faith that they experienced as adolescents. Four participants — Mikaela, Elizabeth, Kevin and Stephen — experienced some form of conversion. Ullman (1989) had concluded that adolescent conversions were psychological states and had little to do with religious faith. Because this was a possibility, the decision was taken to include aspects of psychology in the hermeneutic circle established to interpret the text of the participants’ stories about their faith development. The work of Babin (1965), Granqvist (2003), Rambo (1993) and Thomas (1999) provided the basis for considering the role of the imagination in religious conversion from a psychological perspective.

Ethical considerations

De Voss (1982) drew attention to four ethical limitations that he addressed in his investigation of the life experience of three student teachers. The problems he encountered were relevant to this study. They were:

• Acquiring permission from school principals to approach selected students to participate in the study and cooperation from the students and their parents
• The limits dictated by subjects’ rights to privacy
• Conflict of interest
• Researcher bias.

The first ethical concern related to acquiring permission from the principals of selected Catholic secondary schools to conduct the study in their schools. The procedures used in the conduct of the collection of date will be
outlined in chapter 3; it is sufficient at this point to note that the names of students willing to participate in the study were obtained from those members of staff directed by their principals to deal with the researcher. They allowed the initial interview to take place so that the purpose of the study could be explained to the selected students with a view to eliciting their participation in the study.

The University of Notre Dame Australia, through its Ethics Committee, provided regulations with respect to involvement of human subjects in research. Guided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research involving Humans* (1999) which was published by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Ethics Committee made the following statement that was relevant to this study:

It is required that before the research is undertaken the free consent of the subject must be obtained. The researcher is responsible for providing the subject, at his or her level of comprehension, with sufficient information about the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconvenience and discomforts of the study. Consent should be obtained in writing unless reasons, submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee, apply. If consent is not obtained in writing, the circumstances of consent being granted should be recorded. The subject must be aware that he/she is free to withdraw consent at any time.

The students who had been approached were still minors and so parental or guardian permission was required as well as their own consent. Therefore,
the following documents were given to each student who expressed interest in participating in the study:

- a letter to the student (Appendix 1)
- a letter to parents/guardian (Appendix 2)
- an acceptance form (Appendix 3)

The Ethics Committee detailed the information that must be presented in writing to the students and their parents. Therefore, documentation provided to them included the title of the project, the names and addresses of those responsible for the project, the nature and general purpose of the study, a brief description of the data collection method and a statement about the precise extent of participation by the subject, including the length of time required of the participant and the location of the interviews. The document emphasised the importance of responding to questions only if the response would not cause discomfort. It also provided participants with the option of withdrawing at any point if they wanted to without having to provide any explanation. Were that to happen, all references to the participant would be removed from the thesis and copies of transcripts (both typed and electronic formats) would be handed over to the participant. The documentation given to the students outlined also how the data would be stored and that it would be kept confidential.

The acceptance form that was used provided the name, address, phone number and email address of the researcher. It included a statement of acceptance that detailed the involvement of the student and the use of information provided through the interviews and the journal. It also contained
a permission statement that required the parent or guardian to give their permission for the student to participate. They were offered access to the development of the thesis by indicating if they wanted to receive a report from the researcher. Finally, the acceptance form asked the student to provide a contact address, phone number, email address and a pseudonym.

The second problem, namely the limits dictated by people's rights to privacy were more difficult to deal with. In this study, participants were asked to reveal intimate details about the religious dimensions of their lives. They were told that aspects of their faith would be subject to analysis and would be reported on in publications. People's concerns with respect to privacy were handled in three ways. Firstly, while it was important for the researcher to know who the respondents were, their names and other identifying characteristics, such as the names of schools, names of teachers and localities were changed when the interviews were transcribed. This was done to provide them with anonymity. Secondly, those who chose to keep a journal controlled the writing process. They were made aware that they should reveal only what they felt comfortable writing about in their journals. If they revealed details that would identify them, those details were altered when the journal was typed. Lastly, they were reminded at the outset of each interview that they had the right to decline to answer any questions, which they considered to be too personal.

The third ethical problem related to the pitfalls of collaborative research, particularly with respect to those participate in the research. Bonzelaar (1983) warned that there was a danger of conflict of interest
influencing what was said in an interview and recorded when the interviewer and interviewee were known to each other. So, is there a danger of research being invalidated because of what might be called ‘collaborator bias?’ Hutchinson (1988) argued that the subjects would be too concerned with their daily tasks to be “paying attention to, pleasing, or playing games with the researcher” (p. 131). Her comment was made in reference to teachers. With students it can be a different matter. Most Year 12 students lead very busy lives and generally they are quite mature (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007). The successful use of interview and journal writing methods was based on the development of a relationship of trust between the researcher and the subject. Every effort was made to develop such a relationship with subjects in the time spent with them.

A fourth ethical problem concerned researcher bias. Miles & Huberman (1984) made the point that the human mind finds patterns “so quickly and easily”. They warned that the downside was resistance to anything that does not fit. Yardley (2000) constructed a schema that was adopted in the present study to ensure that it would not be affected by personal bias. She identified the following elements of good qualitative research: “sensitivity to context”, “commitment and rigour”, “transparency and coherence” and “Impact and importance” (Coyle, 2007, p. 22). These elements were addressed in the methods employed in data collection and data analysis in the following ways: Firstly, all recorded data was transcribed as faithfully as possible. Secondly, during the data analysis (which included the process of transcribing the interviews and typing the journals), the researcher made note of the personal
effects of the data. These notes became more detailed as the data analysis became more detailed. This was considered a responsible way of dealing with bracketing the researcher’s perceptions so that the focus would be the perceptions of the participants. It was conceded that in phenomenology bracketing is the ideal that must be sought vigorously while acknowledging that it would not always be achieved perfectly. The issue of researcher bias was addressed again when conclusions were drawn about the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. Lastly, the data, the analysis and the conclusions were used in a responsible and honest manner.

Summary

In this chapter, the concepts of faith, religious conversion, imagination, religious education and catechesis were described and their relevance to the study explained. While faith may start out being a universal human concern, the writers considered in this chapter acknowledge the religious and Christian dimension of faith. Some view Christian faith as potentially its ultimate form. Related to religious faith is the experience of conversion that ushers in the ever-deepening and intimate relationship with the divine. Some writers credit the imagination with a significant role in religious conversion. Finally, consideration was given to determining a research method appropriate to the task of describing the role of the imagination in religious conversion. In chapter 3, the methodology will be explained in detail, the research participants introduced and the major and minor themes of their accounts of their religious lives will be identified.
Chapter 3: The research plan

Introduction

It was the aim of this study to describe the role that the imagination plays in the religious conversion of adolescents who attend Catholic secondary schools. In particular, the study focused on evidence of religious conversion found in the transcripts of interviews and journals contributed by 15 Year 12 students attending Catholic secondary schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter referred to by the acronym IPA) was used to analyse students’ accounts of their religious lives. Conclusions were drawn about the role of the imagination in the experiences of conversion that were revealed by them and of the contribution of Religious Education to their religious conversion. As a research method, IPA provided the means whereby a detailed analysis could be made of each participant’s account of his/her religious life. Smith & Eatough (2007) described IPA as a “double hermeneutic” process, that is, “the participant is trying to make sense of his/her world and the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participant is trying to make sense of his/her world” (p. 36). The interpretative dimension of the method, from both perspectives, was evident throughout the whole study, particularly during the data analysis phase, as will be shown in the chapters that follow. All forms of belief and faith involve interpretation just as does any form of research. What was critical to the success of the study, then, was the rigour of the research method.
Procedures

It was stated in chapter 1 that the present study had its origins in the experience of teaching religious education to senior students attending Catholic secondary schools. Concerns about the contribution made by religious education to the evangelisation of youth in Catholic secondary schools and a personal interest in the use of creative strategies in teaching religious education led to the formulation of the research questions stated in chapter 1. In the same chapter, in the examination of the ethical dimensions of the present study, the procedures employed in locating likely participants were outlined. To summarise: the principals of five schools were approached and their permission sought to speak to the Year 12 cohort of their schools, to encourage some students to participate in the study. Generally speaking, all but 15 students declined the request. Those who did respond were given an information package to read and to present to their parents. The information package included a letter to the student, a letter to parents/guardians an acceptance form and a stamped, addressed envelope.

The participants communicated their willingness to contribute to the study by posting the signed forms in the stamped, addressed envelope provided with the information package. In most instances, the participants were contacted by telephone to arrange a time for the interview. This information was communicated to the relevant authorities in the schools that the participants attended. In one school, the religious education coordinator spoke with the Year 12 cohort and provided the information about the names of the participants as well as the date, time and location of the interviews.
The participants were interviewed in the schools that they attended with the knowledge of relevant school authorities and in a room made available for the interviews. Most interviews took place in classrooms. The locations of subsequent interviews with those who had graduated from secondary school varied. Some took place in school surroundings. Two participants were interviewed in their homes. One interview took place across a table in a park. As far as possible, the interviews took place during school hours. All interviews were conducted at times that were chosen by the participants. The interviews were conducted across a desk with the recorder placed between the interviewer and the participant.

Data Collection

In the present study, two methods of data collection were used. First, all participants were interviewed. Second, they were asked to keep journals for a period of one month. Some of the participants wrote in the journals that were provided. Others chose to be interviewed a second time rather than keep a journal. Some participants were interviewed again after they had left school. Typically, phenomenologists gather data by means of in-depth interviews and personal journals that are maintained by researchers throughout their involvement in their projects. In this study, the researcher kept notes and typed memos that became a data source along with the transcripts of the interviews and the journals that some participants provided.

The purpose of interaction with the participants in the study was to learn as much as possible from them about the meaning of their experiences of God that formed part of their religious lives. While the questions used in the
interviews conducted in qualitative research need to be open-ended, so as to encourage participants to reveal as much as they can about their experiences, the researcher found that closed questions also provided rich data: participants often expanded on their responses to closed questions in order to clarify their position. Sometimes, the researcher had to seek clarification, but did so only if the initial response was unclear or it seemed that there might be something more to be said by the participant.

Qualitative data collection requires great sensitivity towards the participant. The required level of trust displayed by participants was high and it was the responsibility of the researcher to treat the sharing of personal details as sacred ground. How the data was handled was crucial to the project’s success. Because phenomenology seeks to understand and appreciate the meaning of a person’s lived experience, the researcher tried to "bracket" personal feelings, perceptions, misconceptions and judgments. Recall that in chapter 2, it was noted that bracketing is an area for debate within phenomenology and related methodologies. As stated above, the researcher used note-making and memos while working with data collection and data analysis as a way of maintaining the detachment needed to ensure that the participants’ lived experiences were reported faithfully.

Each participant was interviewed at least once; some were interviewed two or three times. The reasons for this will be outlined below. The interviews were semi-structured in form (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5). There were five main areas raised for reflection:

• What do you believe about God?
• How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?
• What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?
• Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months? Why?
• Who has played a significant part in your faith development?

As stated elsewhere, each question had subordinate questions that were intended to broaden and, hopefully, to deepen the reflection through helping the participants identify what was meaningful for them in their experiences of lived religious faith. Most interviews were between 30 and 40 minutes in length.

The interviews were taped using a cassette recorder. The researcher experimented with a digital voice recorder but found it to be too sensitive to ambient noise and, as a result, the task of transcribing the interviews became an ordeal. Analogue technology won out in this part of the research process.

Away from the interview, the sound was transferred to a computer using a software package known as Express Scribe (www.nch.com.au). With the aid of a game controller and its four function buttons, the researcher was able to use the computer like a tape player and control the movement of the sound (start, stop, fast forward, rewind, slow down, speed up) to assist with the task of transcribing each interview.

In the early part of the data collection phase of the research, after the first interview, the participants were given a journal document and a stamped,
addressed envelope for returning it to the researcher. They were asked to
write in the journal over a period of one month. The reflection tasks in the
journal directed them to think about aspects of their faith. They were asked to
consider their life to be like an autobiography. An outline of the journal writing
tasks can be found in Appendix 6.

The journal-writing phase of the data collection proved to be valuable
but unpopular with the participants. Some completed their journals, but took
more than the month stipulated in the instructions. It was evident with at least
one participant that the journal writing was rushed. One journal was returned
incomplete and others were not returned at all despite regular contact with the
participants to encourage them to complete it and return it.

The decision was made to offer ask participants to choose between
journal writing and another interview. Being interviewed again was much more
popular than writing. The journal content became the content of the second
interview. Participants were asked to prepare for the interview by reading the
instructions printed in the journal. Those who chose this interview spoke for
about thirty minutes.

The data collection also included an interview that was conducted
about twelve months later. It took place to surface any changes in thought and
attitude that the participants had experienced as a result of moving away from
the familiar territory of their school.

In the early phase of the data collection, saturation was a reality and so
the methodology was changed to reduce the likelihood of redundancy. The
number of interviews for each participant was reduced from two (or three in
the case of those who did not want to write a journal) to one interview on the understanding that should further interviews be required, then the participant would be contacted and invited to another interview.

Table 2

*The interviews and journals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
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<td>Glynna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gunter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
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<td>Mikaela</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* The participants who chose to be interviewed rather than keep a journal.

The interview that took place after students had graduated from school was structured to reflect the categories explored in the first interview. Where there was evidence of change in what the students shared with the researcher, they were invited to reflect further on their experiences.

The journals were typed and misspellings and incorrect syntax and grammar retained to keep the transcriptions as faithful as possible to what the
participants chose to share. The data in the transcriptions of the interviews and journals were analysed using the method employed in IPA. In addition to these data sources, use was made of the notes and memos recorded during the data collection phase and during data analysis.

Sample selection

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia supports more than 30 Catholic schools with upper school classes. Most of these schools can be found in the metropolitan area surrounding Perth. This study involved a total of 15 Year 12 students from five Catholic secondary schools. Information gathered from the students provided data on the meanings they gave to aspects of their lived religious faith, on their awareness of changes in their religious beliefs, attitudes and values, on their experiences of religious education, and on those moments that they considered to have been significant in their religious development.

Phenomenological research typically uses small sample sizes (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Smith & Eatough (2007) stated that it was not uncommon to have one participant in research projects that make use of IPA. They reported that it depends on “the degree of commitment to the case study level of analysis and reporting, the richness of the individual cases and the constraints in operation” (p. 40). The critical factor is saturation, that is, reaching a point in the analysis when no new theme emerges from the data. Creswell (1998) suggested using 10 to 15 participants for a phenomenological study. Other authors suggested that it was inappropriate to indicate the number of participants. Instead when the data is saturated, data collection ceases
(Streubert-Speziale & Rinaldi-Carpenter, 2003). It has been stated that samples of two to 10 participants have been found to yield data redundancy or saturation. However, depending on the study and the researcher, there may be as few as one to eight participants (Caelli, 2001).

The concept of data saturation works on two levels. First, in phenomenological research, it is possible to interview too many people. Beyond a “critical mass”, the elements of meaning emerging from the data start to repeat themselves. In qualitative research, this might provide some level of comfort for the researcher, but in reality the repeated elements are redundant. On another level, while it might be useful to interview participants more than once, saturation might occur in the first interview, thus rendering subsequent interviews redundant also.

Smith & Eatough (2007) argued for homogeneous or “purposive” sampling (p. 40). They counselled researchers contemplating the use of IPA to be pragmatic in their sampling procedures: “… you may have to adapt or redraw the criteria for inclusion as it transpires that you are unable to persuade enough members of the originally defined group to agree to take part in your study” (p. 41). This was certainly the case in this study. There was a serious attempt to gain a spread of students from across the suburbs of Perth, but this was met with only limited success. In two schools, only one student from each was willing to be interviewed. In another school, no students presented themselves. In the fourth school, of the four students who volunteered, only two presented themselves to be interviewed. The majority of students interviewed came from the school in which the researcher teaches.
Only those students whose parents or guardians approved of their involvement were interviewed.

The participants

Fifteen students participated in the present study. To protect their identity, the participants were placed in four fictional schools, one in the northern suburbs of Perth, one in Perth itself, the third in the southern suburbs and the fourth in the hills to the east of Perth. The following portraits were constructed to reflect this and the details were drawn from the transcripts of the interviews and journals.

Alexandra

At the time of the research, Alexandra lived with her mother and stepfather in one of Perth’s northern suburbs. She attended a Catholic secondary school situated in a neighbouring suburb. Alexandra said that she believed that God existed and is “in everything alive.” She described God as “friendly” and as the one who determined her destiny. She linked her attitude towards God with her attitude towards her family and friends. When they supported her, she knew that God was supporting her. Despite the certainty of this belief, she admitted that when her stepbrother died suddenly, she was convinced for a time that God had abandoned her family.

Alyssa

Alyssa attended a Catholic secondary school in one of Perth’s southern suburbs and was in Year Twelve when she was first interviewed. She lived at
home with her parents, her younger sister and her grandmother. Alyssa acknowledged the help her parents have given her with her religious development: “it’s always been the two of them, like my Mum an’ my Dad an’ my Gran even, um – that have – um – helped me grow with my faith an’ what I believe.” She believed that God was “something bigger in the world than us” and saw her relationship with God as “friendly,” even though she admitted that she was not as close to God as she “probably should be.” She believed that God listened to her and took “on board” everything she said.

Cameron

Cameron was born south of Perth and lived near the ocean with his parents and his younger brother. In his interview, he acknowledged that his parents were a major influence in his life. They were his “main support structure.” He described how they encouraged him to listen, to question and to discuss what he was thinking. Often the context for this learning was Sunday Mass. His parents allowed him to choose whether or not he attended Sunday Mass with them. He appreciated the responsibility given to him and commented, “You have to do your own thing an’ take your own path.” Cameron spoke about God as “a greater force” who “can comfort us” and who always listened to those who called on him.

Cecil

Cecil and his younger sister live with their mother in one of Perth’s hills suburbs. His parents separated when he was young. He reported that still sees his father “on various weekends,” but did not think he was a strong
influence in his life. On the other hand, his mother influenced his religious development. She taught him to “light a candle at Mass” and pray for people in need, such as his Nan when she was ill. Cecil spoke about the influence of his girlfriend, Anita, who led him back to regular Mass attendance in his parish. He also attributed his renewed interest in his faith to the experience of listening to some of his peers give witness to their faith on his Year 12 Retreat earlier in the year of the interview. Cecil said he believed that God “sits up there and watches over us.” God listened to him and answered his prayers, even if indirectly.

*Elizabeth*

Elizabeth was born in Perth and raised in one of Perth’s hills suburbs. Her father was the pastor of the local Lutheran church and she was an active member of her parish. She spoke proudly of her participation in the children’s liturgy programme and her leadership role in the Lutheran Church in Western Australia. Elizabeth reported that her parents chose to send her to the Catholic school she attended because it had a reputation for being a school with a strongly Christian and ecumenical focus. She spoke about the influence of her parents on her life and drew a clear distinction between the nurturing role of her mother and her father’s contribution to her religious development. Elizabeth described God as being like a Father who held her in his hand. God guided her and challenged her to be a forgiving person, an understanding of God that she had begun to struggle with.
Emily

Unlike the other students who participated in this project, including those from her school in the hills outside of Perth, Emily said she believed that God “doesn’t exist.” She acknowledged that when she was little she probably believed that God existed, but she had reached the position of rejecting the value of God in her worldview. She stated, “I just haven’t seen anything in my life that makes me believe in a God or anything, so I’ve given up.” Emily explained that her rejection of belief in God was a sign of her stubborn nature, something she inherited from her father. She admitted that religious belief and practice was not part of her family life. Her final year at school was in contrast to her time in Italy at the end of Year Eleven. It symbolised for her the purpose of living, which was to have fun.

Frank

At the time of the interview, Frank lived with his parents and some of his siblings in one of Perth’s eastern suburbs. He said he was the youngest of five children. Frank described his relationship with his parents as positive. He said that his mother had a strong faith and this encouraged him to seek a similar relationship with God. He described her as his “foundation, the centre part” of his faith. On the other hand, his father was less “churchy”, but admired by him nonetheless. Frank described his faith in God in terms of being helped by God whose presence was “more of a feeling of him being there than actually seeing him.” He had been given the responsibility to choose whether or not he attended Mass with his parents. Even when he did not go, he said he listened to what they had to say about the Mass and the priest’s homily.
Glynna

Glynna was a Year Twelve student from a Catholic College in the southern suburbs of Perth. She was an only child and she lived at home with her parents. For as long as she could remember, religion had played a significant role in her life. When she was a child, Glynna believed that God “created the universe in seven days.” By the time she entered Year Twelve, she was trying to reconcile her former beliefs with evolution. Glynna stated that her mother “had a big impact” on her faith. She enjoyed sitting in her mother’s prayer room because it helped her to relax. Her father was not a Catholic. She called him an atheist but acknowledged that he challenged her intellectually, something that she enjoyed.

Gunter

Gunter lived with his parents and his younger brother on a farm on the outskirts of Perth. He travelled about thirty kilometres to school, a journey he had made since he was in Year 8. Gunter said that he had always believed in God and accepted what the Church taught about God, namely that God was “the creator of everything.” He saw no reason why he should change his views. He credited his parents with the drive to have him educated in the Catholic faith. They made sure he was prepared for the sacraments and they took him to Church.

Kevin

Kevin, the eldest of four children, lived with his parents and siblings in one of the suburbs adjacent to Perth. His parents were members of a Catholic
covenant community and they encouraged their children to be involved in the community. The family attended youth nights. The children went on camps organised by members of the community and participated in their liturgies. Kevin enjoyed the support of his parents in all that he undertook. He described them as his teachers. Believing that God was a “supreme being” who was “powerful” and “amazing”, Kevin was convinced that God had called him to be his servant and to please God by keeping the commandments, by joining the Disciples of Jesus Covenant community, by listening to God and by accepting suffering as part of God’s plan for him.

_Luke_

Luke attended a Catholic co-educational college in the southern suburbs of Perth. His family was strongly Catholic and traditional in the expression of their faith. His parents had a “big influence” on his religious development. He described them as being supportive of his efforts to deepen his understanding of his Catholic faith. Luke went to Sunday Mass regularly with his family. A talented musician, he played in a number of music groups in different parishes. He claimed that this brought him closer to God. Luke was also a member of his parish youth group and expressed his appreciation for the efforts of the assistant parish priest whom he credited with teaching him how to pray.

_Mikaela_

At the time of her first interview, Mikaela was in Year Twelve at a Catholic College north of Perth and preparing to graduate from the school she
had attended for five years. She was living at home with her mother and younger sister. Her parents had separated and divorced when she was in lower secondary school and she found it difficult to cope with two places to call home. The interviews and her journal revealed that her parents’ influence on her was strong but considered by her to be largely negative. Although she was not a Catholic, Mikaela revealed her desire to be received into the Church. She acknowledged the influence of her school and her best friend and she commenced instruction in the faith with the help of the local parish priest.

**Morgan**

Morgan lived at home with her parents and her younger sister. Her father was often away because of his work. Her parents portrayed contrasting attitudes towards religion. Her mother taught by word and example the importance of having a relationship with God. Morgan recognised that going to Mass was important to her mother who forced her husband to go and her children, too. She reported that her mother taught, “You have to go to Church or God won’t love you.” Morgan believed in God and described God as “the creator of the universe”. “He’s a sort of spirit who’s always there.” She described a growing realisation of the presence of a transcendent being: “He’s always there to help. He’s always – always there to listen.”

**Sophie**

At the time she was interviewed, Sophie lived with her parents and her younger sister in a suburb close to the city. She was brought up in the
Catholic Church and her mother taught her about the value of strong faith. Sophie described her mother as her “best friend” and was inspired by her mother’s strong faith to try to remain faithful to God. She explained in her interview that her father “doesn’t really the into whole religion thing,” however, she acknowledged her debt to him. He taught her to respect other people’s opinions. Sophie spoke confidently about her faith in God. She claimed, “I sort of construct the idea that if you believe in God, you shouldn’t question.” Sophie believed that God was present in her life and she described her relationship with God with words like “strong” and “respect.”

Stephen

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. Whenever he stayed with his father, he was encouraged to go to Mass. He reported that his religious development underwent a dramatic 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 did give people the strength to face adversity.

Data Analysis

The method of analysis used in phenomenological research varies according to the focus of the research; however, no single method will suffice
for all enquiries. There are commonalities that lead to a general approach. Giorgi (1975) described a seven-step method of analysis, which Giorgi & Giorgi (2008) modified to form a four-step method that aimed to reveal the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon. Both methods identified essential themes embedded in the experience. Other researchers, including Schweitzer (1998) and Holroyd (2001) adapted Giorgi’s method. Van Manen (1990) suggested a three-step analysis that moved from global statements to precise meaning derived from consideration given to individual words. Munhall (2000) and Polit & Beck (2008) summarised phenomenological analysis as “bracketing, intuiting, analyzing and describing”. Interpretative studies, such as those conducted using IPA, do not make use of bracketing. Storey (2008) described a four-step process for IPA that involved the careful reading and re-reading of transcripts, the identification of themes, the grouping of themes into clusters and the tabling of meta-themes illustrated with quotations from the transcripts (p. 52f).

The method of data analysis used in this study was based on Storey’s outline of the method recommended for the use of IPA. The method was modified to make use of qualitative data analysis software. In the outline of the method of analysis below, the following were considered: the use of qualitative data analysis software, how the transcripts were read, the coding of the transcripts, the use of memos, how the themes were derived, and how the findings were reported.

In the present study, the goal of the data analysis was to extract from students’ accounts of their relationship with God, signs of the imagination at
work in their conversion to a more religious way of living. The first step, which is common to all forms of data analysis in phenomenological research, was an iterative process: the transcripts of interviews and journals were read and re-read in order to gain an understanding of and appreciation for the richness of the experience of each participant’s relationship with God. Second, through a process of categorising statements in the transcripts, themes were derived which were grouped or clustered into major themes that reflected the presence of statements identifying experiences of relating with God and conclusions were drawn about religious conversion and about the role of the imagination in these experiences.

*Using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)*

To carry out a rigorous data analysis of thirty documents seemed a daunting task. The decision was taken to make use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) to assist with the data analysis, a simple, but powerful, software programme was used. The observations of Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson (1996) were borne in mind from the outset. In their review of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis in ethnographic studies, they raised four important issues. First, the use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) made it possible for the researcher to assign code words to pieces of data, which could be retrieved easily when required. Second, it was foolish to think that QDAS was different from manual methods of coding data. In fact, QDAS was developed from manual techniques that were used prior to the advent of computer technology and continue to be used. Third, there was no conceptual difference between QDAS and manual techniques of marking
documents with code words, or using ways of highlighting pieces of data on a page of text. Fourth, the major benefit of QDAS lay in the ease of access to coded data. Most QDAS programmes provided sophisticated search facilities within the database holding the information about the coded documents.

Attention was paid to the observations made by Thompson (2002), who reviewed the use of QDAS in phenomenography, a qualitative research approach related to, but distinct from, phenomenology. He highlighted the failure of some qualitative researchers to be transparent about their use of QDAS. He quoted from Hasselgren (1993) who stated that in most cases researchers "quite simply establish that they transcribe their interviews, read and re-read these thoroughly and then state that in this process categories of description, and so also the conceptions, simply 'emerge'" (Thompson, 2002, para. 17).

In this study, a qualitative data analysis software programme known as Weft QDA was used. It was developed by English social researcher Alex Fenton and made available in 2006 on the Internet as public domain software. Weft QDA uses SQLite, an open-source file-based relational database system, to store data that can be sorted, extracted and exported through a user-friendly graphical interface. Text searches (words and phrases), queries about the occurrence of relationships between categories, and reviews of coding are features of Weft QDA that were used in the data analysis carried out in this study. There was a fusion of the old and new in the methods employed in the study. In the search for relationships between categories that might yield insights into themes running through the accounts given by the
participants, reports were generated and exported as text files that were opened in Microsoft Word. The reports were analysed for evidence of organising principles, called “themes” and these were grouped in such a way as to provide a faithful interpretation of each participant’s religious life.

Weft QDA facilitated the process of identifying themes and how they were related. Briefly, it was used in the following way. The transcripts were converted to text files (.rtf format) and loaded into the programme. Fundamental to the use of the software in data analysis are the “categories” that can be created to analyse transcripts. Fenton (2006) defined categories as “themes, ideas, coincidences and variables that you use to describe and inter-relate passages of text within documents” (p. 17).

*Reading the transcripts*

The transcripts were read during the transcription activity that formed part of the data collection process and as outlined by Storey (2007), they were read again and again in the initial phase of data analysis to increase familiarity with the content of each text. Even at this early stage, it was possible to identify common threads running through their accounts.

Prior to focusing on each participant, as in a case study, the transcripts were read again during the coding phase of the analysis. These readings tended not to focus on a careful reading of the whole transcript because Weft QDA had a “find” facility that assisted in locating relevant passages expressing a common idea. At this stage of the analysis, the reading of the transcripts was more focused on the context and meaning of each passage
that had been found. For example, when the transcripts were read to locate passages identifying what the participants believed about God, references to “God as creator” were frequently made. The “find” facility was used to locate passages containing the word “creator,” “created,” or “creates. These passages were marked and their locations stored in the database under the heading “God as creator.”

By far the most intense reading came with the interpretative phase of the analysis when major themes were derived and tested against the text for accuracy and relevance. The final reading of each transcript was done to ensure that the themes identified reflected faithfully the meanings ascribed by the participants to their experiences.

Coding the data

Essential to the analysis was the coding of the transcripts. Coding is a method of identifying significant statements, even if the significance is only a hunch and not yet able to be articulated. Fenton (2006) defined coding as “the process of reading text and selecting and marking passages as “about” a topic, and then later returning to review the marked text about that topic” (p. 33). The “marked” passages were given labels. The code labels came partly or completely from the text being read.

Fenton (2006) suggested that an initial source of codes could be found in the questions that formed the structure of each interview (p. 17). For example, in this study, the first question asked was “What do you believe about God?” and, therefore, the transcripts were coded to gather all the
passages directly related to “beliefs about God”. Following his advice, and
drawing on the interview schedule (Appendix 4), the following categories were
created: beliefs about God, the Blessed Trinity, personal faith, prayer,
significant people, significant events (Table 3). Each category was defined
and the coding of each transcript was conducted according to the categories.

Table 3

The general categories and their definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about God</td>
<td>Statements which identify what the participants believe about God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Blessed Trinity</td>
<td>Statements which identify what the participants believe about the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal faith</td>
<td>Statements which identify the types of relationships that the participants have with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Statements made by the participants which identify the place of prayer in their lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant people</td>
<td>Statements which identify who has influenced the participants to seek God or turn away from God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant events</td>
<td>Statements made by the participants which identify the events in their lives that have influenced them to seek God or turn away from God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IPA makes use of an “idiographic” approach to data analysis, that is, the focus is solely on one participant at a time (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Therefore, because the participants were grouped alphabetically according to their pseudonyms, the analysis began with the transcripts of interviews and the journal provided by Alexandra. Each transcript was read and coded according to the six categories tabled below. In phenomenology, categories are sometimes referred to as “natural meaning units” which Ratner (2001) described as “coherent and distinct meanings” (para. 4) that are found in the text of the transcript being analysed. Sometimes short statements were coded; mostly, however, there were chunks of data included. For example, coding the category “Beliefs about God” in Alexandra’s second interview yielded the following: “I see God as “support.” (line 50) In contrast to this, the following passage from her journal revealed the significance of her encounter with a guest speaker during a religious education class:

A religion lesson, which changed my view of my faith, was when we had a guest speaker who was blind. My faith changed because he made me realize that life will always bring hard times and problems but you need to learn from those problems and see how you can get through the problem stronger. The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 57-63).

It became obvious in the course of coding the transcripts that the chunks of data contained related categories. Locating the categories required interpretation about what constituted a coherent and distinct meaning. These
categories were identified and called “sub-categories.” For instance, passages coded for the category called “Blessed Trinity” included participants’ responses to the question “Is Jesus different from God?” The responses from participants were coded both for “Blessed Trinity” and for a sub-category called “Jesus”.

One of the powerful graphical features of Weft QDA is the construction of tree-like structures to show the relationship between categories. As the data analysis progressed, new categories were added and some were moved around the “tree” to reflect the growth in understanding of the participants’ experiences of their religious lives (Figure 2). The tree that was developed for the data analysis of Alexandra’s transcripts was used to carry out the coding and analysis of all the transcripts. Other sub-categories were added as needed.

Using memos

In their accounts of data analysis methods employed in IPA, Smith and Eatough (2007) and also Storey (2007) made reference to the practice of “memoing” or note making. They explained that in their research projects, they used the left hand margin of their copies of the transcript to make notes about personal feelings and reactions evoked by the account they were reading as well as about significant elements of the transcript. The right hand margin was used for noting themes.

In this study, as each transcript was read and re-read, notes were recorded using the “memo” facility that is part of Weft QDA. Early in the data
analysis, the notes were very general. For instance, the following memos were recorded when coding documents for the category “Beliefs about God”:

Figure 2

*Category coding tree*

Beliefs about God
Trinity
  Father
  God as Creator
  Jesus
  Holy Spirit
Relationship with God
  Changes in the relationship
  Faith development
Prayer
Significant people
  Family
  Parents
  Mother
  Father
  Siblings
  Friends
  Teachers
  RE teachers
  Priests
Significant events
  Family crisis
  Death
  Separation and divorce
  Attending a Catholic school
  Listening to a guest speaker
This category seems to be present in a number of places throughout the interviews. So far, the notion of God being transcendent is very strong. However, it is not a vengeful God, or an abusive God who is described, but one who is forgiving, gentle, caring and, as Frank says, "affectionate".

I have just been through Mikaela's journal again and marked more passages. Some relate to the category of "relationship with God" but they also carry ideas about what she believes about God as well.

These memos acknowledged the presence of categories other than the one being coded at the time the memo was entered. This was an important feature of the early note-making activity. The newly discovered categories were added to the list as sub-categories attached to the category that was being coded and the transcripts were later coded again using the new categories. Fenton (2006) referred to this aspect of data analysis as “coding on” (p. 20).

Detailed memos were reserved for comments made about individual passages. Whenever a category name was selected in Weft QDA, a window opened displaying all the passages coded for that category. For instance, at one point in the data analysis carried out in this study, when the category “Beliefs about God” was selected, a window opened and it was possible to scroll through 181 passages taken from 30 transcripts. The passages were listed alphabetically according to the names of the participants and progressively through each transcript. Each passage was given a numerical tag to indicate its location in the transcript. By double clicking on a passage in
this window, another window opened to display the transcript at the location of
the quote being analysed.

To make the best use of the memo facility in the programme, the
passages from the transcript that was being analysed were selected and
copied into the memo window. Then each passage was analysed and a
memo typed directly below the passage. The memos became increasingly
important in the iterative process employed in the data analysis. They
exhibited a mix of operational, intuitive and speculative comments. The
comments became wide-ranging. They brought together aspects of the study,
including references to conversion, the role of the imagination and strategies
used by religious education teachers. There were theological comments and
references to the ideas of Kant, Fowler and others whose works were
reviewed in the previous chapter. It was recognised that the memos would be
a valuable resource in the construction of the remainder of the thesis
document. This process was repeated until no further categories could be
created. In other words, it was clear that data saturation had been reached.
This is why Smith & Eatough (2007) call IPA a “double hermeneutic.” In this
way, a highly detailed picture of each participant’s account of their religious
life was derived from the transcripts analysed.

Identifying major themes

In this study, insights into QDAS provided by Thompson (2002) who
reviewed literature about phenomenography, a research approach related to
but distinct from phenomenology, proved to be useful. His distinction between
mechanical and conceptual parts of data analysis was used to guide the
process used in this study. The task of marking text was largely mechanical, however, the identification of themes, which is a conceptual activity, was much more difficult and required interpretation at a deeper level than that used in coding the transcripts. Concerning the conceptual part of data analysis, Smith & Osborn (2008) stated:

Once each transcript has been analysed by the interpretative process, a final table of superordinate themes is constructed. Deciding which themes to focus upon requires the analyst to prioritise the data and begin to reduce them, which is challenging. The themes are not selected purely on the basis of their prevalence within the data. Other factors, including the richness of the particular passages that highlight the themes and how the theme helps illuminate other aspects of the account, are also taken into account (p. 75).

With the focus solely on one participant, the analysis proceeded by viewing the Memo window of each element of the category tree and noting below each passage the themes evident in the passage. For instance, in the Memo window for the category “Significant events: Listening to a guest speaker” the following passage from Alexandra’s journal was recorded and below it the themes were typed:

Alexandra’s Journal [3464-3960]
A religion lesson which changed my view of my faith was when we had a guest speaker who was blind. My faith changed because he made me realize that life will always bring hard times and problems but you need to learn from those problems and see how you can get through the problem stronger. The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of
the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end.

- Learn from problems.
- Always look on the brighter side of problems.
- Problems are lessons that make and shape you as a person.

These steps were followed with every passage coded for each category. Some passages had more than one theme associated with them. The data accessed through the Memo window was selected and then copied and pasted to a Microsoft Word file. This was done to simplify the process of moving around the thematic statements to form major themes. The document was printed and then read and re-read, one category at a time, to discover the connecting threads within the set of passages that would reveal the major theme(s) embedded in the accounts given by the participant of her religious life. The lists of themes attached to the passages assisted in this step because they presented a summary of the contents of the passages. Once the themes were recognised and named, they were used to analyse the sets of coded passages taken from the transcripts of the other participants.

Smith & Eatough (2007) stated that in IPA the findings of research are reported initially in a tabular format. Because IPA is idiographic, even though the focus initially is on one participant, the detailed analysis and reporting on that one case must be extended to every participant equally. The researcher “should … endeavour to convey some of the details of the individual experience of those participants” (p. 48). This characteristic of IPA has impacted on reporting on the findings of the research.
The passages representing the six categories in Alexandra’s transcripts were analysed and themes were identified and listed below each passage. These themes were then sorted and grouped like with like to reveal three major themes, each with subordinate or minor themes. The major themes were named as follows:

1. A changing relationship with God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to changes in participants’ perceptions of their relationship with God and how the relationship changed.

2. Significant influences. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to the support provided by parents, family, friends, youth groups, church, schools and teachers.

3. Owning faith in God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to participants’ efforts to develop their relationship with God in the light of changes in their lives.

Limitations of the study

Every inquiry is limited by the human condition, that is, by such factors as intelligence, awareness, knowledge, gender, culture, communication skills and motivation. The present study was undertaken with the knowledge that the research process, including the outcomes, would be limited by the researcher’s level of awareness and understanding of the subject matter and of the research process. Recall that in chapter 1 it was stated that the desire to understand the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents motivated the researcher. The decision was taken to use a qualitative research approach to allow the data to emerge because the
researcher believes that knowledge is the outcome of reflection. Recall that it was stated in chapter 2 that the researcher was attracted to the “discovery” orientation of the qualitative research paradigm which allowed time for the reflection to happen and for adjustments to be made. For instance, the discovery of IPA came only after an unsuccessful attempt to use phenomenography in the data analysis phase of the study. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the qualitative differences in people’s understanding of concepts or constructs (Marton, 1988). The researcher had used the approach in a study of religious education teachers’ personal constructs of revelation (Branson, 1998). The iterative character of both approaches led to recognition of the importance of each participant’s story. IPA, with its idiographic orientation, was better suited to discovering the role played by the imagination in the faith development and conversion of the participants in the present study. The differences between the participants’ understanding of God and their religious experiences were no longer relevant to the purpose of the study.

The account of the shift from phenomenography to IPA was given to illustrate the importance of the dialectic nature of research: the limitations of the research approach are held in tension by the strengths that co-exist with the limitations. For instance, qualitative approaches such as IPA are time poor, that is, data collection and analysis take a long time to carry out; however, they are also time rich, that is, they allow for the development of lines of thought, the gaining of insights, and the development of understanding and knowledge. The interpretative nature of IPA called for the use of knowledge from various fields of study that impact on the classroom,
such as philosophy, theology and cognitive psychology. The interpretation of the accounts given by the participants made use of the Catholic Church’s teaching about evangelisation, Kant’s (2007/1781) understanding of the imagination, Rambo’s (1993) description of the process of conversion, the structural-developmental theories of Piaget (1950) and Fowler (1981), and Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory. The discovery orientation of qualitative research and its emphasis on process rather than outcome allowed for the development of the researcher’s understanding of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents.

Is such a generalisation as that just made warranted given that qualitative research approaches are limited in what they can claim by their small sample size? Is it possible to make generalisations about the role of the imagination based on a study of the accounts of their faith given by 15 participants? The issue of the size of the sample was dealt with elsewhere in this chapter and its justification stated in terms of the purpose of the study. Smith & Eatough (2007) presented a case for making generalisations based on small samples in studies using IPA. They stated “delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal” (p. 39). This was found to be true of the present study. The outcomes of the present study were modest, in keeping with qualitative research, even if, at times, they were stated confidently. The confidence came from the recognition of the richness of the data and from knowledge gained from reviewing the literature related to aspects of the present study. For example, despite the small size of the sample, the significant role of Christian youth groups in the religious conversion of adolescents was highlighted. This conclusion was supported by
statements made by Pope John Paul II (1991) and the research into the importance of sponsorship in faith development and conversion by Fowler (1981), Leavey et al. (1992) and Rambo (1993).

The sampling procedure provided its own set of limitations. The researcher had very little control over which Year 12 students were addressed in the schools that were visited. Recall that it was stated above that in one school, the religious education coordinator was given the task of finding participants. In other schools, the principal found teachers of Year 12 religious education who were prepared to allow the researcher to speak with their classes. Despite these limitations, there were 15 students who agreed to participate. Although the study drew its respondents from Catholic secondary schools, there was no attempt to make sure that all respondents were Catholic. Given the relatively small size of the sample, religious traditions other than the Catholic tradition were not represented intentionally. It was not the purpose of the study to draw conclusions about the religious affiliation of students. Rather, it was intended that within the boundaries of religious development, it could be shown that the imagination plays a significant role in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools. The study made no claims about students attending non-Catholic schools. The researcher addressed groups of Year 12 students in a number of schools and accepted as participants those who volunteered to be interviewed. While such an approach places some strictures on the research, the richness of the data gathered from the 15 participants more than compensated for the lack of response from most of the students who were addressed.
Adolescents are no different from any other group in society when it comes to commitment to seeing tasks through to their completion. While some of the participants completed the three parts asked of them (being interviewed twice and writing a journal), others baulked at the journal writing and yet others were not prepared to be involved beyond the first interview. Recall that it was reported earlier in the chapter that two participants chose to be interviewed a third time rather than write a journal. One participant lost interest in the journal and never submitted it to the researcher. Another wrote part of the journal and eventually submitted it incomplete. A third participant completed the journal and then lost it. Frantic phone calls to Australia Post produced no results. Eventually, some months later, it turned up on the back ledge of a car the participant had been travelling in while visiting a friend in the north of Western Australia. Yet, despite the limitations of the data collection method, the sincerity of the participants was obvious in their commitment to telling their stories when they were interviewed. Those who engaged in the journal writing activity also provided data that was invaluable in constructing the images of adolescent faith that revealed how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion.

Summary

In this chapter, details concerning the sample sought for the study as well as vignettes of the participants were provided. The methodology used in the study was laid out and the elements used in the analysis of the data were explained. Consideration was given to the matters relating to the limitations of the study. In chapter 4, the findings of the research will be provided in a form
consistent with IPA: a narrative account of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents will be delivered. It will draw on the transcripts for examples to illustrate the major themes that emerged from the data analysis. Subsequent chapters will provide a detailed analysis of the theoretical and practical considerations flowing from the findings of the study.
Chapter 4: Data analysis

In the previous chapter, the methodology used in this study was outlined and the participants who formed the sample for the study were introduced. The method of data analysis that was outlined drew on that which is used in IPA. The presentation of the results of the data analysis was designed to ensure that the idiographic character of IPA was preserved. It was decided also to limit the present chapter to reporting the results and to interpret the outcomes of the data analysis with the aid of various disciplines and studies in the following chapters. The interpretation of the results will be guided by the three research questions in the following structure:

Chapter 5 will interpret selected students’ disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion.

Chapter 6 will present a discussion of how the imagination assists faith development and religious conversion.

Chapter 7 will examine the mission of the Catholic school to evangelise its students.

The themes

It was stated in the previous chapter that each transcript was coded initially to identify six categories. Commencing with Alexandra’s accounts, and with the aid of Weft QDA, the passages representing the six categories in Alexandra’s transcripts were analysed and were “coded-on” for subordinate, or minor, themes. The minor themes were listed below each coded passage. The list under each passage was rearranged so that closely related minor
themes were sequenced. This was done to assist the recognition of the major themes in Alexandra’s account. The research questions, which were stated in chapter 1, were used to guide the selection of major themes. Three major themes emerged. They captured the essence of Alexandra’s accounts and were broad enough to incorporate the themes running through the accounts given by the other participants. The three themes reported in the study were:

1. A changing relationship with God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to changes in participants’ perceptions of their relationship with God and how the relationship changed.

2. Significant influences. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to the support provided by parents, family, friends, youth groups, church, schools and teachers.

3. Owning faith in God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to participants’ efforts to develop their relationship with God in the light of changes in their lives.

The three major themes and their related minor themes are tabled below.

Table 4

*The major and minor themes derived from the data analysis*

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<th>Minor themes</th>
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<td>Supported by Church, schools and teachers</td>
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First major theme: A changing relationship with God

The accounts given by the participants presented the dynamic character of religious faith. They stated that their personal faith changed as they responded to changes in their lives. Their changing relationship with God was identified as a major theme. Two minor themes were identified: who God is, and what God does. In exploring the changes in participants’ faith in God, the following questions will be applied to the data and answers sought: Do all participants believe in the same God? What does God do for them? How does God interact with them?

First minor theme: Who God is…

With the exception of Emily, who said that there might have been a point in her life when she did believe in God, “but not anymore. Or there’s no interaction with us,” all the participants stated that they believed in God and most said that their faith in God had grown stronger, particularly during the year prior to their involvement in this study. For some participants, there were times when they doubted God’s existence. Alexandra said she found it difficult to believe that God existed when she experienced “relationship problems” with her friends. Mikaela had a similar experience. In her case, it was her parents’ divorce and her father’s “abusive and negative behaviour” that drove her to deny God’s existence. Some years later, she recognised the power of her low self esteem in leading her to deny God’s existence.
All participants placed their religious beliefs within a Christian context. This was expected given that they attended Catholic schools. Apart from Emily, who stated in response to the question “What do you believe about God?” that God “doesn’t exist,” the only other participant to adopt a non-Christian or atheistic stance was Stephen who admitted that he thought of himself as being more Buddhist than Catholic in his beliefs.

Most participants said they believed that God was greater than people. Kevin called God “the supreme being” and Luke said God was “the highest power.” Glynna and Kevin referred to God as “all-powerful.” The notions of “power” and “control” were found in different forms in the accounts provided by all the participants, including Emily. Alyssa and Glynna spoke about God who “controls everything” and this belief was implied in comments made by other participants. For instance, Kevin called God “the master,” meaning the one who directs his life. He reflected on his life at school and said the suffering he experienced was used by God to make him stronger in his faith.

Did the participants acknowledge any change in their perceptions of a powerful God? Alyssa said that when she was a child, she thought of God as a big man with a white beard. She continued to hold that image as an adolescent. Glynna’s position was quite different. She said that when she was a young child, she believed that God was “big and in heaven and had really big shoes.” As she reflected further on her childhood, she recalled thinking that God was “this really scary imposing person.” By the time she was in Year 12, her image of God had changed. God had become somewhat remote.
Seven participants referred to God as the creator whose actions were those of a transcendent being. They had little to say about the creative work of God. Glynna said that “God guided evolution.” Stephen, who had reflected on environmental issues from a religious perspective, stated that he thought God would be disappointed with the way people treated creation. In all that they said about creation, they depicted God dwelling beyond creation. This view was put most clearly by Cecil who said, “He sits up there and watches over us.” Luke said that God was “always looking on us, looking over us.”

The idea of a vigilant God was common to most of the participants. However, the belief in an all-seeing, all-knowing God was not strongly endorsed by them. For example, Alexandra was the only one to acknowledge that God “sees everything” and the image of God as a listener was important to Alyssa, Cameron, Morgan and Stephen. What God knew was not perceived as important by them. They showed more concern about their own knowledge or lack of it. Of the 15 participants, only five commented on God’s knowledge. Frank and Glynna declared that God “knows everything.” Glynna had held this belief all her life. She said, “When I was little, I believed like God created the universe in seven days and he knew everything” (lines 12-13). Even though her understanding of God’s role as creator had changed by the time she was in Year 12, her belief that God was omniscient had remained unchanged. With Alyssa, Cameron and Mikaela, the focus became God’s knowledge of them personally. For instance, Mikaela revealed in her journal: “I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I ever will” (lines 151-152). Her belief that God knew her intimately engendered in her a
deep trust of God. She concluded, “So if I follow his lead, my life will not only be a fairy tale but something better” (lines 152-153).

The image of God watching over people did not carry the connotation of a judgmental God. They imagined God as a powerful being who cared for them. In his journal, Frank wrote that he believed in “a God who loves us, who isn’t some angry ruler who wants people to live to the letter and be the same, losing their uniqueness” (lines 54-56). Elizabeth, more than any other participant, reflected on the love of God. In her journal, she wrote, “He has more love to give than you or I could ever begin to understand” (lines 135-136).

Central to the Christian religion is belief in the Blessed Trinity: God is three divine persons with one divine nature, traditionally referred to as Father, Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit. The word “person” has a particular meaning in classical Christian theology (Tillich, 1951; McBrien, 1980). When the participants used the word “person” to describe God, they did not use it as a theological term in the classical sense, even though what they articulated was their theology. Their use of the word seemed to be closer to the meaning proposed by Fowler (1991) who described the Trinity as three “centers of personhood” (p. 66).

Apart from being asked what they believed about God, the participants were also asked if Jesus was different from God. Eight participants said that they were different and six said that God and Jesus were the same person. Alexandra said that God was an “independent being” who was apart from Jesus who was God’s messenger. Alyssa stated that they were “two different
people.” She believed that Jesus “couldn’t always control everything” and he had to ask God for help. Cameron also described God and Jesus as two different “entities,” but the difference was not important.

Alexandra, Cameron and Morgan commented on changes in their understanding of the relationship between God and Jesus. They said that when they were children, they probably considered them to be the same. Cameron explained that it was because he was not yet capable of understanding the differences between God and Jesus.

Cecil, Elizabeth and Gunter believed that God and Jesus were the same. Elizabeth said, “… it’s a very hard thing to try to distinguish the three parts in one….” She was referring to the Blessed Trinity and did not want to trivialise the mystery of God. Frank used the word “confusing” when responding to a question about the difference between God and Jesus. He, too, could not distinguish between them. Luke said he found it easier to relate to Jesus. He said, “We know what he looks like, everything about him….” Yet, despite this, he was reluctant to say that they were different. Kevin tried to reconcile the differences between the two groups. He believed that God and Jesus were “one being in two people.”

The very thing that Cecil discounted as a difference, namely the humanity of Jesus, Glynna, Morgan and others accepted as a real difference between God and Jesus. Glynna described God as the administrator. Jesus dealt with people’s emotions. Like Glynna, Morgan believed that the difference between God and Jesus was real because Jesus was human. Sophie and Stephen also believed that God and Jesus were different, the
major difference being the humanity of Jesus. Sophie described him as “a physical form of God.” Of all the participants, Mikaela was the most definite in her views. She believed that God was “Father” and “Creator,” while Jesus was “Son” and “Saviour.” Like Alexandra, Alyssa and Cameron, she believed that they were “two different people.”

Alexandra, Cameron, Glynna, Morgan and Stephen said that they found it easier to think of the two being one and the same when they were younger. Alyssa, Mikaela and Sophie said they had always considered God and Jesus to be different. Of those who spoke about the difference between God and Jesus, only Alexandra, Mikaela and Sophie said the difference was important and for quite different reasons. Alexandra believed that she needed Jesus to be sure that God had listened to her prayers. Jesus was her mediator. Mikaela needed them to be different so that she could understand what she read in the Bible. Sophie looked on Jesus as a model of God. Like Mikaela, she found that Jesus being human made it easier to have faith in God.

The Catholic Church teaches that the presence and action of the Holy Spirit are essential to evangelisation and conversion. Pope Paul VI (1975): “…it is he who in the depths of consciences cases the word of salvation to be accepted and understood” (EN, par. 75). While it was not necessary for the purpose of the present study that the participants be aware of the the Holy Spirit acting in their lives, it was expected that as senior secondary students attending Catholic schools they would have some understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian salvation. That is why they were asked how they
would explain the Holy Spirit “to a friend who does not believe in God.” The responses from the participants revealed a lack of understanding of the Catholic Church’s teaching about the Holy Spirit. Some participants admitted that they had never given any thought to who the Holy Spirit was. Most stumbled over the question. Gunter’s response was typical of many participants: “I dunno. It’s something that’s just there, I guess.”

The only participant for whom the question was meaningful was Kevin who believed that the Holy Spirit played an important role in his relationship with God. Kevin’s parents were members of the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community, a charismatic community founded in Australia in 1979. Kevin joined the community when he was in Year 12. He described the Holy Spirit as “a divine helper” who gave him “a sort of buzz,” “sort of excitement” when he prayed for help. He cited having to give a talk in class as an example and believed the Holy Spirit helped him to “clear my head a bit so I can have more self control.”

As the participants reflected on their lives and their faith in God, some recognised that their beliefs had changed. For a few participants, the changes were the outcome of their intellectual development. Most participants who acknowledged change also stated that their relationship with God had grown stronger: knowing God better contributed to the bonds of friendship that they believed existed between them and God. Finally, Kevin’s belief about the action of the Holy Spirit in his life illustrated another theme that ran through the accounts given by the participants: God was active in their lives and helped them in many ways.
Second minor theme: What God does

Divine help was by far the most significant quality and action attributed to God by the participants. Their stated beliefs in relation to this reflected the meaning and sentiment expressed in Psalm 18:

In my trouble I called to the Lord. I cried out to my God for help.

From his temple he heard my voice; my call for help reached his ears.

(Psalm 18:6 New Century Version)

For example, Morgan expressed her belief in the abiding presence of God who was “always there to help.” Both Alexandra and Cameron referred to God as a “support.” Alexandra illustrated her use of the word with reference to a trust activity used in various educational settings, including religious education classes. She said that God’s help “makes you feel – um – like you can fall back as well, or you have something there to support you.” In his journal, Luke referred to God as being “like our seatbelt on a roller coaster.”

Alexandra’s description of God as a “support” reflected the way she interpreted her experiences of growing up in a family struggling to cope with alcoholism. As a child, she learned from her mother to rely on God. During her final year of secondary school, her brother died, she was recovering from a minor operation and her mother had “a heart problem.” She concluded that God wanted to teach her a lesson about life. Her accounts illustrated how people cope with crises through faith in God who is shown to be effective in helping them deal with traumatic events in their lives.

Cameron’s use of the word “support” came from a markedly different context. Whereas Alexandra focused in her accounts on the emotional impact
of events in her life and the support that God gave her through her family and friends, Cameron focused on his efforts to find meaning through reflecting on his life. He said,

I think that … just tryin’ to work out what’s going on in my head an’ having someone there or – to – that will listen an’ not comment or judge, just be there an’ listen so I can sort it all out an’ then it can be done with (lines 87-92).

He called God a “comforting spirit,” a description that revealed his understanding of how God interacted with him in his life.

Alexandra and Cameron testified to their dependence on God. Six participants, including Alexandra, Alyssa, Cameron and Morgan, stated that God listened to them. Others said that God answered their prayers. All participants, except for Emily, believed that God responded to their prayers, although the response was sometimes not what they expected. Emily, who had not been brought up to have faith in God, concluded that God either did not exist, or had moved on. Stephen believed that God “will give you little signs he’s heard your prayer.” That wasn’t always the case for Alexandra who believed “briefly” that in the midst of the tragic circumstances of her step-brother’s sudden death and health issues in her family that God had abandoned them.

Glynna had a similar experience when one of her school friends died after a car accident when she was in Year Ten. Rather than deny God, she and Alexandra developed their own understandings of how God worked in their lives so that they could cope with the pain of losing people close to them.
They believed that God worked indirectly through others to help people. Alexandra stated that God helped people cope with their suffering through the kindness of others. Alyssa said that God sent Jesus to teach people how to avoid the mistakes that had been made in the past. She also believed that God sent others, such as missionaries and members of organisations, like World Vision and Amnesty International, to help the needy. She said that the work of organisations such as these was possibly “God coming true in them.” Elizabeth said that “God sends others to do his work.” Glynna thought of God as an administrator who sent Jesus to help people. Gunter widened the concept to include God’s use of the media. He said that God influenced people through what they read in newspapers and especially through movies with themes that supported Catholic beliefs. Stephen spoke about God sending messages to him through the media.

Typically, the participants sought divine assistance through prayer. The place of prayer in the lives of the participants is a separate theme and will be dealt with in detail later, however, in general, it was obvious that they believed that God could help them in their daily lives, as well as help their family, friends and people in need. Alexandra believed that God could help her be successful with her studies. Cecil also believed that God would help him with his exams, however, both stated that they were still required to struggle with what they found difficult because God would not do the work for them. What was important was their reliance on God and not what God did to help them because it was an expression of their faith in God.
Except for Emily, the participants believed that God was active in their lives. They prayed for help. A few turned to God for forgiveness. Some thanked God for what they had received in life. Some reported changes in their faith because God did not always answer their prayers or help them in ways they expected. Mention has been made of the situations faced by Alexandra and Glynna. As a child, Glynna believed that God was scary and powerful and created the world in seven days. By the time she was in Year 12, she believed that God guided evolution much like a captain might steer an ocean liner. The real work was done by Jesus who “is like the compassionate, like really caring, like emotional side.” This was a far cry from believing that God wore big shoes and spent his time stomping around in heaven.

Second major theme: Significant influences

The changes in the beliefs held by the participants happened over time and with the support of those who were significant in their lives: their parents, friends, youth groups, the Church, schools and teachers, as well as those who entered their lives briefly and challenged them to think differently about their lives and their faith. All participants reported the support and influence of significant others and some explained how their presence in their lives changed how they related with God.

Third minor theme: Supported by parents and family

In the interviews, the participants were asked to comment on the influence of their parents and families on their relationship with God. In general, they reported on how their parents supported them. Most did not
comment on siblings and so their influence was not taken into account in the
analysis of their accounts of their lives.

Alyssa, Elizabeth, Gunter and Kevin each gave accounts of how both
their parents were strongly committed to their faith development. Alyssa called
her mother a “super woman” because she involved herself in Church life and
did not “sit around an’ wait for things to happen to her.” Alyssa was indebted
to her mother for her strong faith. With reference to her involvement in Luke
18, Alyssa stated in her first interview that “… if she hadn’ta pushed me I don’t
think my faith in God possibly would be as strong as it is” (lines 323-324).
Even though her parents did not always take their children to Sunday Mass,
she said, “My Mum has been pretty good with my faith. So’s my Dad.” Her
father also involved himself in Church life. They taught her about God,
encouraged her to be involved in Luke 18 and, to support her, they
volunteered to be parent leaders for the group. Alyssa described them as
“good role models.”

Elizabeth’s parents were members of the Lutheran Church and her
father was the pastor of the local parish. She reported that her parents taught
her to pray when she was young and they prayed with her every night before
she went to sleep. Even though she did not think much of this at the time,
more than ten years later, she was moved to write in her journal: “From the
time I was born my parents told me about my heavenly Father, and I have
prayed to him and he has been in my life for as long as I can remember” (lines
73-75). They modelled for her their belief in a loving God. Through their
influence, prayer became part of her daily life.
Elizabeth described her mother as a “feeling type person” and her father as a “thinking type person.” Each parent contributed something different to the faith development of their child. Elizabeth said that her mother taught her to “trust in God,” while her father taught her by his example and by sharing with her his knowledge of theology and his insights into faith in God. She admired her parents and mentioned her father’s ability to preach: “He’s the best preacher anyone’s heard ever.” Concerning their influence on her, she wrote in her journal: “They guided and moulded me to be the best person I can be, and taught me without even knowing it with their great example” (lines 30-32).

Both Alyssa and Elizabeth found that the support of their parents was an essential part of their developing relationships with God. It has been stated already, that Alyssa regarded her mother as a “super woman.” She described her parents as “good people” who encouraged her to reach out and help others, just as they did. Elizabeth wrote in her journal that her mother cared for her in ways that reminded her of the image of the mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings which Jesus used to describe his love for his people (Matthew 23:37). She reflected on her father’s contribution to her faith in God and marvelled at how “he knows how to say things an’ – and what to say to fix things.” As a leader in her Church youth group, she wanted to be the same as her father.

Gunter’s parents introduced him “into the Catholic faith.” In his first interview, he stated that they made him “take the lessons to get Holy Communion an’ Confirmation ‘cause I didn’t go to a Catholic primary school”
They took him to Church and involved themselves in the liturgy. Gunter admitted that they did not go to Mass every Sunday. They owned and operated a farm which meant they often had to work on Sundays to maintain their business. Gunter said that when the farm work became more intensive, his mother gave up being a catechist in the parish, but still involved herself in liturgical activities when the family went to Mass on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter. He said his father was also involved, so it was just a matter of course that he would follow in their footsteps and read at Mass occasionally.

Gunter recalled what his parents did to help him develop his faith in God. It was more significant to him than what they said, unlike Elizabeth who stated that her parents “taught” her about God. Like Alyssa, he identified the element of coercion in his early experiences of his religious upbringing and later remarked that it was because he was immature. Like Alyssa, he was grateful for his parents’ insistence that he be formed and informed as a Catholic. Although he did not say anything about his parents teaching him – which would have happened anyway given his desire for knowledge of the Catholic faith – Gunter enjoyed the task of learning about Catholicism. His parents had shown him by their example that to belong in the Catholic Church was a good thing. They encouraged him to join the Young Christian Students group (hereafter referred to as YCS) that operated in his secondary school and always made sure he could remain an active member, even though the farm was some distance from the school. Gunter became a leader in his YCS group.
Kevin’s recollections of how his parents were involved in his faith development were much more detailed and intense. Like Alyssa, Elizabeth and Gunter, he acknowledged that as a child he was too young to understand and appreciate what they were doing when they tried to inculcate in him the same religious habits that were so important to them. He recalled that what they taught him about praying meant little to him when he was young. Kevin’s parents were religious people. They were committed to living as active members of the Disciples of Jesus, a Catholic charismatic community and they encouraged Kevin and his siblings to become members of the community. They involved their children in Twenty-four Seven, the Disciples’ youth group. Like Alyssa, Elizabeth and Gunter, Kevin became a leader in his youth group when he was in Year 12.

Elizabeth was able to identify differences in her parents’ contributions to her faith development. Kevin also recalled the differences between his parents both in their ways of praying and in their responses to him. He described his mother’s prayer as “quiet” and contrasted with his father’s style of praying which was “more open like he’d sing, use his talents to pray, like he’d chant an’ be more like loud.” Kevin said his mother had “a very emotional side” and her typical response to his tears was to hug him. His father was “very stern” and an “action man” who was always prepared to defend his son. As different as they were in their ways of responding to their son, they were united in their efforts to form him in the Catholic tradition that meant so much to them. His parents were involved in their local Catholic parish and encouraged their children to be involved as well. Kevin used his musical talents to contribute to parish liturgies and liturgical celebrations at school.
Other participants acknowledged the involvement of their parents in their faith development, however, their accounts indicated that one parent, generally their mother, exercised a more significant influence than the other. Alexandra, Cameron, Frank, Luke, Morgan and Stephen fitted into this category. As stated above, Alexandra acknowledged the importance of her relationship with her parents to her perception of her faith in God. She credited her parents with the origin of her belief that everything that happened in her life was God’s will. Unlike Alyssa, Elizabeth, Gunter and Kevin, who provided details about their parents’ involvement in their faith development, Alexandra had little to say. However, she said that it was her mother who assisted her most in her religious development when she was a child. She recalled how her mother listened to her prayers each night before she went to sleep. Her parents were supportive and spoke with her about trusting God, but they did not insist on regular attendance at Sunday Mass. Alexandra admitted that she went to Mass when her father wasn’t at work and when she did not have homework and assignments to complete. It will be shown later in the chapter that Alexandra seemed to rely more on her friends than her parents in developing her relationship with God.

Cameron’s parents raised him as a Catholic. He described them as his “main support structure” and said that when he was young, they took him to Church and made sure he understood what he saw and heard. He stated that they “… helped me to have that sense that – um – it’s – it’s part of your life and you should have it as part of your life because it can help you” (lines 175-176). Cameron observed that he was “pushed” into going to Mass every Sunday and was grateful for the direction his parents gave him. He admitted”
“I doubt that I’d have the courage to actually be able to go and do that myself” (lines 181-182).

As his understanding of the Catholic tradition in which he was raised increased, Cameron realised that it meant more to his mother than it did to his father. He learned that his father had been forced to go to Mass regularly when he was young and was determined to make sure his children did not suffer as he had. By the time Cameron was in Year 12, his father had stopped going to Mass and Cameron was given the freedom to choose whether to attend or not. He appreciated the freedom given to him and noted that his views reflected his mother’s commitment to Sunday Mass. He said, “She sees it as a support system as well.”

The account that Cameron gave of his faith development revealed his desire to find meaning in his religious practices. He describes this desire as originating in those childhood experiences of his parents engaging him in discussions about his religious experiences, specifically the experiences surrounding Sunday Mass. This continued into his adolescent years, and again, his mother figured prominently in his reflection on his life. Cameron said that his time with his father at home was spent “outside doing something.” There was “no time for thinking.” It was different with his mother. Inside, while she attended to housework, he said, “We’ll talk about things.”

Frank also named his mother as the major parental influence in his faith development, but also acknowledged the support given by his father. He was baptised and raised as a Catholic. In his second interview, he said of his parents: “They’re always there for support – um – they’re quite spiritual” (lines
Frank said that it was his mother’s constant encouragement in his younger years to maintain his relationship with God that kept him focused on his faith as a teenager. He found it hard to commit himself to going to Mass on Sundays. In his first interview, he admitted, “I mainly stuck to it all that time because I knew it would disappoint my parents” (lines 254-255). He said, “I mainly go for Mum.” He described his mother’s faith as “just so strong.” She led by example. Concerning his father’s faith, he said that he thought it was not as strong as his mother’s faith and yet it was still part of his life.

Like Cameron, Frank was given the freedom to choose whether or not he went to Mass. In his second interview, he said, “My parents don’t force me to go to Mass” (line 110). This was significant because in telling his story, he revealed that the practice of gathering as a family with his grandparents after Sunday Mass and sharing their thoughts and feelings about the experience they had shared was much more important to Frank than actually attending Mass itself. So it came about that when he did miss Mass, he would make sure he was there for the gathering to find out what he had missed. He appreciated not being judged as less than he should be. Even in this situation, he did not escape the influence of his mother because she made sure he understood what her hopes were. He stated in his second interview: “When I do go, Mum mentions that and how nice it is” (lines 111-112).

In her interview, Morgan stated, “Our whole family’s Catholic, so I was brought up with that faith” (lines 78-79). Morgan spoke about her parents helping her develop her understanding of Catholicism, however, because her father’s work often took him away from his family, Morgan and her younger
sister learned more about their faith from their mother. While she accepted the customs that were part of their family life, such as praying at the start of a car trip, and while she admired her mother for her faith, she did not always agree with what her mother tried to teach about God. For instance, Morgan reported that her mother said on one occasion, “If you’re not gonna be good then God doesn’t love you anymore” (lines 215-216). Morgan’s account of this episode revealed that she questioned the truth of her mother’s statement and proposed to herself questions that were derived from her mother’s words. She asked, “If you repeat those wrongs, is he still gonna love you?” (line 220) Although she did not want to accept her mother’s view, Morgan said she didn’t know if her mother was correct. She had to remain uncertain.

Stephen painted a picture of support from both his parents. Even though they had divorced when he was young and he lived with his mother, he still visited his father twice a week and credited his Catholic faith to the influence of his father who was a practising Catholic. Stephen respected his father and grew closer to him through sharing common interests, such as surfing and football. He was in Year 11 when his cousin suffered spinal injuries in a surfing accident. Stephen was grateful for his father’s support and “so much good advice” that he gave to help him deal with his cousin’s injuries.

Stephen’s relationship with God was influenced also by his mother. It was no coincidence that he called both his mother and God “mate.” In his first interview, he said that she was “just like a really good role model and I try to follow in her path” (lines 402-403). His understanding of prayer as a conversation with God reflected his relationships with his parents. He
described his relationship with his mother in the following way: “I’ve lived with her my whole life. I can tell her anything that’s going on in my life. We’ve got the strongest connection between me and my Mum” (lines 366-368).

Even though she no longer attended Church on Sundays, Stephen’s mother supported his faith development by providing him with a Catholic education and encouraging him to build his relationship with his father.

Some participants, notably Cecil, Glynna and Sophie, reported support from one parent and not the other in their efforts to develop their relationship with God. Cecil’s parents had separated and divorced when he was young. His mother raised him as a Catholic, took him to Mass, taught him how to pray, sent him to Catholic schools and encouraged him to join their parish YCS group. In one reference to the relationship between his father and religion, Cecil dismissed his father’s influence with “he wasn’t a Catholic.” In his interview, Cecil revealed his concern for those who were ill or who had died. He spoke about praying for people in those situations. His mother was instrumental in encouraging him to rely on God for help.

Glynna was raised a Catholic by her parents, but it was her mother who exercised the dominant influence. Glynna reported that her father was not a Catholic. She called him an atheist. When she was young, he left the responsibility for her faith development to her mother. She noted that lately he had started to be critical about her Catholic faith and she defended it. She described her father as a “rational type person” who had “kind of impacted in my, you know, weird melding of science and religion” (lines 485-486). When she was in Year 11, Glynna lost a school friend in a car accident. She
struggled to cope with her loss. In her interview, she reflected on how her parents tried to help her work through her emotions.

My Mum would say, you know, have some faith, have – like, you know, there’s always hope. And my Dad would be like, you know, more rational like, you know, Phil’s in a better place now. But he would just say that to console me. He didn’t really believe it (lines 305-309).

Glynna described how when she was little, her mother’s “apocalypse pamphlet things” created fear of God in her. She said, “And so she let me read them and that would scare me so badly and so I thought that God was this really scary imposing person” (lines 76-78). She tended to pray “to Mary or Jesus” and sometimes to saints, such as Padre Pio rather than directly to God because that was what she observed in her mother’s religious practices. Glynna said that “she’s kinda shown me that like, yeah, there’s always some way to like express myself, you know, like through religion” (lines 515-517). By the time she was in Year 12, even though she continued to pray, to go to Mass, and to be a special minister of the Eucharist at school Masses, she had moved away from the traditional Catholic faith that was such an integral part of her mother’s life.

Like Stephen, Sophie was really close to her mother. “Mum’s like my best friend,” she said. And just as Stephen’s prayer style reflected his way of communicating with his mother, Sophie said that “the way I talk to God is also the way I talk to Mum” (line 361). She reported that even though her father did not “really get into (the) whole religious thing,” he supported his wife’s efforts to raise their daughter as a Catholic. Sophie stated she was inspired by her
mother’s faith in God who “had helped her through hard times,” and she decided to have the same sort of relationship with God.

Mikaela was the only participant who did not acknowledge the positive influence of her parents. Her description of the impact of their separation and divorce on her relationship with God was vastly different from that offered by Stephen in his account of his life, or that given by Cecil who focused on his mother’s support for his faith development. Mikaela described her parents’ hypocrisy: they attended Church together while they lived apart under the same roof. In her journal, she described the experience: “… it was like being on a bungee jump that didn’t rebound” (lines 18-19) and its impact on her self-esteem: “I didn’t care (about) life or anything it stood for” (line 20). As a consequence, Mikaela said, “I vowed never to step into a Church again” and she concluded that God did not exist. But her situation changed. She re-discovered God despite her parents and their negative attitude towards religion.

Emily’s situation was quite different from that described by the other participants. She recalled that she was taught about God when she was a child. Some of the teaching happened at home. Her parents taught her that “God existed an’ that if you pray to him he’ll answer you” (lines 22-23). She remembered the religious significance of events like Christmas and of death being explained to her, but it did not go beyond that. She said, “We’re not a religious family, like, we don’t go to Church” (line 21). While her parents, particularly her father, taught her about being a responsible and moral person, it was done so without reference to religion. Her parents provided her with a
family environment that supported her efforts to develop an understanding of life that did not include God.

It was clear from the accounts given by the participants that parents played a vital role in the development of a personal relationship with God. In particular, it was the parental focus on religious practice during childhood that many of the participants appreciated. They focused on being taught to pray and of parents praying with them as significant religious experiences. Attendance at Sunday Mass was not so important for some participants while others appreciated the experiences of family Sunday Mass that occurred when they were children. Most participants modelled their relationship with God on the relationships they had with their parents. Here the significant factor was the nurturing role played by their mothers. It will be shown in the treatment of the third major theme that some participants constructed their theologies from their experiences of parental support for their faith development.

Fourth minor theme: Supportive friends and groups

One of the most significant features of the accounts given by the 15 participants was the importance to their well-being of strong and stable friendships. They mentioned individuals and groups that influenced them and impacted on their relationship with God. It was a natural outcome of their respect for their friends that some would apply the word “friend” to God.

Many of the participants spoke about the influence of friends and youth groups on their faith in God. Of the 15 participants, nine (Alexandra, Cecil, Elizabeth, Frank, Kevin, Luke, Mikaela, Sophie and Stephen) spoke about the
support friends gave them in their efforts to deepen their relationship with
God, while seven participants (Alyssa, Cecil, Elizabeth, Gunter, Kevin, Luke
and Mikaela) described how the Christian youth groups to which they
belonged, affected their faith.

Alexandra was the only participant who interpreted the support of her
friends – she referred to them as her “support system” – as God’s way of
helping her. She had come to believe that God worked indirectly to influence
or help her through those who were close to her, such as her parents and her
good friends, as well as her teachers and others. What seemed most
important to her was “to spend time with the people you care about” which
was the lesson God taught her. Having good friends was critical to
Alexandra’s sense of well-being. In her journal, she described the chapters of
her life and friendship was a recurring theme.

Faith in God was an integral part of how Alexandra viewed her
friendships. In her first interview, she described her best friend Dillon and
what she admired about her:

… she’s been through some tough times as well, so I guess I can relate to
her more … she wouldn’t try to hurt anyone, although … someone might
be mean to her she still tries to help them out… (lines 208-212).

In her second interview, Alexandra added to her narrative: “… she’s gone
through … bad times an’ … I see it as God tryin’ to help her…” (lines 179-
180). What “it” meant in this context was not mentioned, but could be
interpreted to mean Dillon’s positive attitude towards others. Alexandra
believed that God influenced people indirectly through others and through
life’s many events, whether positive or negative. She interpreted Dillon’s positive attitude as a sign of God at work in her life.

Alexandra was so reliant on her friends for her sense of well-being that when she fell out with them, she found herself doubting the existence of God. … it’s also at the same time difficult to think of — that God does exist, especially now, and with the relationship an’ all that — um — as an adolescent it is — does get difficult with like — um — you have relationship problems like friendship with your other friends … (lines 25-29).

Her childhood experience of moving house every one or two years contributed to the difficulties she encountered in maintaining friendships and developing her faith in God. She wrote in her journal: “Moving away from my friends and having to make new friends in a new environment began affecting me emotionally” (lines 23-25). The experience of the death of her step-brother, of graduating from secondary school and enrolling in TAFE, and of changing from TAFE to university in her first year away from secondary school helped her to become more self-reliant. While her basic beliefs did not change, her relationship with God did change. She admitted to becoming less prayerful.

Cecil, Elizabeth, Frank, Kevin, Luke, Mikaela, Sophie and Stephen also spoke about the help their friends gave them. Some focused on how they were empowered by their friendships to seek a deeper relationship with God. For instance, Elizabeth recounted how at one point in her life, she found herself wanting to have nothing to do with God. The feelings she experienced disturbed her because they challenged everything she had learned about God
in the past. She wrote in her journal:

I went to talk to some of my Christian friends who are my age and understand the struggle. They helped me through this difficult time and my relationship with God was strengthened because I doubted but came back to him (lines 214-217).

Through trusting her friends, she was able to use what they told her to rebuild her relationship with God.

Her experience was similar to that reported by Mikaela who wrote the following about her best friend Joan in her journal: “I needed her to help me and guide me and give me advice when a lot of my friends turned me away from the right path” (lines 37-39). At a time when she was feeling lost and was looking for a spiritual lifeline, Joan “saved” her. Joan, who went to school with Mikaela, was a Catholic. She went to Mass every Sunday and invited Mikaela to come with her. Mikaela described Joan as her “spiritual mentor” because she helped her interpret her religious experiences in a way that tied her relationship with God to her experiences of attending a Catholic school, being a member of YCS, and going to Mass. When Joan’s family moved from the city to the country, Mikaela “was swamped with feelings of mistrust, hatred, rebellion an’ no faith” (line 40). Her perception of her reliance on her best friend resonates with Alexandra’s statement about finding it hard to believe that God existed when she fell out with her friends. The support of her friends was interpreted by her to be signs of God’s presence in her life.

The influence of close friends on their personal relationship with God was a common feature in the accounts given by some participants. It has
been shown that this was the case with Alexandra and, in particular, with Mikaela. It was true also in the case of Cecil, Elizabeth, Kevin and Sophie. Cecil met his girlfriend Samantha at a YCS meeting. Elizabeth was grateful for the help given to her by Katy, the leader of Lutheran Youth of Western Australia (LYWA). Kevin reported how he was influenced by the assistance he received from the leader of his youth group. These cases will be presented below. Sophie’s best friend was her mother. In her interview, she made the following comment: “… he’s (God) helped her through hard times as well and she’s always stayed faithful to God as well, so she’s sort of an inspiration to do the same” (lines 364-366).

Sophie’s comment about being inspired by her mother’s faith in God reflects the experiences of Cecil and Elizabeth. They, too, wanted to have the sort of relationship with God that they saw in the lives of their best friends. Cecil measured his faith in God by Sunday Mass attendance. Since returning to regular attendance, he was aware that his relationship with God was much stronger. As he described it, his girlfriend played a significant role in this change. He said that she “made me start going back” to Sunday Mass. Samantha’s commitment to God was evident in her involvement in the Sunday liturgy in her parish. Inspired by her faith, he called her “a light of my faith.” He explained that he had “trouble concentrating in Church” and Samantha advised him on how to focus his attention on the liturgy. He followed her advice and experienced some success in maintaining concentration during Mass.

Like Cecil, Elizabeth’s relationship with God changed because of the
influence of her friend Katy. She stated in her journal: “I learnt from her attitude towards God and the way she lives with him in her life” (lines 157-158). While on a Lutheran youth camp with Katy, Elizabeth discovered that her friend thanked Jesus for even the smallest of achievements in her day. She resolved to do the same and reported on her progress in her journal: “I am slowly beginning to remember him more often, and make him more a part of my everyday life” (lines 169-170).

Kevin's story differed from those shared by Cecil and Elizabeth. While he was like them in wanting to have a stronger relationship with God, he chose to be influenced by a community of believers and not just one person. His best friend merely confirmed that his decision to join the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community was God’s will.

Frank, Luke and Stephen also mentioned the influence of friends on their faith development but they did not refer to individuals, nor did they report any events involving friends that provided the impetus or motivation for change in their relationship with God. Frank explained how his friendships helped him to become confident with expressing his ideas openly, particularly those relating to his religious beliefs. He stated that most of his friends, who he referred to as “good blokes,” were not practising Catholics but they provided him with the support he needed as he tried to understand how God fitted into his life. During the interview that took place in the year following his graduation from secondary school, he contrasted his friends with his work mates who were not religious and did not know how to speak about matters, such as the death of a colleague, from a religious perspective. Given the
context of his relationships with his peers, it seemed natural for Frank to refer to God as “friendly,” a word used also by Alexandra and Alyssa.

Luke referred to the support he received from his friends who were in the parish youth group he attended. He said, “I always go with them.” By this he meant he could always discuss religious issues with them. Concerning his other friends, he said that they “neither help it nor hinder it”, meaning his relationship with God. In his journal, Stephen mentioned the “many helping hands along the way.” He was referring to the help he received from his family and friends. He prayed for his friends and enjoyed their company, but they did not exert any influence on his relationship with God.

Some participants, notably Cecil, Elizabeth and Mikaela attributed changes in their faith to the influence of friends. Others reported a more general influence. Of the nine participants reported on above, most acknowledged the influence of Christian youth groups to which they belonged: Luke 18 (Alyssa), YCS (Cecil, Gunter, Mikaela), LYWA (Elizabeth), 24:7 (Kevin) and parish youth groups (Luke). These youth movements may be described in the following way:

Luke 18 is a Catholic parish-based youth programme that makes use of peer-to-peer ministry for 12 to 15 year-old youth in an environment based on Christian values. It was established to provide opportunities to develop leadership skills, as well as attitudes and skills that foster self-reliance and resilience.

YCS is an international Catholic youth movement that had its beginnings in the formation of the Young Christian Workers movement in Belgium in the
1920s. In Australia, the YCS ministers to secondary school youth and through peer-to-peer ministry, it teaches its members how to reflect on their lives and on their world through using the Gospels with the intention of acting as co-creators with God. It makes use of a method of reflection known as the Review of Life.

Lutheran Youth of Western Australia (LYWA) is the Lutheran Church’s parish-based youth movement in Western Australia. Like the other Christian youth movements mentioned above, it has a central organising committee that coordinates the development of the movement throughout the State of Western Australia.

The Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community has its own youth group which it has called 24:7, a reference to a specific verse in the Acts of the Apostles. Like the other youth movements, it exists to provide a Christian environment for youth.

Alyssa attended the Luke 18 group that met in her parish. In her first interview, she said that it was “a way for me to get closer to God, learn more about him an’ be appreciative of him” (lines 225-227). The meetings provided her with a time for prayer and for sharing how her life was affected by her faith in God. Concerning the latter, she referred to listening “to a talk” and hearing “another person’s perspective on our God an’ faith” as important experiences. She acknowledged her need for the group experience to maintain the relationship with God that she had developed through her family life and through attending Catholic schools.

Cecil was a member of a YCS group in his parish. His only reference to
the group was his statement about the help he received from Joan, the adult assistant to the group, who taught the members of the group how to use the Review of Life method. Gunter was also a member of the YCS group in his school. He focused on the camps he attended and the importance of having fun while learning about God. He mentioned meditations at night and morning prayer as experiences that he remembered, but he did not mention using the Review of Life method, however, Mikaela did. She said the experience of reviewing in her YCS group changed her life. The question “Would Jesus want me to do this?” became part of her daily reflection and prayer. Of the three participants who belonged to YCS groups, Mikaela articulated most clearly the impact of the group’s activities, particularly the Review of Life, on her faith in God.

Elizabeth’s involvement in LYWA had a profound effect on her relationship with God. She described it as a chapter in her life and wrote in her journal: “It also represents me beginning to share my faith and teach others about God rather than being taught” (lines 55-56). As alluded to previously, her greatest challenge was learning how to pray aloud in the presence of others. She was a group leader and what she had learned from her parents when she was a child did not equip her for spontaneous vocal prayer in the presence of those who were under her care. She learned from her friends in the group that spontaneous prayer came easily if it was an outcome of regular private reflection and prayer.

Kevin found acceptance and feelings of belonging through attending 24:7, the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community youth group. He joined the
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 the leaders were trying to teach him. He described himself as an “outcast” when he was in primary school and in the early years of secondary school. Kevin said that he did not care about himself. The acceptance that he found in the youth group and the help he was given by the group leader, helped him to let go of his pain and suffering so that he could deal with it through his faith in God.

Luke belonged to the youth group in his parish. He found support for his faith through the friendships he developed with the other group members and contrasted his lack of motivation to pray at home with the enthusiasm generated within the group. In his second interview, he said that “… you can get so much guidance and good advice from them and just to be with people who feel the same way that you do helps you just so much to understand…” (lines 71-73). Like Cecil, Elizabeth, Kevin and Mikaela, Luke’s involvement in his parish youth group brought him into contact with people who shared their faith with him and helped him deepen his relationship with God.

It was clear from their reflections on the influence of their friends and the youth groups to which some of them belonged that some participants’ faith in God changed and developed significantly during their adolescent years and particularly during their senior secondary years at school. The responsibility that came with youth leadership challenged Alyssa, Elizabeth and Kevin to be more reflective and to learn how to model faith in God for their peers. Others, such as Luke and Mikaela, expressed gratitude for the friends who helped them to find God in their lives and in the Church.
Fifth minor theme: Supported by church, schools and teachers

The interview schedule used with the participants invited them to recall events and people who had contributed to or hindered the development of their relationship with God. They were also asked to consider the impact of their school and their religious education teachers on their faith in God. Even though they were not asked to do so, fourteen participants chose to comment on the role played by the Church in their faith development. Every participant reflected on the significance of their secondary school education and some of their religious education teachers. Some even spoke about their primary school experiences that related to their faith in God.

Fourteen participants used the phrase “go to Church.” They were referring to the Sunday liturgy conducted in parish churches. Their responses ranged from the rejection of church-going to acknowledging it as an important part of Christian faith. At one end of the spectrum was Emily who stated, “We’re not a religious family, like we don’t go to Church, or anything.” At the other end of the spectrum was Mikaela who, like Emily, was not a Catholic. At one point in her life, when she was in Year 12, she attended Mass every Sunday and wanted “to be a person who receives Holy Communion.”

Most participants admitted that they did not attend church regularly on Sundays. None made any statements about the purpose of liturgy or of the central theme and significance of the Catholic Mass. Most focused on the Catholic Church law about Sunday Mass obligation. Morgan went to Mass every Sunday with her mother. She stated her position clearly: “You shouldn’t have to go to Church all the time. I mean once in a while is fine…” (lines 275-
276). For her, as for most participants, going to Church was about praying or listening to the priest’s homily. They did not make any reference to the Catholic Church’s teaching about the Mass being a celebration of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. Nor did they consider it to be a sacred meal. The only one who mentioned Holy Communion was Mikaela and she was not a Catholic.

Stephen adopted a position similar to that held by Morgan. In his first interview, he said: “I believe that I don’t need to go to church to relate with God …” (lines 60-61). Cameron’s argument was more involved. He acknowledged God’s law — “the Ten Commandments say that you should keep the holy Sabbath an’ go to Church on Sunday” (lines 227-228) — and reinterpreted it by stating that religion was “more about your frame of mind and more about how you feel about it an’ how much you need it an’ how much you are getting out of it” (lines 228-231). Some, like Cameron, found reasons for not going to Mass every Sunday. Alexandra and Morgan cited study commitments. Both said it was easier to go if their parents took them to Mass. Gunter made a similar comment. If his parents were able to leave the farm to go to Mass, then he went too. Stephen went to Mass whenever he visited his father on weekends. Cecil started going back to Mass to please his girlfriend. Frank went to Mass because he did not want to disappoint his parents, however, he admitted to missing Mass if he was too tired to get out of bed. Going to Church was less important for Alyssa who admitted in her first interview that she was “not a big churchgoer, like I don’t go to Church every week” (lines 336-337).
For most participants, going to Church did not contribute significantly to changes in their relationship with God. With Cecil, Elizabeth, Luke and Mikaela, it was different. While Cecil might have started going to Mass every Sunday to please his girlfriend, he found that his relationship with God was stronger because of the changes he made. Elizabeth spoke positively about going to Church. She attended the Lutheran Sunday liturgy which was presided over by her father and she assisted with Sunday school, a children’s liturgy conducted during the Sunday liturgy, and sometimes played guitar to help with the liturgy. The Sunday liturgy was part of her youth group’s activities and she encouraged the younger members of the group to attend with her.

Luke also spoke positively about going to Mass. Like Elizabeth, he was involved in liturgies as a musician. In his journal, he revealed that he was a member of two ensembles in neighbouring parishes and this commitment helped him to develop his relationship with God: “Involvement also helps me to keep my faith with God. While I’m involved at churches, I will go…” (lines 95-96). Mikaela stated that when she was little, she was forced to go to Church. “Now I go to Church on my own accord,” she said after her decision to convert to Catholicism. Mikaela was invited by her friend Joan to accompany her to Mass each Sunday. She was looking for somewhere to belong. She chose to adopt the following attitude: “What better group to belong to than a Church group.” When she was in Year 12, Sunday Mass was part of belonging to the Catholic Church and she considered it to be part of her “vocation” to become a Catholic.
The accounts that Cecil, Elizabeth, Luke and Mikaela gave of their faith in God revealed the positive influence that going to Church had on their faith. Their stories showed that the act of going to Church helped to motivate them to relate with God. Alyssa acknowledged that in her life “something’s changed now a bit” and she no longer went to Mass every week. Mikaela revealed that her life situation had also changed, but she chose to go to Mass to help her deal with her problems. Her attendance at weekly Mass was supported by her friend Joan. When Joan moved to the country, Mikaela’s life changed dramatically. Her other friends influenced her to be less religious. She revealed in her second interview:

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… (lines 19-22).

Whatever happened in the year following her graduation from secondary school was not stated by her, but she said that she broke away from her friends and began to think for herself. The focus of her faith shifted to Jesus as saviour. Mikaela was the only participant to attribute this role to Jesus, a matter that will be discussed below as part of the third major theme. She returned to celebrating Mass each weekend as an expression of her relationship with God.

In the accounts that they gave of their lives, did the participants acknowledge the role of the Catholic school in initiating, facilitating, or supporting change in their relationship with God? Some spoke at length about the influence of their schools on their faith in God. Others said little and their reflections did not warrant detailed commentary. One participant rejected any
influence from her secondary school.

The data revealed that 12 participants mentioned their experiences of primary school, but most comments did not refer directly to their faith in God. Alexandra referred to her primary schooling as “the golden days” because of the friends she made. Alyssa said her faith was stronger in her primary school years. Like Alexandra, she accepted without question what she was taught about God. Frank and Gunter found primary school boring. In their interviews, they spoke about experiences beyond the classroom that were significant to them. For Frank, it was a Year Seven camp. For Gunter, it was his preparation for Confirmation. Kevin said he was an “outcast” in primary school.

Like Gunter, Emily and Sophie went to State primary schools and did not have religious education as part of their curriculum, apart from attending scripture classes that were conducted by catechists who visited their schools on a regular basis. The three participants could not recall what they were taught. Emily remembered having to “colour in sheets.” By the time she entered secondary school, Emily had begun to reject all religious beliefs. Sophie had her mother’s faith and her example to guide her. Stephen also attended a State primary school. He described himself as being arrogant in those years, blaming God for anything that went wrong in his life. Other participants made comments about their primary school experiences, but used them as reference points for social experiences that related to their faith in God. A typical example was Elizabeth’s account of trying to help a boy in Year 6 who was being teased. She played with him in the playground.
because she thought it was the right thing to do.

Some participants associated changes in their relationship with God with the secondary schools they attended. Most related the changes to the impact of religious education classes and their religious education teachers. There were no obvious patterns in the reflections given by the participants, however, they could be grouped into those whose comments did not identify significant changes in their faith in God and those that did indicate that their faith in God had changed. Emily belonged in the first group. She was raised in a family that was not religious. Five years in a Catholic secondary school did not bring about any appreciable change in her beliefs. When she was asked about the impact of religious education on her way of understanding her life and the world, she replied: “I don’t think about it too much because it’s not really anything that impacts on my life all that much” (lines 204-205). She concluded by saying, “I just haven’t seen anything in my life that makes me believe in a god” (lines 278-279).

Some participants spoke about their faith changing and linked it to their experience of well-being. For instance, Frank said that he did most of his “spiritual maturing” at school and through religious education. As he looked back at his time in Year 12, he noted that “there was a lot of stress” and he described his experience of religious education as an “open time to express what you’re thinking.” He identified the content of lessons in the following way:

… relaxation – um – reflection, prayer – um – and they may have drifted from – ah – religious topics and gone into sport, all kinds of things, but it was great to have that there as a break during school. Really good. Very
thankful for it (lines 215-218).

Frank stated that he “always thought quite broadly about God in high school” and he appreciated being given the time to think and discuss his beliefs and their impact on his life. This was evident in his reflection on changes in his attendance at Mass on Sunday: in his second interview, Frank reported that although there were times when he did not go to Mass with his parents, he always made a point of participating in the family gathering after Mass. The discussion that took place after Sunday Mass was an experience that he cherished. He stated: “We still talk – um – religious things – ah, especially with – when Granma comes around. Generally, they talk about the homily, or whatever, so I can catch up” (lines 112-115). Frank had decided that “how you treat others, how you live your life” was more important “than the — the formal side of [religion]” (lines 117-118).

The opportunity to take responsibility for personal faith in God and to own their own faith, was appreciated by Frank, Alexandra and Cameron. They found that the task of owning faith was supported by their schools in a number of ways. Frank commented on the influence of his religious education teachers and singled out his Year 12 teacher. He interpreted the intention behind her teaching as being concerned with maturing the faith of her students. She encouraged them to discuss openly how they integrated their faith in God with their daily living. He said that she and his other religious education teachers helped him to gradually come to a “more practical understanding of faith in God.” As a result of their teaching, he concluded he was a “more placid and open person” with a “stronger connection with God.”
Alexandra reported that her understanding of who God is changed when she went to secondary school. She stated in her first interview that “coming to secondary school really more developed my ideas about God” (line 42). Like Frank and Cameron, she acknowledged that her intellectual development contributed partly to the changes she experienced in her understanding of God, however, by far the greatest catalyst for change came from her experiences of life. Her school, particularly through its religious education programme, provided her with key learning experiences that contributed to her understanding of God and the relationship she formed with God. In her journal, Alexandra acknowledged that the visit by a guest speaker to her religious education class changed her. She said the speaker taught her:

- to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 61-63).

This encounter was timely because she had just returned from travelling overseas to accompany her parents and to help them arrange for the return of the body of her step brother and was trying to deal with the feeling that God had abandoned her family.

Frank had commented on the serendipitous quality of religious education as he had experienced it, noting that whatever was troubling him would surface as an issue to be reflected on either at Mass or in his religious education class. “It happens quite often, it’s kinda scary,” he said. Alexandra had similar experiences. In her first interview, she stated that what she heard in her religious education class and what was happening in her life led her to believe that God let “horrible” things happen to her to teach her to rely on
those who loved her. God worked indirectly through them to help her. She commented on her Year 12 religious education teacher: “he doesn’t force us to think his views.” She believed that it was “important for everyone to have their own views (and) to … structure our own beliefs … about God” (lines 253-255).

Like Alexandra and Frank, Cameron appreciated the opportunity to be responsible for his faith development. He, too, appreciated the efforts of his religious education teachers and said that he saw them as individuals, each with “their own style of religion.” Like Alexandra, this became part of his argument for developing his own understanding of faith and religion. In the account of his life, he presented an argument for having control over what constituted religion — faith became for him “believing in religion.” Like some participants, including Frank, Cameron spoke positively about the retreats offered by his school. He went on school retreats in Year 11 and Year 12 and described them as experiences where you go “as one person and you definitely come out as someone else” (lines 249-251). He was referring to gaining greater self-understanding and a clearer perception of his goals beyond Year 12. His perception of the purpose of the school retreats is similar to his understanding of prayer, which was outlined earlier in the chapter.

Cameron interpreted religious education as a subject that helped him learn how to make religion useful. He enjoyed the lessons when they allowed for discussion, but was critical of his Year 12 class because it was “more about actually writing what they want you to write rather than what you actually feel sometimes” (lines 261-263). He stated that religious education
should be about “growing as a person.”

Undoubtedly, the experience of change that Cameron described was real for him. However, it was not a change in faith in the way it was understood by Alexandra, Frank and the other participants. Cameron wanted to chart his own way through life and he chose to use religion as he understood it, to help him. Alexandra and Frank, however, chose to relate to God and chart their course through life in keeping with that relationship.

The second theme brought together the main characters and institutions involved in the narratives presented by the participants. They described how their faith in God changed because of the influence of their parents, friends, their Church experiences, their schools and teachers. For some, the changes were more obvious and significant than for others, nevertheless, with all, including Emily, it was obvious that their faith possessed a dynamic quality and represented their desire for what they interpreted as being good and for their well-being.

Third major theme: Owning a personal faith

The first and second themes provided insights into the participants’ relationships with God and how circumstances, the influences of others and growth in maturity impacted to change those relationships. From the participants’ perspective, the changes were interpreted as meaning-making activities. The intellectual dissonance experienced when old ways of thinking and old images no longer satisfied them, provided the impetus to search for new meanings, new images and new patterns of thought that would restore
harmony in their lives. And when new meanings were established, new patterns of behaviour emerged. One outcome of the interviews was theologies being constructed by the participants. In their search for the equilibrium that was part of the process of constructing meaning, they found new ways of expressing what they believed about God and how they could relate to God.

*Sixth minor theme: Resolving inner conflict and dissonance*

Most participants reported changes in their relationship with God, particularly during their senior secondary school years. Most said that their faith had grown stronger and they felt closer to God after resolving inner conflicts. Some reported experiences of some sort of intellectual dissonance associated with their intellectual development. They told of the emotional turmoil that arose when what they believed about God no longer helped them understand what they were experiencing in their lives. The interpretation of religious activities that underpinned the narratives constructed by the participants reflected their efforts to make sense of their relationship with God. Each narrative and each interpretation was unique and deserved its own treatment to illustrate how their faith in God changed.

Alexandra was baptised and raised as a Catholic. Her parents taught her to believe in God, however, most of what she learned about God was taught to her at school, particularly in secondary school. She moved from being unsure about who God was to recognising that God was present wherever there was life. In her accounts of her life, Alexandra experienced crises in her family during her childhood and adolescence. These impacted on her faith and changed her relationship with God. She vacillated between
certainty and uncertainty, depending on the state of her relationships with her parents and with her friends. Yet reliance on parents, friends and on God could not, and did not, avert tragedy. The only way she could reconcile her faith in God with the death of her step-brother, was to adopt the belief that God willed such things to happen to teach people lessons about life.

The drive within her to find meaning in her suffering led her to believe that God wanted people to help one another. Alexandra found that her life was not that simple. The move from secondary school to TAFE and later to university brought with it a new set of challenges. Without the security of the structures provided by her school, she found she had to rely on herself more than in the past. She reported that her best friend encouraged her to have faith in herself and her ability to succeed at university level. Looking back on her life, and armed with self-confidence, she interpreted the changes in her faith in a positive way. In her second interview, Alexandra admitted that since leaving school, she thought less about God and did not pray as often as she knew she should.

The narrative that she provided revealed the theology which she constructed to help her reconcile the suffering her family endured with her faith in God who created everything, who had a plan for each and every person, and who allowed people to suffer so as to teach them important lessons about life. The elements of that theology have been explained in previous sections of this chapter. What was significant in Alexandra’s case was that she chose to interpret her experiences as God’s will and, despite believing that God had abandoned her family, she chose to continue believing
in God and seeking a way of maintaining her relationship with God.

The catalyst for change in Alyssa’s relationship with God was the time she spent in Luke 18. The practice of preparing talks about personal faith affected her. She started to question the truth of what she had been taught at school and what she heard being preached from the pulpit at Mass. Her way of resolving the conflict that she experienced was to focus on examples of good works that she associated with the Catholic tradition in which she was raised, rather than let her faith in God be affected by her questioning of what she once accepted as fact. As far as she was concerned, faith gave people “boundaries” which she perceived to be of a moral nature. In the end, it was what a person did and not what they believed that was more important. Alyssa said that she tried “to live a good life” and her secondary school experience, particularly through her religious education classes, deepened her understanding of the Christian message about supporting the needy. She focused on the good work of organisations and people. In her first interview, Alyssa said:

… there are good people in the world who are willing to try and make a difference, y’know, to help, to help people who aren’t as fortunate as us so that they can have a good life and a happy and a full life (lines 204-207).

Clearly, this was not enough to resolve the inner conflict she experienced. She regretted that she did not “pray at night and go to Church all the time.” Alyssa acknowledged the importance of daily prayer and hoped that she could overcome her short concentration span which hindered her development in all aspects of her life, including her relationship with God.
Cameron’s story can be interpreted as one in which he constructed a theology that resolved issues in his own life. In his interview, he described how his parents took him to Mass every Sunday when he was young and made certain he understood as best he could what he saw and heard. He appreciated their commitment to his faith development. When he went to secondary school, they gave him the responsibility of choosing whether or not he went to Mass on Sundays. Cameron stated that he chose to go to Mass with his mother if he did not have too much homework to do. To resolve the sense of guilt he felt on the occasions when he did not go, he gradually formulated a view of faith, religion and God that gave him control over his life. Cameron wanted as much control as he could get. He said he would even like to have total control over his death but recognised that it was not possible and he had to trust God with his life.

Cameron created a silent God who listened to him like a “comforting spirit” and did not comment on his thoughts. He described prayer as thinking about life and the issues that confronted him. God listened to him and agreed with what he was thinking. Cameron adopted understandings of religion and faith that made it possible for him to interpret what he had been taught to suit his own ends. He made certain that he used religion to establish harmony and well-being in his own life and this included going to Mass when it did not interfere with other commitments. It also included living by the Ten Commandments as long as they did not prevent him from keeping control of his life. It was his belief that religion existed for this reason. To ensure that he had control over religion in his life, he created an image of God that supported his view of religion.
Cecil’s account of his life provided little evidence of experiences of conflict between his beliefs and what was happening in his life. The changes in his relationship with God that he reported in his interview seemed to happen as a result of the influence of three women in his life. As outlined above, he gave an account of how his mother, his girlfriend Samantha and Joan, the adult assistant to the YCS group in his parish, encouraged him to adopt beliefs and practices that would enhance his relationship with God. In his interview, he spoke about the place of prayer in his life and his return to regular attendance at Sunday Mass, however, there was no indication that these happened to counter negative experiences or influences. His situation was not unlike that of Luke, whose case will be discussed below. Cecil’s perception of the development of his relationship with God was an outcome of his growing maturity and the support of people who were significant to him and admired by him.

The changes in Cecil’s perceptions of God reflected his intellectual development. Elizabeth’s account of her life showed a similar pattern. Hers was a story of drawing closer to God within the faith tradition of her parents. Part of her story revealed her struggle to understand parts of the Scriptures that appeared to present conflicting images of God. The example of her parents and the support of her friends helped her to stay within the Lutheran tradition into which she was born. Elizabeth spoke about feelings of guilt which she experienced and which she worked through. She said in her first interview that it was her faith in God that helped her through the inner emotional conflict that she experienced: “… it’ll work out because like he’s guiding everything” (line 110).
Frank also stayed within the Catholic tradition into which he was born. The central issue for him was attending Sunday Mass. It became a source of irritation for him. Even though his parents did not force him to go to Mass with them, he was caught between their example (and the example of his grandmother) and the example of his older siblings who had stopped going to Mass. He chose to continue going and whenever he missed Mass he tried to join his parents at his grandmother's home after Mass to be part of the discussion about the Sunday liturgy, a long-standing family practice. Frank said that whenever he felt the urge to miss Mass, he thought of how it would disappoint his mother if he did not go to Mass. He used that sense of guilt to motivate him to get up and go with them to Mass.

Glynna also faced inner conflict about her relationship with God in two quite different dimensions of her life. The first arose, as it did with the other participants discussed above, because of her intellectual development. The catalyst in her case was her interest in science. Glynna could not reconcile her childhood notion of God with what she learned about evolution. To overcome the dissonance that she experienced, she changed her understanding of God to allow her to continue believing in God and also continue to value scientific knowledge. As stated in the previous section of this chapter, Glynna came to accept that God “guided evolution.”

The second instance arose when she was in Year Ten. A classmate was critically injured in a car accident. Despite the prayers of many people, he died. In her interview, she stated that she became angry with God. The
description of her journey showed clearly the impact of conflicting beliefs that fuelled her grief:

When like Phil died I really thought like “Nuh, I’m gonna give up this religion stuff. I can’t handle it anymore. It’s just a load of crap.” And like I know it’s not probably like the greatest thing to say, but I really just couldn’t stand it. I just stopped going to Church for like, y’know, a month. I know that that’s not that long, but like I just thought (pause) And then like (pause) Um, I don’t know, I think I went for Christmas because he like died a couple of months before Christmas and I went to Christmas Mass and I kind of realised that, you know, like there was this whole community of people that like would support me if I needed it. And so that sort of started me getting back into (pause) And then like I wanted to become a Special Minister ’cause like I wanted another badge like (laughter) so terrible, but like that was kind of like the initial reason why I wanted to do it. And then like I actually gave out the communion like at the – at the first Mass, like it just felt so amazing like, It was like wow! All these people I’m like giving something to them. It’s o – ah – it just felt so good and like we did it – I – I did it like a couple of weeks ago and I just had that like, y’know, glowing feeling and – I think that like has really, really strengthened my relationship with like God an’ stuff (lines 315-335).

It is obvious from her account that she went through a period of self-reflection and, as she described elsewhere in her interview, personal prayer that became like a meditation. It soothed her troubled spirit and she arrived at the realisation that the support of others could help her deal with the loss of her
friend. She also made the decision to become engaged again in living in relationship with God.

Gunter’s experiences were not dramatic and the changes in his faith in God reflected his desire to become more closely identified with the Catholic Church. Like the others, he identified his intellectual development as the catalyst for change. In his first interview, he stated, “I s’pose as you get older you sort of understand what they’re saying in Church a lot more” (lines 328-329). In his second interview, he described his Confirmation as the pivotal moment in his relationship with God which, like most of the participants, he measured in terms of his involvement in the Church: “I kinda saw it as – up to that point I wasn’t like fully part of the Catholic Church community sorta thing and getting confirmed would bring me into that community sorta thing” (lines 134-137).

Gunter fed his desire for certitude about his place in the Church by watching movies that projected some aspects of what he perceived to be the Catholic tradition in which he had been raised. He spoke at length about the religious dimension of films, like *The Exorcist, Signs of God* and *Stigmata*. They were a more significant source of reflection on his faith tradition than what was included in the religious education course at his school. His belief about how God communicated with him would have resolved any inner conflict he might have experienced about how he reflected on his faith. He said that what he observed happening around him, and what he read in the newspaper, caused him to question his faith but also strengthened it.
The story told by Kevin about his faith in God showed how he overcame emotional turmoil to embrace the faith tradition modelled by his parents and some of his friends. As with the other participants, his story referred to his intellectual development. Even though he had been baptised and taught about God from a very young age, it was not until he was in Year Ten that it started to make sense to him. He described clearly his journey of faith:

… as soon as I got into Year 8, I was prep- – sort of teached a lot because 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. But each time I did I was like unhappy an’ so these ah – few years with a – these past few years I’ve went to a youth group called “Twenty-four seven” in – ah – Osborne Park and I got introduce – like (pause) I been going to that for some time before Year 8 but I never really give it a thought but like in Year 10 I started paying more attention an’ yeah, the stuff that they were saying was pretty interesting, so I kept coming back an’ was asked to be a leader… (lines 17-27).

Kevin’s situation, like that described by Alexandra, was vastly different from the experiences of other participants because low self-esteem played such a vital role in his search for the peace and harmony that came with a strong relationship with God. Just as Glynna had shown, the changes Kevin experienced took a number of years to come into effect. At the time he was interviewed, Kevin was at peace with himself and confident about his relationship with God. Even though he struggled with his studies, he
cherished the energy he experienced from his faith in God and applied himself
to giving witness to his faith.

Luke’s story provided only hints of the possibility of the movement from
any experience of dissonance in his relationship with God to the harmony of a
closer relationship with God. It would appear that he was never challenged to
doubt God’s existence, or God’s concern for him. This came through clearly in
his comment about how he drew on his relationship with God to deal with
uncertainty and disappointment:

… it’s always been there to turn on – to faith. Um – when something in life
is not making sense, is going wrong I’ll ask, “Why is it going wrong?
Could you please help to make it right.” It just – I’ll sometimes pray and
ask for stuff and it’ll happen and I’ll think, “Wow! That was because I
prayed for it.” And it just gives – I don’t know – it sorta gives me a sense
of not knowing what’s gonna happen in the future. I think, “What’s gonna
happen?” And I’ll fail the tests in school and think, “Was that meant to
happen for a reason?” It’s confusing sometimes but it sorta gives life a bit
of – it’s not boring. You don’t know what to expect, so – that’s slack. I like
it (lines 175-185).

In this statement, and elsewhere in the story he told about his faith, Luke
confirmed that his relationship with God developed without having to deal with
the challenges faced by some participants, such as Alexandra and Kevin. Like
Gunter, his faith was strengthened as his ability to understand religious
concepts developed and as he practised using skills associated with faith
development, for instance, the skills involved in praying to God.
Mikaela’s journey of faith was turbulent. When she was in Year 8, her parents separated. The experience was traumatic and she resolved to never go to Church again. She was not able to resolve the conflict between her parents’ hypocrisy – they pretended to be a loving couple whenever they went to Church – and faith in God. She spoke about those early years of adolescence being a time of low self-esteem and “no faith.” To some extent, her experiences paralleled those described by Kevin. She reached a point in her life when she started to take notice of what was being said in her religious education class, her experiences in the YCS group she joined, and especially the influence of her friend Joan. These influences moved her from being antipathetic towards the faith tradition in which her school was based to wanting to learn more about Catholicism and eventually, to the decision to become a Catholic.

The peace and harmony that Mikaela named as an outcome of her decision were shortlived. When Joan moved to the country, she was devastated and she blamed God for her inability to deal with the loss of the support of her friend. Mikaela described how her other friends tempted her to let go of her relationship with God. She followed them but was unhappy. Her experience was similar to that described by Kevin. Both participants came to realise that true peace would be achieved only by taking personal responsibility for their relationship with God. Her story illustrated how owning one’s faith in God required persistence and the determination to rise above experiences of failure.
Morgan did not attribute the changes in her relationship with God to any factor other than her growing up. There was no drama in her life and the only negativity she referred to in her interview was her own attitude towards attending Mass every Sunday with her mother and pressure from some of her peers to avoid speaking about religion. It was established earlier that Morgan’s regular attendance at Sunday Mass was controlled by her mother whose message about God’s conditional love — “If you’re not gonna be good then God doesn’t love you anymore” (lines 215-216) and “You have to go to Church otherwise God won’t love you” (lines 271-272) — was rejected by her daughter. However, her conflict between being forced to go to Mass and not believing it was the only way to pray to God and hence unnecessary, was an irritation and probably something to be endured. She recognised that going to Mass was important to her mother. She perceived her father to have a different attitude towards religion. He rarely went to Mass and only when pressured to do so by his wife. Morgan was aware that her mother prayed for her and for her success in her studies and knowledge of that probably contributed to her acceptance of her mother’s pressure on her to attend Mass with her.

There were no negative forces in Sophie’s life that propelled her towards God. Instead, there was only the influence of her mother, a feature of her faith development alluded to earlier in the chapter, and the positive influence of her secondary school and her teachers. Sophie used the verb “construct” to refer to her belief in God. She said, “I sort of construct the idea that if you believe in God, you shouldn’t question.” When she was asked about her use of the word, she replied:
Um – I think it’s because as you grow up, you – as I grow up, or grew up, um – I pulled bits from my background – my fam– ’cause my family being Italian – um – the Catholic sort of f– um – faith and belief: from that – um – an’ I just constructed – Also my surroundings, like my school, I just constructed different pieces of what I form in my religion my faith an’ that’s basically why I said “constructed” (lines 14-20).

Like the others, she thought her faith in God increased as she matured and it was strengthened principally through her mother’s good example and stories she shared with her daughter about her own parents’ faith. Sophie also looked for the positive dimension in her father’s example. She said, “Dad doesn’t really get into (the) whole religious thing.” Nevertheless, she was open to learning from him. “He’s very much about respect,” she stated. Sophie acknowledged that she learned from him to respect other people’s beliefs and their opinions about religion. While with many of the participants, there were tensions to be resolved and the act of resolving them strengthened faith, in Sophie’s case, and possibly also Cecil’s and Luke’s situations, faith was developed through the love and support of significant people. In Sophie’s case, the word “construct,” then, summarised well how her faith developed.

Like Alexandra, Glynna and Mikaela, Stephen experienced inner conflict between his faith in God and certain critical events in his life. In his case it was his cousin’s surfing accident that left her confined to a wheelchair. Stephen had to reconcile that occurrence with what he had been taught about the power of God. The accident occurred before he commenced his Year 11 studies.
In the previous year, when he was in Year 10, one of his teachers challenged him about his attitude towards life. He described the situation in his second interview:

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. … But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you … (lines 92-97).

Stephen reflected on that incident and on the sacredness of life. It was evident in his interviews and in his journal that he had come to consider life as a sacred gift from God and his belief did not fit with what he had been taught in his religious education class about issues such as abortion and the use of embryos in stem cell research. He spoke about these issues and wrote about them in his journal. He wrote: “I would give anything for the technology to grow stems so that Andrea can walk again” (lines 87-88). One of his hopes for the future concerned his cousin’s rehabilitation: “I would like the next big chapter of my life to be that of the rehabilitation of my cousin’s legs so that she is able to walk again” (lines 114-116). To resolve the inner conflict he was experiencing, he moved from a faith that was a reflection of his father’s traditional Catholic faith to one that reflected his mother’s compassionate nature: “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” (lines 276-279). Stephen came to the realisation that he was more Buddhist than Catholic in his attitude towards life and he was comfortable with that. He was more at home with a
Christian faith that emphasised Jesus’ commitment to life than one that celebrated his suffering, death and resurrection.

Despite her declaration that God did not exist, Emily’s story revealed how she resolved any inner conflict that she might have experienced as a student in a Catholic school:

… so I participate in RE because I understand that’s what you have to do being part of a Catholic school an’ I don’t resist that, or anything, but I just sort of just do it. I don’t really think about things so much because (long pause) yeah. (pause) So it’s sort of there to pass over but I don’t think about it too much because it’s not really anything that impacts on my life all that much (lines 200-205).

Even though she was able to provide answers to questions about the Christian faith tradition, which showed that she remembered some of the content covered in religious education classes, the information was irrelevant because she had concluded that there was nothing to be gained from applying it to her own life. Emily did experience conflict in her life and she had worked out how to deal with it in a constructive way. To restore faith in herself and others, she sought to distance herself from the source of the conflict. In her interview, she explained the methods she used to restore inner harmony:

Um (pause) I try to relax myself like and to do other things or listen to music an’ stuff. Or I go to the beach, or whatever, and I start thinking positively. Like maybe I’ll go see some – like I’ll go maybe – um – see something that makes me look at the world in a better way like – or when my nephew was here I may go an’ see them an’ stuff because they cheer
me up. They make you look at the world like better an’ stuff. Or, you know, something like that (lines 176-182).

The methods used by Emily to restore inner peace were no different from many used by the other participants. For instance, in the interview he gave during the year following his graduation, Frank mentioned how he enjoyed reflecting on how great life was for him as he droved home after work. Mikaela had her own special retreat in the bush near her home. She would go there when she needed to get away from her mother. Most participants referred to the part their friends in helping them work through their problems. The major difference between the other participants and Emily was their use of prayer as a way of resolving inner conflicts.

Seventh minor theme: Responding to God’s presence

Except for Emily, all the participants said they prayed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2004) described five basic forms of prayer: blessing and adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise (para. 2626-2643). The participants spoke about some of these forms of prayer. Generally, the participants prayed for help. Some participants changed in the way that they prayed. The changes reflected their intellectual development, their growth in maturity, and their commitment to God.

Alexandra made the observation that her faith “became stronger as I got older,” however, her practice of praying “stayed kind of the same.” In interviews conducted after they left school, both Alexandra and Alyssa admitted that they prayed less because they found that they were too busy. Alexandra stated that “if you don’t belong to a Catholic or religious school you
do tend to stray from praying.” As stated above, Alyssa confessed to having a short attention span which affected her studies and her religious life. She observed that people need “extreme concentration” to pray before going to sleep each night. All she wanted to do at the end of the day was to “blank everything out.” Luke reported the same problem. He said that he overcame his tiredness, but his prayer wasn’t as meaningful as it normally was for him. Alyssa’s faith had not developed to the point where she communicated with God regularly. She revealed that she wanted to be better at “being able to talk to him an’ tell him stuff,” as she put it, but lacked the inner strength (“being perhaps stronger in myself”) that she needed to turn to God in prayer as part of her daily life.

Elizabeth also expressed the desire to be better at praying. Her situation was somewhat similar in that both she and Alyssa were members of Christian youth groups and public prayer was part of the meeting structures used by their groups. Elizabeth was a group leader and she wanted to be more confident at praying aloud spontaneously in her group. She considered spontaneous prayer to be part of her responsibility as a leader. In that context, it might have appeared that prayer was a social mechanism rather than a form of personal communication with God, however, it was far from that, as will be explained later. Like the other participants, including Emily, Elizabeth had been taught to pray when she was a child. Whereas Alexandra’s mother listened to her daughter’s prayers each night, Elizabeth’s parents taught her prayers and prayed with her. Concerning her experiences of praying as a child, Elizabeth said that “it’s not that much of a big thing.” Nevertheless, by the time she was in Year 12, she was trying to emulate her parents, albeit in a
different context, namely in her youth group. She was also sufficiently committed to modelling what it means to be a prayerful person and to seek advice from her friends about how to pray aloud in the presence of others.

Glynna’s prayer-life changed also and the changes reflected various influences on her, including her mother’s example, the importance given to prayer at school, and the death of one of her classmates. In her interview, Glynna said, “But over the past couple of years … I’ve sort of gone back to how it was a bit when I was little and returned to praying” (lines 29-30). She prayed to Jesus and sometimes to Mary: “I say the Hail Mary, or the Hail, Holy Queen, ‘cause I like the words of the Hail, Holy Queen” (lines 141-143). Sometimes she prayed to certain saints. She was influenced by her mother, who had established a prayer room in their home, a space that she came to appreciate because it was a peaceful place.

Glynna said, “I don’t really say like set prayers.” Often her prayer revolved around working out “what’s the right thing to do.” She described her prayer as being like meditating. She added: “it just clears y’ mind … and it’s calming.” Glynna concluded that her way of praying at present differed significantly from praying the rosary out of fear when she was seven years old. Her mother left religious booklets in her prayer room. Glynna read about the end of the world in one of the booklets. This caused her to fear for her life. Like her mother, she turned to Mary for protection. By the time she had reached her final year of secondary school, Glynna had worked through her fear and had developed an understanding of God that ruled out the notion of God destroying the world.
Glynna’s comments about the calming effects of prayer on her mind were echoed to a large degree by Cameron who had moved from using traditional prayers to considering prayer to be a form of personal reflection carried out in the presence of God. After admitting “I wouldn’t describe myself as a very prayerful person” he defined prayer as:

Just tryin’ to work out what’s going on in my head an’ having someone there … that will listen an’ not comment or judge, just be there an’ listen so I can sort it all out an’ then it can be done with (lines 89-92).

It has already been noted earlier in the chapter that he described God as a “comforting spirit.” All he wanted from God was a sympathetic ear. The passive nature of God’s role in Cameron’s life was highlighted further through his emphasis on faith as a “whole new dimension to life” that exists alongside sport and music. He said that “having God as part of life just adds another aspect, another way that you can grow” (lines 109-111). Prayer was an important part of his relationship with God. He referred to praying more than any other aspect of his faith. He prayed for his family, his friends, for people who needed help, and for himself.

Unlike Cameron, Cecil’s prayer was directed to God and he usually commenced by asking “how God’s going.” In general, his prayer was spontaneous and concerned with thanking God first and then asking for help for others and himself. Like the other participants, he did not consider prayer to be a magical “fix-it.” He knew from experience that prayer needed to be accompanied by effort on his part:

I have asked him for quite a few things like in the la– past few years ’cause I’ve gone through a bit of tough times and (pause) that’s influenced my life
by me asking him 'cause after I've asked him I've tried a bit harder 'cause I can't, and then I can do it even though — even if it takes a while… (lines 82-86).

When he attended the Year 12 retreat, Cecil's conviction about prayer was confirmed by a fellow student's testimony about its power in her life. He decided to continue praying to gain God's help.

As Mikaela became more other-centred, the focus of her prayers changed. In her first interview, she said that “for the last couple of months, I've been praying about, for everyone else and not for myself” (lines 172-173). The change seemed to coincide with her growing awareness of the desire to be a forgiving person. She told the story of coming home to find her home had been burgled. Her first concern was for those who had committed the crime. She said, “I'm gonna go out and help them because they've obviously got a problem that can be fixed” (lines 123-124).

Mikaela's prayer was related to her sense of self-worth. She said that when she was in Year 11, “I didn't pray much. I had very low faith.” As with Alexandra, Mikaela's faith seemed to be linked to the state of her relationships with her parents and her friends. The relationship she had with her best friend Joan was instrumental in bringing about significant changes in Mikaela's prayer. Joan invited her to Mass and encouraged her to attend regularly. Mikaela shared her religious experiences with Joan who encouraged her to interpret her positive feelings as signs of the presence of God in her life. Prayer assumed a greater significance in her day. She prayed regularly and directed her prayer to God. Mikaela had reached a point in her faith where
what God wanted was more important than what she wanted. In her first interview, she revealed that “lately I’ve been praying and asking him, ‘If you want me to do anything, just tell me so’” (lines 140-141).

At the time of the first interview, Mikaela had arrived at the point where prayer was “a release.” Her experience was similar to that reported by Glynna and also Luke, who recorded in his journal:

The way that I prayed had also changed. It had turned from just a ritual with words to words that actually meant something. This was a change for the good and made me as a person feel better about myself and others (lines 74-76).

Similarly, Stephen’s prayer developed from his childhood experience of praying “the same prayer every night” to the point where he could say that he looked at God “as a mate” and his prayer became more “like thanking a friend for doing certain deeds.” It was clear from their accounts that many of the participants experienced an intimacy with God in their prayer that was beyond their awareness as children.

Summary

This chapter presented an analysis of the data gathered through interviews and journals from 15 participants. The method of analysis was adapted from the methodology employed in IPA. Three major themes and seven minor themes emerged from the data and they were used to construct statements about changes in the participants’ relationships with God. It was shown that most participants perceived the changes to be part of growing up; in some cases, participants reported that their beliefs about God were
challenged by personal situations. They acknowledged 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.

In keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA as a research approach, the following chapters will present interpretations of the data that are supported by studies in various disciplines, including theology and cognitive psychology, as well as studies in developmental psychology. Chapter 5 will present a response to 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?
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, you 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’ protectivebehaviours (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 be 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 caregiver: 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
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 his 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 journalling 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

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 have 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.
Chapter 6: The imagination and religious conversion

Introduction

In the previous chapter the accounts given by four participants, Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen were used to illustrate aspects of religious conversion. This was done as directed by the research question: *Is it possible to interpret students’ disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?* It was concluded that such an interpretation could be established with the four participants named above. The other participants did not describe situations that could be construed to be instances of religious conversion. In this chapter, the second research question will be addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focuses on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion is the aspect under consideration in the present study. Consequently, in this chapter, the role of the imagination in faith development will be considered first and then followed by a discussion of how it assists in religious conversion.

In chapter 2 of the present study, definitions of the imagination and religious imagination were developed. We should recall that it was stated that the imagination is that human faculty which makes it possible for people to have knowledge of what constitutes their world. Kant’s understanding of imagination was adopted for this study. According to Kant (2007/1781), there are two types of imagination: reproductive imagination, which recalls images
drawn from experience, that is, from the past; and productive imagination, which produces images that are future oriented. Lothane (2007) referred to the former as “recreative” imagination and called the latter “creative” imagination (p. 152). It was stated in chapter 2 that the focus in the present study is on the latter form of imagination and particularly within the context of religious imagination which was defined in the same chapter as the orientation of the imagination towards what Fowler (1981) termed “the ultimate conditions of our existence” (p. 25).

In chapter 2 of the present study, the phenomenon of religious conversion was explained using James Fowler’s faith development theory. Recall that Fowler (1981) proposed that religious conversion could be described as the movement from one stage of faith to the next, for example, from a Synthetic-Conventional faith (Stage 3) to an Individuative-Reflective faith (Stage 4). To explain the role of the imagination in religious conversion, he outlined three movements that can be summarised as follows: when a person is confronted by experiences which cannot be assimilated in the present meaning structure of their world, but which “command” attention and “demand” acceptance, the old meaning disintegrates and is replaced by the “new” reality. In this chapter, Fowler’s model will be expanded to include various theories and models as outlined below for the purpose of providing some evidence of the role or function of the imagination in faith development and religious conversion.
A model of how the imagination assists faith development

It is much easier to identify the product of imagination than it is to describe how imagination achieves what is attributed to it as its work. Kant (2007/1781) wrote that people are “scarcely ever conscious” of its presence (p. 104). To achieve the task of describing how it assists the faith development of adolescents, a model of how the imagination works was sought. But what would such a model be like? McFague (1987) defined a model as “a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation” (p. 34). In the search for something metaphorical that would serve as a model, the word “pattern” became a primary focus. Crime scene investigators typically lay down a pattern over a crime scene, to systematically search for clues that will reveal the identity of the criminal. In much the same way, a model was sought that would provide a pattern to lay over the data obtained from the transcripts of interviews and the journals written by some participants.

McFague’s (1982) development of a model to reinvigorate the relations between religious and theological language involved a survey of the use of models in many fields of human thought and endeavour. She discovered that good models make it possible for the unintelligible to be understood, because they provide a framework and a language by which the unfamiliar could be examined and insight generated. McFague noted that useful models revealed “a dialectic of simplicity and detail” (p. 74) which made possible the discovery of order in what appeared to be chaotic.
In the present study, the model that was adopted came from a statement made by Kierkegaard (2004/1849) about the work of the imagination. He wrote: “What feelings, understanding and will a person has depends in the last resort upon what imagination he has – how he represents himself to himself” (p. 60). It was recognised that the imagination works with more than the three dimensions identified above. The representation of self to self also involves memory. In the present study, then, the imagination was considered to be like two movements, the first characterised as “reaching back to gather data from the world of sense experience, typically through memory and emotion, and the second considered to be “leaning forward” to inform understanding and will (behaviour/action). Both movements can be represented graphically as shown below (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

The two movements described “reaching back” and “leaning forward” are like the two parts of a dialectic being held in dynamic equilibrium by the imagination. It can be likened to reflection and action being brought together and held in tension. One without the other would lead to either chaos or atrophy. To assist with the application of the model to the data in a pattern-like way, various theories and models were used to provide the detail that the model needed. Concerning the “reaching back” of the imagination: the imagination is stirred through mental and emotional conflict to use a person’s memories to produce new realities. Some findings from information processing theories proved useful in explaining how this work of the imagination can be initiated. People remember not only events, but also emotional states. It was established in the previous chapter that religious conversion and religious experiences in general have an affective dimension.
Fowler’s (1981) model of religious conversion has as its second movement, the introduction of events that challenge currently held beliefs. Such conflict produces a form of cognitive instability—the imagination “reaches back” and takes hold of memories and emotions in a sense to “steady” the mind—that causes the imagination to “lean forward” to restore the balance, that is, to produce new images that either assimilate or accommodate the changes. Piaget’s concepts of equilibration, assimilation, accommodation and particularly disequilibration proved to be useful in describing how the imagination works in religious conversion to produce new understandings of how to relate with God.
Concerning the “leaning forward” activity of the imagination, Thomas (1999) provided a way of considering how the imagination assists understanding. He described the work of the imagination as perceptual activity, the mind having an array of procedures it uses to actively interrogate the environment. It tests and re-tests percepts for adequacy or fit. Rambo’s (1993) model of religious conversion described the effects of conversion, one being a form of elation. It is one sign of the imagination’s work. Recognition of truth, that is, understanding, brings what Perlovsky (2002) called “instinctual satisfaction.” Finally, the contribution of the imagination to the operation of will referred to by Kierkegaard, which was taken to mean the influence of the imagination on religious behaviour, was examined with the aid of Harris’ (1987) model of religious imagination. She proposed four ways of considering the work of the imagination in a religious context.

In terms of the model outlined below, the imagination is defined as the process of synthesising cognitive and affective experiences in a way which produces new meanings. Such synthesising may result in a promoting of the metaphysical over the purely physical, the phenomenal over the nominal, the non-rational (but not irrational) over the rational. When the ‘other worldly’ is so preferred, the experience may be closely aligned with what Rudolph Otto (1958/1923) termed an encounter with the numinous – that which “is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’” (p. 28). To imagine is to touch the Holy, to reach out beyond the material, to experientially affirm that “... what we see was made by something that cannot be seen” (Hebrews 11:3, New Century
The model, with its two movements of “reaching back” and “leaning forward” held in tension as in a dialectic, can be represented graphically in the following way:

Figure 5
A model of how the imagination assists the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents

Reaching back: memory, emotion and the imagination

The imagination processes information that is made available through the senses and stored in the memory; and it unifies or synthesises what has been or what could be experienced (Warnock, 1986; Harris, 1987; Green, 1989). In The Critique of Pure Reason (2007/1781), Kant wrote “By synthesis, in its most general sense, I mean the act of putting different representations together, and of comprehending their manifoldness in one item of knowledge” (p. 103). Bryant (1989) defined Kant’s term “manifoldness” as the many “originally unconnected sensations” (p. 67). Apart from the information provided by the five senses, these sensations include experiences of emotion,
the intellectual tasks of forming concepts and of creating symbols, and the
historical dimension of human life, that is, the data of memory. Thus the
imagination constructs or builds images from the undifferentiated data of
experience, including memory and prior knowledge. Its function, however,
involves more than just representing faithfully what has been experienced.
Using Kant’s understanding of the work of the imagination, Warnock (1976),
Fischer (1983) and Harris (1987) identified in this power of the imagination to
synthesize experience, the power to enable people, as Warnock described it,
“to think of certain objects in the world in a new way, as signifying something
else” (p. 197). Fischer stated that the imagination was “the human power that
opens us to possibility and promise, the not-yet of the future” (p. 7).

Models are mental constructs that are created to facilitate
understanding. The model outlined here was devised to guide the discussion
of how the imagination assisted the religious conversion of adolescents. The
image of “reaching back” and “leaning forward” illustrated something of the
dynamic nature of synthetic function of the imagination. Because the product
of its synthesis was also part of the synthesis, discussion of each part of the
image included references to the other part of the image.

Information processing theories and the imagination: memory and emotion

A major focus of information processing theories is the role of memory
in learning. Information-processing models and theories, such as the stage
theory model based on the work of Atkinson & Shriffin (1968), the “levels of
processing” theory of Craik & Lockhart (1972) and the “connectionistic” model
developed by Rumelhart & McClelland (1986) share some common principles
related to memory which could be applied to the present study, such as the principle that “the human organism has been genetically prepared to process and organise information in specific ways” (Huitt, 2003, p. 2). Changes in the ability to process information noted by some participants in the present study were taken to be evidence of the validity of this principle and of the imagination at work. For example, Alexandra reported in her first interview: “I believe a bit more now ‘cause - um - when I was younger, I wasn’t sure” (lines 39-40). In her first interview, Alyssa made a similar admission. She said, “I’ve always believed and just lately, as you get older an’ stuff, you just ask more questions about it” (lines 13-14). Cameron reported a similar experience. When he was asked about the differences between God and Jesus, he replied:

When I was very young, around five an’ six, an’ just starting to learn all these sort of things, it was just an easier concept to see them all as one person, but as you grow up, you mature an’ you sort of – logic takes hold an’ it’s – you can’t just have questions that are unanswered an’ that you just believe and you have to ask those sort of questions an’ work it out for yourself (lines 51-57).

These examples point to the existence of cognitive development and how increased cognitive powers can assist the imagination in the work of constructing a new vision of reality that takes into account new information. It was concluded in the present study that the participants whose stories indicated the likelihood of religious conversion — Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen — were not able cognitively, nor emotionally, to experience conversion when they were children. The accounts of the other participants
included above, suggested that such a conclusion was reasonable and consistent with the findings of Inhelder and Piaget (1972), who stated that the adolescent at about 14 or 15 years of age is capable of holding in equilibrium that which appeared contradictory when a child (p. 335).

Religious conversion can happen only when people are able to process cognitively information about themselves, their world and about God and the changes in understanding and behaviour are significantly different from past understanding and behaviour. For example, Mikaela testified to changes in her faith. She moved from having a poor relationship with God—"I didn't get along with him very well" (first interview, line 37)—to wanting to be close to God. She wrote in her journal: “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" (lines 145-146). She noticed the change in herself when she was in Year 11. In the previous chapter, it was shown that Kevin changed from being unaware of the meaning and value of his Catholic upbringing to accepting God into his life. He spoke about his involvement in a Catholic youth group and stated that “in Year 10 I started paying more attention an’ yeah, the stuff that they were saying was pretty interesting, so I kept coming back” (lines 25-27).

Elizabeth acknowledged that as a child she did not give much thought to the religious practices that were part of her life. In her first interview, she said: “When you're younger you kind of just – y'know – you listen to the stories and you say, you say your prayers at night with your parents, but it’s not that much of a big thing” (lines 22-25). As she grew older, this changed.
Concerning prayer, she stated: “I think it – that got more meaning, or I felt that it actually worked more as I got a bit older” (lines 27-28). Stephen acknowledged the changes in attitude and understanding that were part of his life. He admitted: “I was pretty arrogant in primary school, like if something bad had happened I’d like blame God” (lines 35-36). Events in his life contributed to changes in his understanding of God and his attitude towards God. In his first interview, he stated: “I realised that he doesn’t – like he’s given earth and people like the will to do their own sort of – do what they want” (lines 36-38).

Egan (2009) linked memory and the imagination with learning by means of the medium of story-telling. The key to the success of the relationship between memory and the imagination lies in the engagement of the emotions. In his discussion of the use of stories in teaching and learning, Egan emphasised the power of narrative to engage people affectively, that is, through the emotions. Memories both stir and are stirred by emotions and together they feed the imagination. In his journal, the participant named Luke called his imaginary autobiography “The Steady Rollercoaster.” Luke described himself, God and his relationship with God (the “steady”-ing influence in his life) in a positive way. It is suggested that the image of God as the seatbelt on the roller coaster of life, an image he introduced in the opening part of his journal, was constructed as a synthesis of memories of the positive experiences of life at home, at school, in the youth group to which he belonged, and as a member of a Catholic parish. In his journal, he wrote: “There are so many influences in my life at the moment but most of them are good which to me is a good sign” (lines 87-89). He stated in his first interview:
I was baptised really early, couple a weeks, I think. Um – ever since then I’ve been to Church, um – we’ve always said grace before meals, um – we’ve always – both my parents were in youth groups when they were young and both went to Church an’ stuff, so they’ve continued to go to Church with us kids as well. We’ve been taught the way – being at a Catholic school all my life has taught me a lot. Um – I did altar serving which also I think brought me closer. And then just yeah as growing older going through all the sacraments and then getting to these youth groups.

My parents have had a lot of influence (lines 124-134).

Luke’s expansive language, seen in phrases such as “ever since then,” “we’ve always,” “all my life,” and “all the sacraments,” contribute to the positive image that Luke created of his relationship with God.

Religious conversion involves the interplay of memory and emotion with the imagination working to produce a synthesis of experiences related to faith in God. The data collection method used in the present study involved the recording of autobiographical memories. Bernsten and Rubin (2006) commenced their reflection on autobiographical memory by observing that memories of the past do not always correspond to what actually happened, but may be consciously directed or re-membered to achieve a particular outcome. They referred to this form of remembering as the “observer perspective;” however, it is possible for the past to be recalled automatically without any conscious direction from the person doing the remembering. They called this the “field perspective” (p. 1193). Their interest focused on the emotions associated with reliving biographical memories and their study provided some valuable insights into the relationship between memory and
emotion that were relevant to the present study. In the discussion of their findings, they remarked that “… remembering a past event in such a way that sensory details and emotional states are relived and re-experienced requires the activation and processing of more information than remembering the personal memories in a pale and detached way” (p. 1211).

**Cognitive development and the imagination**

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) developed a theory of cognition based on his belief that cognition, like digestion, is a biological system (Lerner, 2002). Central to Piaget’s theory of cognition (1950) was his understanding of cognitive development as “an evolution governed by an inherent need for equilibrium” (p. 49). The balance achieved by an organism and its environment was called “equilibration” which he defined as “a system of balancing interchanges, alterations which are being continually compensated by others” (p. 40). What was most significant to the task of describing how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was Piaget’s (1950) concept of disequilibration which he defined as “the state of tension or disturbance in which elements of a person’s world no longer seem to fit the “reality” which he has created” (p. 168). According to Fortosis & Garland (1990), disequilibration comes about when new information or data is perceived to be contradictory to a person’s “created reality,” that is the reality that the adolescent created “against which he or she will later test every incoming piece of information or data” (p. 633). It must be either assimilated, that is, changed to fit a person’s created reality, or accommodated, meaning the created reality is changed to fit that which contradicts it in some way.
experience of disequilibration and of accommodation is where the work of the imagination can be found, particularly with respect to faith development and religious conversion.

Piaget described assimilation and accommodation as two complementary, yet opposite, cognitive processes that remain in a dynamic balance as long as there is cognitive activity. By assimilation, Piaget meant the integration of perceptions of objects or concepts into pre-existing cognitive structures, or schemas. The cognitive structures remain unchanged; the perceptions are “changed” to fit the pre-existing mental structures. Assimilation is best noticed in the religious sphere of life when a person takes on a religious practice but does not make any conceptual adjustment to accommodate the new activity. The logical structure of the person’s perception of the world is so strong, new information is assimilated into it. For instance, the participant named Glynna revealed in her interview that when she was a child she believed that heaven was in the sky and God “was like big and in heaven and had really big shoes ’cause we could only undersee his feet” (lines 41-43). Information associated with the sky was assimilated to this belief. Thus thunder became the sound of God walking around in heaven.

Accommodation is also about change, however, it is the opposite of assimilation. Accommodation is the adaptation to schemas that occur when the perceptions or concepts “act” on the pre-existing cognitive structures to change them under the influence of elements external to those structures. Put another way, assimilation occurs when information that is received is changed to fit the person’s prior perception of reality; accommodation occurs when the
person’s perception of reality changes to “accommodate” newly discovered environmental factors. Piaget (1950) maintained that the human person, like every other biological system, operates to achieve an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation.

The case of the participant named Glynna can be used to illustrate the meaning of Piaget’s concept of equilibration. During her interview, Glynna described her childhood beliefs about God as creator of the universe. She explained: “Like when I was little I believed like God created the universe in seven days and he knew everything and all that type of stuff…” (lines 12-14). Through her studies at school, she became interested in science and set her sights on studying nanotechnology at university. The information she gathered contradicted her beliefs. She found herself in a state of disequilibration. To accommodate what she learned through studying science, Glynna changed her beliefs about God. She explained: “I sorta started to get more into like science. And I kind of realised that it was a bit like ignorant of me to just ignore that” (lines 15-16). She stated:

I believe that like God created the universe an’ stuff. But like I don’t really believe like the whole creation story an’ that ’cause I’m really like sciencey based type thing. So like evolution and God’s role have sorta like combined, like God guided evolution type thing (lines 6-10).

The only way for the new information to be accommodated was for her to change her religious beliefs. It made more sense to her to think in that way than to bring a new interpretation to bear on the information she gathered through her studies. At the time of the interview—she was in her final year of
secondary school—what she had chosen to believe about God and about creation restored the equilibrium.

The imagination does not work independently of the human mind. Rather, it is a power or function of the mind and it makes use of the mind’s cognitive structures. As a way of coming to an understanding of this, consider for a moment that while explaining the role of play in child development, Vygotsky (1978) made the point that the activity of the imagination is “a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action” (p. 93). In the context of the present study, something happens to the individual (disequilibration) that causes the imagination to propose an image of God that is more relevant and more satisfying in the changed circumstances of the individual’s life.

Disequilibration is not necessarily, or even commonly, a short-lived experience. It can last for years, particularly in some of the situations that were examined through the present study. For instance, the story told by the participant named Alexandra provided an insight into how she lived with the knowledge of the abusive behaviour of her step-brother towards her mother throughout her childhood. In her journal, she wrote about the third chapter of her imaginary autobiography. She titled the chapter “New Demons”:

… because that year my step-brother became violent and an alcoholic. After uncountable years of sleepless nights I lost my childhood spirit and view. My childhood was cut short and adult more mature problems then became mine. Since viewing my mother in trouble and scenes no child should see I’ve developed more faster mentally in the area of behaviour
and thinking “beyond the box” when friends, even family, ask for help and support (lines 25-31).

Alexandra’s first interview took place towards the end of her final year of secondary school. She was interviewed about 12 months later again. Her step-brother had passed away prior to her first interview. The experience had been traumatic. She did not refer to it directly in the interview but what she did say gave an insight into the impact of his death on her: “… death - um - had a big influence on me and that’s influenced me to go - get closer to get to God, to get closer to God” (lines 159-161). Alexandra lived with the trauma and her confusion about the place of God in her life until the experience of listening to a guest speaker at her school speak about making the most of the opportunities in life. She stated in her first interview that he helped her to realise “not to worry about the bad things, but focus on the good things in life” (lines 226-227). His message provided her with a way to resolve the faith issue she had: she was convinced that God had deserted her family.

The case of Alexandra as outlined above highlighted the difficulty of separating the two movements for the purpose of discussing the activity of the imagination in faith development and religious conversion. The conduct of the discussion is somewhat like walking a tightrope: it is a matter of balance and compensation. As stated at the outset of this part of the discussion, because the matter of the role of the imagination in religious conversion involves reflection on a dialectic, it is necessary to keep in mind both parts of the dialectic and to move backwards and forwards between them. Concerning this balancing act, two points need to be borne in mind. First, Kant (2007/1781)
stated that the work of the imagination is something “of which we are scarcely ever conscious” (p. 104). Thomas (1999) also described the functioning of the imagination as being “a rapid sequence of microperceptions and microreactions, almost simultaneous as far as consciousness is concerned” (p. 21). The point behind these references is this: the imagination is engaged in a balancing act. Second, religious conversion is rarely a sudden event, but something that tends to happen over a long time. Individuals become aware of changes in their perceptions and their own choices often only reflexively. For instance, it was shown above, that changes in faith and awareness of those changes come with maturity. These points need to be borne in mind during the following discussion of how the religious conversion of Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen came about and the role of the imagination in their efforts to “reach back” into their memories and emotions.

*Leaning forward: the imagination, understanding and will*

When a person becomes aware of new information that contradicts present knowledge and understanding, a state of disequilibration is created in that person’s mind. It was shown in the previous section of this discussion that the imagination “reaches back” into a person’s memories and the emotions associated with those memories to construct or create a reality that restores the balance. Piaget (1950) called this process equilibration. The role of the imagination in equilibration was characterised as “leaning forward,” that is, the act of composing, constructing or creating a new reality is future-focused: it follows the experience of disequilibration. Put in another way, understanding, which is the product of the work of the imagination, informs behaviour. These
ideas will be addressed in the next section of the discussion which will be laid out in two parts. In the first part, the relationship between the imagination and understanding will be considered. The discussion will draw on ideas taken from Thomas' (1999) theory of perceptual activity and Perlovsky's (2002, 2007) philosophy of mind. The second part of the discussion will focus on the relationship between the imagination and religious behaviour. It will make use of Harris' (1987) model of religious imagination to explain the relationship. In each part of the discussion, examples will be used to illustrate how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion.

The imagination and understanding

There is a relationship between the imagination and understanding which Kant (2007/1781) described in the following way: “To bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that belongs to the understanding, and it is through this function that the understanding first supplies us with knowledge so-called” (p. 104). The imagination, whose work is largely unconscious, serves understanding in the task of forming knowledge that people have of themselves and their worlds. Its activity is perceptual. Nigel Thomas (1999) proposed a theory of perceptual activity that was based on the understanding of perception as “a continual process of active interrogation of the environment” (p. 11). The environment to which he referred consists of what is remembered. According to the theory he proposed, the products of perception are used by the imagination “to see things as whatever they are or might be taken to be” (p. 15).
To illustrate his understanding of the work of the imagination, Thomas referred to the example of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler recounted by N. R. Hanson (1958) in his book *Patterns of Discovery*. Brahe saw the sun rise over the horizon, whereas Kepler saw the earth turning towards the sun. It was Kepler’s willingness to look at what he knew with fresh eyes that led to his discoveries in astronomy. The understanding of the imagination implied in Thomas' description of Kepler's creative insight was found also to be relevant to the accounts of faith development and religious conversion given by the participants in the present study, as will be explained below.

In an outline of his neural modeling field theory, Perlovsky (2002) stated that the purpose of imagining was to satisfy the instinct for knowledge and understanding, a satisfaction that was experienced emotionally. Perlovsky contended that humans and higher animals have a knowledge instinct which is responsible for cognition. He (2007) defined the knowledge instinct as “an inborn mechanism in our minds, an instinctual drive for cognition, which compels us to constantly improve our knowledge of the world” (p. 27). There appears to be no real difference between Perlovsky’s idea of the knowledge instinct and Fortosis & Garland’s (1990) understanding of disequilibration as being “life-based — that is, the accumulation of better and better modes of representing reality is accomplished to help persons survive and get along in their environment” (p. 639). The ideas that have been drawn out of the work of Thomas and Perlovsky will be used to guide the following discussion about how two participants in the present study used their imaginations to construct or create their understanding of how to relate with God.
In his interview, Cameron constructed an image of his faith development from memories of his beliefs and religious behaviour as a child and also at the time of his interview. Cameron described belief in God as “sort of an idea that’s there that he’s there an’ he can comfort us an’ if we do need help that’s there’s always someone there listening” (lines 8-11). God was “a support structure for me – um – that’s someone who can sort of listen an’ just be there, so, maybe a comforting – comforting spirit” (lines 20-22). But his faith was not always that sure or comforting. Cameron constructed an image of himself changing from not understanding much about God to being able to create his own image of God. In the passage below, he was responding to a question about the differences between God and Jesus:

Um – maybe when I was very young, around five an’ six, an’ just starting to learn all these sort of things. It was just an easier concept to see them all as one person, but as you grow up, you mature an’ you sort of – logic takes hold an’ it’s – you can’t just have questions that are unanswered an’ that you just believe and you have to ask those sort of questions an’ work it out for yourself (lines 51-57).

When he was a child, he believed that Jesus was God. It was easier to think of Jesus and God as the same because he was not capable of thinking “the unthinkable,” that is, that perhaps Jesus was not God in the way that God is God. Such possibilities were part of the formal operational thinking of the adolescent, and as an adolescent, Cameron’s understanding of God changed. The focus came on the humanity of Jesus and his faith; the divine power was returned to God:
Jesus was a man an’ he – he lived an’ he died an’ he did all these other things that I might not be able to do, but it was through his intense faith in God an’ being the son of God that did that… (lines 65-68).

Working things out for himself was a theme that ran through Cameron’s interview. It surfaced in his statements about his beliefs and about his upbringing. According to Cameron, his parents encouraged him to be an independent thinker. The shift in his beliefs about Jesus reflected this theme. Looking at his life from that perspective, he remembered that when he was a child his parents forced him to go to Church. In his interview, he referred to his parents “dragging” him to Church (line 159). But he also remembered that they helped him to understand and appreciate the place of religion in his life by:

… taking me to Church an’ talking to me afterwards about it an’ if I understood it all an’ commenting an’ listening to my comments an’ making sure I understood it all when I was little helped me to have that sense that – um – it’s – it’s part of your life and you should have it as part of your life because it can help you. I think the whole idea that religion’s out to help you … (lines 171-177).

Thomas (1999) quoted Hamlyn (1994) to clarify the work of the imagination which involved “perspectives, new ways of seeing things, in a sense of “seeing” that need not be literal” (p. 27). This understanding of the imagination was reflected in Cameron’s story: as his ability to think developed, and he sought to understand what was going on in his life, his understanding of God changed. He said as much himself when he spoke about what prayer
meant to him: prayer was his time to think – “just tryin’ to work out what’s going on in my head” (lines 89-90) – while God remained in the background, a silent, comforting presence.

Cameron’s lack of understanding about theological concepts that were part of the faith he received from his parents was a form of disequilibration. His story was constructed to show this. It would appear that he lived with it for a few years until he realised that he could make up his own mind about what he believed about God. This seemed to coincide with being given the freedom to choose whether to go to Mass or stay home.

With the development of his cognitive abilities and the freedom his parents gave him to choose how he practised his faith in God, Cameron was able to assimilate the beliefs that he had been given, meaning he changed what he had been taught to make it fit with the reality that his imagination created. He concluded his comment about the difference between God and Jesus with a comment that described how he perceived the relationship between imagination and understanding: “So I think with more knowledge you can build a better an’ more – more like strong image of what is really going on an’ what you see” (lines 68-71). His statement is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s (2004/1849) statement that the depth of understanding a person has depends on the imagination. Cameron’s ability to imagine God, that is, his “strong image,” produced what he can “see,” — used in the way Thomas (1999) used the word “see”—that is, what he understands.
Applying Maria Harris’ model of religious imagination to faith development

The imagination is credited with producing a world of the not-yet future. For instance, the latest mobile phone product is a wrist watch video phone. It was first described in 1932 as a tool to be used in the fight against crime by the comic book hero Dick Tracy. Often the flights of fancy attributed to the imagination represent the first steps in the search for knowledge that will transform the world for future inhabitants. The concerns of the present study, are those images produced by the imagination that are religious in content as well as intent. Such images can be part of what is often referred to as the sacred. Early in the present chapter, this form of the imagination was defined as having a transcendental, or ‘other worldly’ dimension. Like Dick Tracy’s wrist watch video phone, religious imagination produces a world of the not-yet future for people to choose to make their reality.

In her desire to understand the ‘other-worldly’ or sacred character of religious imagination, Harris (1987), whose intention to give the imagination a religious meaning and to describe its functions using religious language, described the imagination as a person-centred power that could transform creation. According to Harris, religious imagination worked in contemplative, ascetic, creative and sacramental ways. The following discussion of religious imagination drew on her model and the four ways of imagining faith were applied first to the development of faith and then to religious conversion.
Contemplative imagination and faith development

Like other forms of productive imagination, contemplative imagination creates new realities, however, what is different about contemplative imagination, is its focus. Harris (1987) stated that the imagination functions in a “contemplative” manner by drawing on “the active intensity of contemplative life, which calls for a totally engaged bodily presence: attending, listening, being-with, and existing fully in the presence of Being” (p. 21). Contemplative imagination is characterised by the awareness of the “adequacy, fit or truthfulness in representation” of the created reality of a new, or renewed, relationship with God (Fowler, 1981, p. 30).

Experiences of this form of the imagination are confirmed by what Perlovsky (2001) called “instinctual satisfaction,” that is, the satisfaction that comes from recognising the truth of what has been experienced. Religious imagination has a contemplative quality that is recognised in the tendency to reflect on or ponder a situation until the presence of the divine is confirmed and celebrated in action. The recognition of the presence of God is an act of the imagination reflecting on the manifold of experience. Faith changes and develops as people reflect on their experiences of God being present in their world.

The participant named Luke reflected on the impact of listening to a guest speaker at a youth camp on his faith. In his journal, he wrote:

There were about 150 kids all in this room from ages 12-18 and we were listening to a talk that a guy was giving and he had been in a crash (car). His story just hit me and made me think. From the things he was telling us
that were happening, they couldn’t have happened without God (lines 40-44).

What was being said was distinctive enough to hold his attention (“His story just hit me….”) and caused him to reflect on the message that the speaker delivered. Luke interpreted his story as being about the intervention of God in a person’s life. Neville’s (1981) explanation of Kant’s description of the synthetic function of the imagination was helpful in coming to understand how the imagination assisted the type of reflection that Luke experienced on the camp and subsequent to it: “(Kant) supposed that knowledge grows from two roots—the influence of outside objects and the spontaneous activity of the mind developing these influences in the form of knowledge” (p. 149).

The “spontaneous activity of the mind” to which Neville referred does not mean the effect was instantaneous. While Luke might have recognised the truth of the speaker’s message when it was delivered, in other circumstances, recognition might have taken much longer and as a result of periods of reflection or contemplation. When the participant named Frank found himself in a situation which challenged his understanding of how to relate with God — a religious education class debate on the death penalty — he reported that the change in his thinking happened slowly. He stated in his journal:

The change was gradual and could probably be partly attributed to my own maturing. My RE teacher is the one who helped me come to my more practical understanding of faith in God…. I believe I am a more placid and open person now and have a stronger connection with God. It was hard to
be close to God when you would be willing to kill another man (lines 85-89).

Frank’s experience of inner conflict confirmed the existence of the action-reflection dialectic referred to earlier in the present chapter as part of the work of the imagination. Frank came to a “more practical understanding of faith in God” through reflecting on what he believed about God and the part that God played in his life. The adequacy of his new knowledge of God—the instinctual satisfaction identified by Perlovsky (2002)—was acknowledged through his reference to changes in his beliefs about himself: “I believe I am a more placid and open person now and have a stronger connection with God.” At the time when Frank wrote his journal the changes in his faith were not radical; they were rather an intensification of qualities that he saw in himself. Prior to the debate and the subsequent reflection, he had a strong connection with God. The experience and his reflection on it confirmed and strengthened his faith. With religious conversion, the contemplative work of the imagination produced radically different outcomes.

Ascetic imagination and faith development

Harris (1987) described ascetic imagination as the synthesis of all that a person experiences that is related to religious discipline and discipleship. The word “ascetic” comes from the Greek word askesis which means “exercise.” It was used traditionally in Christian spirituality to refer to the exercise of the regulation of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. McBrien (1980) identified three aspects of Christian asceticism: self-acceptance, commitment to service of the needy, and freedom to love and to
be creative. The terms “religious discipline” and “discipleship” which were used by Harris (1987) to describe the context of ascetic imagination were taken to refer to the practice of observing the laws and customs of Christianity as a follower of Jesus Christ.

From its inception, the Christian religion was characterised as being “other-centred,” that is, its focus was on reflecting the love of God, which was made visible in the person of Jesus, in acts of service to the needy. The “ascetic” character of this focus was captured in sayings, like “This is my commandment: Love each other as I have loved you. The greatest love a person can show is to die for his friends” (John 15:12-13 New Century Version), as well as in images like the actions of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and pre-eminently in the suffering and death of Jesus.

In chapter 3, it was stated that the participants were not asked to comment on their use of imagination. Rather, it was intended that the questions put to the participants would assist them to identify what was meaningful for them in their experiences of lived religious faith. One set of questions was directed towards determining whether or not their faith helped them to identify the purpose and meaning of their life. In keeping with the understanding of Christian asceticism outlined above, it was concluded that the signs of McBrien’s structure of the ascetical life would arguably be signs of ascetic imagination at work.

The analysis of the data showed that for most of the participants, there were no significant signs of ascetic imagination. For instance, when Glynna was asked if her faith had helped her gain a sense of purpose and direction,
she responded by stating that although it helped her make decisions, ultimately her choices were based on what she wanted. She stated: “I’m more selfish” (line 232). The vision she had of herself was evident also in her comment that her religion had taught her “that family and friends are really important” (lines 240-241). She could not conceive of herself being so ambitious that she would put her future before her family and friends. Glynna was not able to say that her life had meaning and purpose. She stated: “Like I want to do well but I don’t know why I want to do well” (lines 254-255).

Morgan responded to the same question with a statement about experiencing pressure to hide her beliefs when she was with some of her friends. “Sometimes you hide that sort of belief when you’re in front of your friends, or something, because maybe they’re not Catholic. Maybe they don’t believe in that and you think, “Oh, I’ll get teased now.” Or like you’d rather just not say something, y’know” (lines 119-123). When Morgan was asked about her prayer life, she stated: “If everything’s all right in my life, I’ll probably pray for people who don’t have what I have. Like, y’know, poor people who don’t have anything” (lines 100-102). With Morgan, the focus was on her own needs and her fears with little consideration of others outside her own circle of family and friends.

Creative imagination and faith development

The third form of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) in her model of religious imagination is creative imagination. Drawn from Wheelwright’s (1982/1968) “compositive imagination” which she defined as “the blending of disparate elements” (p. 18), Harris related creative
imagination to the role of being a co-creator with God. Thus creative imagination shows itself in people’s efforts to use “their potential in the service of one another and of the world” (p. 22) in ways that seem new. Wheelwright’s model needs to be used to make clearer what this means. According to Harris, Wheelwright described two principles which combine to form compositive imagination. The first, which he labelled “radical interpenetration,” is the belief that everything is interconnected. The second principle, which he identified as “radical novelty,” refers to the freshness of new ideas that seemingly appear out of thin air. Hart (2003) provided a shape to these principles in action: he referred to people responding to the world in appropriate and responsible ways (p. 8).

When creative imagination is considered as the meeting of these two principles, then it should be possible to find creative imagination at work wherever new ideas emerge about the relationship between the divine and the human that give expression to the possibilities that flow from such a relationship. For example, in the present study, the participant named Alexandra had resolved an impasse between her beliefs about God and the experience of trauma in her life by deciding that her family’s relationship with God had changed. She wrote in her journal: “I believed God had abandoned my family. I thought that God wouldn’t have all these events in less than three months to my family” (lines 50-51). Her conclusion was not satisfying. Her journal traced her search for more satisfying understanding of God’s participation in her life. As stated in chapter 4 above, Alexandra found inspiration in the message of a guest speaker. In her journal, she wrote:
The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 61-63).

This was only part of the solution to her impasse. She came to realise that God worked indirectly through people to help those in need. In her first interview, she revealed: “I think that - um - God can act as another human being trying to help stop the suffering” (lines 122-123). Alexandra cast herself in that role and explained in her journal that she regarded her life as an opportunity to “help others to become strong when faced with difficult problems” (line 66). Everything was connected and in this interconnectedness lay the resolution to the dissatisfaction she experienced in her relationship with God. Creative imagination provided her with a way forward in her life and in her faith.

Sacramental imagination and faith development

Through her descriptions of the significant relationships in her life, the participant named Sophie communicated what she believed to be true about her relationship with God. At the outset of her interview, she explained that her beliefs were constructed:

… as I grow up, or grew up, um — I pulled bits from my background — my fam– 'cause my family being Italian — um — the Catholic sort of f– um — faith and belief: from that — um — an' I just constructed — Also my surroundings, like my school, I just constructed different pieces of what I form in my religion my faith (lines 14-19).
One of the aspects of the imagination observed in her construction of her faith was what Harris (1987) called “sacramental imagination.” To understand what Harris meant by “sacramental imagination” it is necessary to go to the sources of her idea, one of which was Wheelwright’s (1982/1968) fourth way of imagination, the “archetypal imagination.” Tarnas (2009) defined archetype as “a universal principle or force that affects—impels, structures, permeates—the human psyche and the world of human experience on many levels” (p. 27). Harris interpreted Wheelwright’s understanding of archetypal imagination as follows: it is that way of imagining which “reveals in an almost effortless way the universe or universal embedded within it” (p. 19). The work of revealing is “almost effortless” because truth resides in the image. Harris, wanted to develop a theology of teaching, so she described this way of imagining being oriented towards the numinous, or as Tarnas (2009) described it, an orientation of the imagination that is “in one sense timeless and above the changing flux of phenomena, as in the Platonic understanding, yet in another sense deeply malleable, evolving, and open to the widest diversity of creative human enaction” (p. 28).

In the context of religious imagination, archetypal images can be sacramental, that is, they become a vehicle for divine-human communication. As a Catholic Christian, Harris drew on her experiences of the sacraments and the “sacramental” in life to draw attention to the experience of mystery in life. The word “sacrament,” from the Latin sacramentum, meaning “solemn oath,” that is, conviction about the truth of the experience of the presence of the divine in daily events, was used to translate the Greek word mysterion that has come into English as the word “mystery.” The seven sacraments of
Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Holy Order, Marriage and Anointing of the Sick which were part of Harris’ faith and her life as a Catholic and her experiences of the sacramental in life were moments of participation in the divine, or the inherent numinous dimension of life and of truth. Harris summarized her understanding of this way of religious imagination with “nothing here on earth is profane” (p. 22).

Sacraments are signs that point to the presence and power of the Divine in life. It is the role of sacramental imagination to construct those signs from the data of experience. A few examples, taken from the transcript of the interview conducted with Sophie, will show how this way of religious imagination assists faith development. The truth for Sophie was the existence of God who was present and who guided her through life. She stated that faith ruled out the need to debate the existence of God. Instead, relationships confirmed her faith. They were the signs of God’s presence in the world.

The most important relationship was the one she had with her mother. Sophie described her as “like my best friend an’ I – I can tell her everything” (lines 358-359). From her mother’s story, Sophie learned the truth about God’s faithfulness, that is, she constructed her beliefs about God on what her mother told her about God and what she accepted as the truth about God in relation to her mother’s experience of God: “how he’s helped her through hard times as well and she’s always stayed faithful to God as well, so she’s sort of an inspiration to do the same” (lines 364-366). Her relationship with her mother became a sign of her relationship with God. In her interview, she stated: “… not that my Mum is my God, but like she – the way I talk to God is
also the way I talk to Mum” (lines 361-362).

Sophie also described the impact of her relationship with her Aunty Sue on her faith. In her interview, she reflected on a photo of her aunt that she kept in her room:

… it’s really beautiful ’cause she’s just sitting in a field an’ – um – I jus’ – I jus’ love that photo. I’ve got it in my room. An’ – um – I jus’ picture her as this – this beautiful, wonderful person that would always look after me an’ that’s sort of my gift – like having her in spirit with me (lines 150-154).

Sophie believed that her aunt, who died before Sophie was born, was her guardian angel. Based on what her mother told her, Sophie chose to think of her aunt as someone who looked after her. She described her as a model, “as like a very great person,” (line 145) and gave her aunt a role similar to that which she attributed to the Holy Spirit: “… the Holy Spirit is sort of – I would describe it as the feeling you get with faith an’ – um – the – sort of the – guidance, the – um – the encouragement” (lines 70-72).

Sacramental imagination constructs signs of the presence and power of God that a person uses to define their faith. In the case of Sophie discussed above, her relationships with her mother and her aunt provided her with an image of a supportive God who was faithful to her. Sophie’s image of faith in God was constructed from stories about struggling to overcome adversity. Her father taught her to respect people: “He’s very much about respect” (line 350). She acknowledged the importance of respect in the face of conflict about religious belief. As stated above, her mother’s “hard times” (line 365) and her grandparents’ “struggles through life” (line 375) taught her
“to stay strong” (line 388), meaning to be faithful to God. Her own struggle with a delicate conscience — “I have the – like the worst conscience I feel guilty if I don’t help Mum with the dishes …” (lines 161-162) — that caused her stress, was portrayed as an aspect of her faith in God.

Harris (1987) described the work of sacramental imagination as picking up a thread of reality and following it to the heart of the universe (p. 75). As she told her story, Sophie twisted together the strands of her life to form a thread that led her to a faithful God who supported and guided her family. In her story, family was the archetype on which her existence and meaning was founded. The bonds of family were stronger than the adversity her family endured, stronger than death. Sophie spoke about death as adversity, including the death of her Aunty Sue, however, death was never cast in the role of the victor. With God’s help, the human spirit triumphed. This was the context of her story which showed the work of sacramental imagination.

While Harris’ (1987) model of religious imagination proved to be a useful means for describing how the imagination assists faith development, it must be stated that it is just a construct. The four ways of religious imagination described by her provided four different views of the one reality, namely, the participant’s perceived relationship with God. They served to amplify the presence of the transcendent in the accounts of their lives that the participants provided.
Concluding remarks

To facilitate the discussion about the role of the imagination in faith development, a model was generated from Kierkegaard’s (2004/1849) insight into the interplay of the imagination with feelings, understanding and will. Various theories related to cognition, particularly Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, provided concepts and language to assist the discussion. Finally, to clarify aspects of the relationship between faith and the imagination, Harris’ model of religious imagination was used to show how the imagination helped people express their faith in God. In the next part of the discussion, the focus will be on the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

Evidence of the imagination in religious conversion

Many people experience moments of grace that affect them profoundly, that is, they testify to being moved by God’s Spirit to choose to commit themselves to God in ways that are radically different to their past behaviour. Their changed religious practices accompany changes in their religious beliefs and attitudes towards themselves, others, the world and God. In the following part of the discussion about the role of the imagination in faith development, the focus will be on the part that the imagination plays in religious conversion. In the previous chapter of the present study, four participants were identified as likely to have experienced conversion: Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. Their stories will be examined again to determine how their imaginations assisted the radical changes in their relationship with God.
**Mikaela’s conversion**

During her interviews and in the journal that she kept, Mikaela recalled how her relationship with God changed over the time she was in secondary school. She remembered events and recalled some of the emotions she experienced because of what happened to her. In her journal, Mikaela presented a view of her childhood that contrasted with her life at the time she wrote the journal. She was in her final year of secondary school.

The first journal-writing exercise invited the participants to imagine that they had written their autobiographies. The activity made use of their biographical memories. It required them to name their biography and then to name and outline each chapter. Mikaela chose to call her biography “Elevator” because “we all have ups and downs. In my life I have had ups and downs and sometimes felt like I wasn’t moving at all” (lines 10-11). In itself, this appeared to be an innocuous image, however, the title of her second chapter revealed the intensity of the emotions she experienced as a child. She named the chapter “Plunge” which described the impact of her parents’ divorce on her emotions: “It was like being on a bungee jump that didn’t rebound. Travelling down without (stopping) slowly. This was when my parents broke up. I didn’t care (about) life or anything it stood for” (lines 18-20).

Mikaela made use of this image to express the intensity of her feelings of powerlessness. In response to the experiences surrounding her parents’ divorce, her imagination “reached back” into her memories of her anger towards her parents, her lack of trust and her self-pity and composed an
image of her being isolated from them, and also from her friends, from Church and God. To accommodate her feelings of betrayal and insecurity, she chose to believe that God either no longer existed or did not care; she wrote in her journal: “… 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 69-70). She blamed God for how she felt about herself and others, including her parents.

Fowler (1981) stated that the imagination composed in the direction of what fitted best with what was perceived. Even images of hate provide the sort of instinctual satisfaction that Perlovsky (2001) identified as part of the acquisition of knowledge. Fromm (1965) analysed the use of the Hebrew word yetser which means “imaginings” and which is used to refer to good and evil. Thus the imagination is responsible for both good and evil. The negativity that Mikaela recalled as being part of her childhood and early adolescence was constructed by her imagination from the data of her experiences. Fortunately, by the time she was in Year 11, it had lost its dominance. The human mind responds continually to the information it receives through the senses. Fortosis & Garland (1990) stated that “one’s view of reality is not passively registered but is actively constructed by continually relating new information to existing knowledge” (p. 639).

Mikaela’s conversion occurred when she was in Year 11. In her journal, she recalled it as a powerful emotional experience: “I remember feeling worthy and a sudden burst of energy and happiness when the idea or
epiphany came to me” (lines 84-85). Upon the advice of her best friend Joan, she took her feelings as a sign that God approved:

I then told Joan and she said it was a sign that God was making contact with me because I made contact or finally read the signs he was sending me through my whole life. God does exist and I know it almost hands on (lines 85-88)!!

Her elation was obvious and contrasted markedly with her description of her childhood as a “huge puzzle.” In her journal, she wrote:

I was a good child throughout my life but I never seemed to know much about life picking up on small pieces of a huge puzzle that I would probably never figure out. Slowly but surely by the work of a lot of older people I began to tell me things even when I didn’t want to believe it (lines 13-17).

The action of “picking up on small pieces of a huge puzzle” is the work of the imagination as Kant (2007/1781) understood it: “… the act of putting different representations together, and of comprehending their manifoldness in one item of knowledge” (p. 103). Mikaela highlighted the confusion that she experienced in her childhood and her lack of confidence in coming to understand life. The description of the reality of her childhood and her poor relationship with God — “I didn’t get along with him very well.” (first interview, line 37) — contrasted with the description of her present relationship with God: “What has he given me? What am I gonna give him?” (first interview, lines 12-13).

The moment Mikaela decided to become a Catholic was like being transported to a new world. Everything she remembered was interpreted by
her imagination through the template of this experience as she sought to construct a meaningful account of her life. A similar cognitive pattern was noticed with the other participants who experienced religious conversion. For example, Kevin viewed his life from the security of his position in the charismatic covenant community of the Disciples of Jesus. Elizabeth found her security in her participation in the life of the Lutheran Church through her membership in her parish youth group. Stephen was comfortable with seeking answers from what he referred to as a Buddhist perspective. In general, it was noticed that the imagination constructed a new world from memories that could be synthesised into a more satisfying understanding of God than what was experienced in the past to guide the journey into the future.

The act of re-imaging the world provides a way of dealing with disequilibration that has the possibility of being instinctually satisfying. The images are like mental maps that guide the search for information that is used to create new realities in the mind. As Fortosis & Garland (1990) noted, the search for information is natural; the motivation for learning is intrinsic. It was found in the present study that the act of seeking information about God had a self-reflection component that assisted the work of the imagination in religious conversion. Harris’ model of the four ways of religious imagination provided a way of analysing the shift in Mikaela’s view of the world that she constructed with the aid of her imagination.

What was said about contemplative imagination and faith development in the previous section of the discussion was true also of religious conversion, but in a radical way as befits the nature of conversion. Recall that Frank’s
experience of the class debate about capital punishment demonstrated in a small but significant way the power of disequilibration in bringing about change in his faith without producing any radical changes in religious behaviour, such as taking up the cause of the anti-death penalty lobby through joining Amnesty International. The experiences of disequilibration reported by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen demanded real and definitive changes in their relationships with God which were created with the assistance of contemplative imagination. The analysis of their stories revealed five factors that affected the work of their imaginations: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups of friends.

Concerning the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection, Mikaela reported in her first interview that: “I reflect a lot. When I’ve done something wrong I sit there for ages thinking: “Yep! Why did I do that? Yep, that’s pretty stupid. Maybe next time I’ll think a little bit quicker” (lines 214-216). Mikaela recalled associating wrongdoing with the image of God as a “parent.” Potvin (1977) concluded from his research of adolescent God images that adolescents tend to see God as punishing if they perceive their parents to be exercising undue control over their lives. One of the signs of her conversion was the replacement of the negative image of a punishing God with the image of a forgiving God: “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” (First interview, lines 26-27). Away from her parents, and in her reflective moments, her imagination was able to draw on memories of other influences in her life, like
that of her friend Joan, to find the best way of representing reality, in this case, her relationship with God.

Towards the end of her second interview, which took place in the year following her graduation from secondary school, Mikaela again raised the issue of self-reflection. She said:

Okay, today I was going to show you where my favourite place was to sit and think, but, y’know, it’s a long track. It takes me an hour to get there and about two hours to get back for no particular reason. Um – I just sit there and think. It’s the most quiet place you could ever find. And um – I don’t know – it’s just very – something just draws me there every time (lines 150-155).

She went on to speak about her motivation for seeking a “quiet place” to be alone and to reflect. She said: “I like being by myself” (line 157). Her reflection, which commenced in her childhood, led her to realise the truth about her faith and to recognise how she could change her life. In her journal, she wrote: “My faith was based on what others wanted for me, but slowly I have begun to realise that it is my choice and my choice alone” (lines 163-164). Just as Frank observed that changes in his understanding of how to relate with God came slowly, the same was found in relation to the experiences reported by Mikaela. Recall that in chapter 2, it was stated that religious conversion is a gradual process (FC, para. 9), a “continuing” process (GDC, para. 56).

The second way of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) is ascetic imagination. In the discussion of how the ascetic imagination assists
faith development, it was defined as “the synthesis of all that a person experiences that is related to religious discipline and discipleship”. The most compelling examples of ascetic imagination were found in the transcripts of the interviews and journals of the four participants whose accounts exhibited signs of religious conversion. With the experience of conversion, equilibration is restored; the new created reality of a person’s life has come as a result of accommodation of new ideas. Fortosis & Garland (1990) reported that once equilibration has been achieved, it is not easy to disturb it again. Thus it would be expected that in the case of conversion in a Christian sense there will be signs of self-acceptance, commitment to service of the needy, and freedom to love and to be creative because these are recognised as aspects of Christian asceticism.

It was stated above that Mikaela moved from being dismissive of God to accepting God as the focus of her life. The change in her understanding and attitude towards God was captured by her in the following passage from her journal:

If I just follow him, I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I even 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 151-153).

Mikaela had come to realise that her relationship with God was her choice. She had moved from having low self-esteem to accepting that God loved her and was ready to forgive her whenever she did anything wrong. Having chosen to be committed to developing her relationship with God, Mikaela
resisted the efforts of her friends to draw her away from the practice of her faith.

Ascetic imagination synthesises elements of a person’s experience that relate to concern for others and it prepares people to do acts of kindness towards others. It was the Samaritan’s ascetic imagination that created for him the possibility that he could help the Jewish man who had been robbed and beaten (cf. Luke 10:30-35). It was Mikaela’s ascetic imagination at work when she realised that it was possible to forgive the people who had burgled her home on the day before she was interviewed the first time for the present study:

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 118-124).

The concern for others that she expressed in this account was evident, too, in her comments about prayer. She said in her first interview:

… for the last couple of months, I’ve been praying about, for everyone else and not for myself as such. And I remember hearing ages and ages ago somebody says ‘If you pray for somebody else, God will give you something in return.’ So I – every night I’d say, ‘Please bless people, please, the people I love and the people that don’t like me, that I don’t get
along with.’ It’s just – I dunno – even though I would – I’d never want to wish anything bad on anybody any more anyway (lines 171-179). Even though there is the suggestion of self-interest in the statement quoted above, her admission that she did not want to think ill of anyone showed that her focus had become the good of others and not just her own situation.

In her search for understanding, Mikaela had come to recognise that it was possible to want only good for others, including those who tried to lead her away from the path she had chosen to follow. In her second interview, she was asked about how her relationship with God had been influenced by her family and friends since leaving school. Concerning her friends, she said: “With my friends, I really have no idea what to do. I think they push me a lot closer than they obviously think they have” (lines 85-87). It was reported in the previous chapter that she considered God to be a better father than her natural father and her communication with God was better than her communication with her natural father. Her situation with her friends had become similar. In both situations, Mikaela experienced conflicting values. She assimilated what she experienced with her friends and, as she admitted in the second interview, her faith in God was being strengthened through their efforts to draw her away from God.

What was sacramental about Mikaela’s use of her imagination? Put simply, a sacrament is a ritual signifying and effecting the presence of the promise and power of God. Mikaela’s sacramental imagination synthesised her memories of times when she recognised and accepted that God was working in and through her to achieve good. The most obvious example was
her belief that she was a forgiving person. Her ability to forgive others was
modelled on God’s willingness to forgive her. Reference has already been
made to the power of her realisation that God wanted her to become a
Catholic; the experience was sacramental.

Mikaela’s imagination worked within the mental and social structures of
her childhood until the parental relationships that supported her world
collapsed (her parents’ divorce). This was a traumatic experience for her. As
she re-lived those years during the interviews and as she wrote her journal,
she constructed images of herself as someone who moved from blaming God
for her unhappiness to accepting Jesus as her saviour, the image that was
dominant in her life at the time of her involvement in the present study.

The construction of a new world, one in which God loved and forgave
her — and she tried to live her life as a faithful response to God’s love — was
a work of imagination. She created her new world over about four years. It
culminated in her “epiphany” when she realised that God wanted her to
become a Catholic. From a cognitive perspective, her imagination worked with
her memories and emotions to compose a reality that she understood and
which she found instinctually satisfying. It was clear from the account that she
gave of her life that her imagination worked within the boundaries of her
cognitive abilities in a state of tension (disequilibration) that led her to God.
That she wasn’t led away from God was a mystery that she continued to
ponder.
Kevin’s conversion

The story told by Kevin was about his search for a relationship with God. The questions put to him in his interview directed him to recall his childhood and how he imaged God. His memories of his childhood were linked to negative emotions. Kevin spoke about times when he felt “really down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally” (lines 114-115). He described the source of his negative emotions and the impact they had on his self-esteem:

“… in primary school I was sorta the outcast sort of thing. Then when I got to high school I was ss-s-so emotionally broken down that (pause) I didn’t really care about myself personally” (lines 140-143). He perceived his life to be worthless—until he found God.

Like Alexandra, Mikaela and Kevin had experiences that disequilibrated them, that is, they had to change their beliefs about God in order to accommodate what the experiences “taught” them about themselves, others and God. Their imaginations created their new worlds from events that challenged the accommodation they had made previously in order to make sense out of their lives. Thus Mikaela had come to accept that if God existed then God was responsible for her low self esteem. She was thrown off balance again by the experience of being with her best friend Joan whom she described in her journal as her “spirituality mentor.”

According to Kevin, his discovery that God cared for him happened as a consequence of growing up. In his interview, he recalled the impact on him of the youth group that he attended regularly. He stated: “… in Year 10 I started paying attention an’ yeah, the stuff that they were saying was pretty
interesting so I kept coming back” (lines 25-27). What he was being told made some sense to him. He was able to see how it applied to his life. As a consequence, he constructed an image of himself as a positive person who accepted suffering because it made him a stronger person and prepared him for what God would ask of him in the future.

Just as Mikaela found herself trying to forge her identity out of experiences of rejection and acceptance, so, too, did Kevin. The rejection by his peers at school and his lack of self-control—he spoke about praying “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)—were countered by the feelings of self-worth generated through his involvement in the youth group. For instance, he spoke about the power of the share group to which he belonged: “… we talk about our problems an’ stuff, so – and they really hold you accountable for your faith. And so you’d get stronger ‘cause of that” (lines 174-176).

The image that Kevin constructed of himself from his memories was of a person who had chosen to live his faith despite the rejection he experienced at school. He recalled that his values differed from those of his peers. He gave his story an apostolic flavour which was in keeping with his religious experiences: at the time of his interview, he had joined the Disciples of Jesus covenant community and was a leader in their youth group. He had constructed for himself an identity of a servant of God: “He’s like the – like all-powerful, like the – like master sort of thing. So like I’m his servant …” (lines 5-6). He imaged himself as a role model for his peers and demonstrated to
them how to behave in the school chapel. Kevin volunteered to sing in the chapel choir and he helped to distribute Holy Communion at Mass.

From the security of his position in the present, Kevin was able to explore his memories of his past and describe the antagonist in the drama that was his life. The experience of rejection by his peers at school disequilibrated him. He spent some years in that wilderness and admitted in his interview that during those years he “was st- – starting to doubt because – doubt that I was any good in myself so I was – yeah, looking for other ways” (lines 20-21). His experiences of rejection caused him to seek acceptance elsewhere and he found it in the youth group he attended each week. However, Kevin admitted that it took him a few years to understand what that acceptance meant. When he was in Year 10, he realised that through the sense of belonging he experienced in the youth group, he found God. The religious experiences that he associated with his involvement in the group were similar to those experienced by Mikaela: they were linked to the reliance on friends who also served as mentors. Both participants recognised the significance of the impact of their friendships on their self-esteem and on their new-found relationships with God. Kevin explained:

I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, 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 36-40).

Like Mikaela, Kevin’s emotions played a significant part in the construction of a way through his experiences of rejection and isolation from God to feeling accepted by others and experiencing conversion to God.
In the discussion about how the imagination assisted in Mikaela’s conversion, it was stated that there were five factors associated with contemplative imagination that affected the work of the imagination. Those factors were: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the environment of supportive groups. All five factors featured in the work of Kevin’s imagination as it constructed the possibility of his relationship with God. The same five aspects of his religious behaviour helped him to maintain the image of his faithfulness to God.

Viewed from the present, that is, at the time of the interview, Kevin’s positive image of himself as a faithful person was partly dependent on the support of his youth group and, in particular, those in the group who mentored him. These aspects of his life were the focus of his reflection and formed part of the image of his relationship with God that was formed by his contemplative imagination. But there was more to consider. Like Mikaela, Kevin acknowledged the importance of reflection in his journey of faith. When asked about the place of prayer in his life, he explained his daily prayer regime:

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).
This was the structure of his prayer, often in the morning before going to school. Typically, he would spend about an hour alone in prayer. His commitment was to doing God's will. He was convinced that God spoke to him through the Bible. When he was asked to explain what he meant by his prayer journal, he responded:

... 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 an’ so – and so I’m open to that. Sometimes I don’t write anything because I haven’t – he doesn’t do it all the time but just I write – sometimes I just get this feeling that I have to write this word (lines 82-87).

The statement revealed a shift in Kevin's way of thinking from being focused on acceptance by his peers to being committed to God. Regular private prayerful reflection which involved the reading of the Bible enabled him to maintain this image. His behaviour was a reflection of the image of a faithful servant of God that his imagination composed from elements gathered principally from the time he spent at youth group meetings and other activities and events conducted by the community to which his parents belonged and which he joined during his final year at school. These positive aspects of his life were used by his imagination to create his way of viewing life that guided his behaviour, particularly in his final year at school.

Kevin's new world could be summed up in his words: “God is — he's 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 …” (lines 5-7). His image of God and the relationship he had with God was created by his contemplative
imagination through those aspects of his religious behaviour that were contemplative in substance or orientation, as illustrated above. Within the confines of his new understanding of life, his ascetic imagination was able to work with other elements of his religious behaviour to further strengthen his relationship with God.

As shown above in the general discussion of the work of the ascetic imagination, and also in the discussion of Mikaela’s conversion, there were three aspects of ascetic imagination that were found to be present in the account Kevin provided of his relationship with God. Those aspects were: self-acceptance, concern for the welfare of others, and the freedom to love and to be creative. The first was dealt with in the discussion about the use of memory and emotion by the imagination to create Kevin’s image of his relationship with God. The movement from having a poor self-image to recognising that God loved him and others cared for him contributed to the creation of his new world and signalled his experience of conversion.

The second aspect of Christian asceticism was evident in his concern for the salvation of his peers at school. In his interview, Kevin reflected on his mission to evangelise his fellow students. He described his mission in the following way: “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). The particular context that he used was singing in the choir at a school Mass. He explained how he witnessed to them: “I’m at Mass – go to – at the liturgy choir. Some people would like sit and then I’d encourage them to kneel and if they don’t – don’t
like if they need some explaining about the Mass, I’d gladly do that” (lines 183-185).

At one point in his interview, he explained that the faith that he found in God gave his life a purpose that saved him: “... if I ha- didn’t have that sense of purpose I probably wouldn’t have been here today ‘cause I would’ve cracked under the pressure, probly done something really bad” (lines 133-135). The compulsion that he felt to model his faith in God came from the conviction that he was God’s servant. His missionary role was an essential part of the world his imagination had created for him. From his belief that he was doing God’s work came the strength that he prayed for each day and that he needed to face the conflict that he experienced at school. Through witnessing to his faith, he found the acceptance he was looking for in his life. He explained this in the context of going to Mass at school:

I’ve been actually able to do what I would do out of school an’ so I would – it gives me real courage an’ s- – I would – gives me since I don’t have to be different so I’d be – be normal, so I can practise what I preach (lines 214-217).

The image of himself as God’s servant that his imagination created for him brought him that instinctual satisfaction that Perlovsky (2001) identified as an outcome of responding to the knowledge instinct that is part of each person. Kevin’s imagination created for him a way of thinking and feeling that gave him the freedom he needed to make his way through life with dignity.

The work of sacramental imagination, which was evident in Mikaela’s description of her “epiphany” moment – her imagination composed her belief
that she was being called into communion with a loving, forgiving God — was evident also in Kevin’s life as he described it. It has already been shown that the reality of his life of faith was constructed from his need for acceptance, coming to understand the message of Christian salvation given through the youth group he attended, and the invitation to become a member of the community. One of the elements of the reality his imagination constructed, was his initiation into the community which involved education-in-faith experiences. Concerning his difficulties at school, he described the help he received from his leader:

… the leader that’s there, he – um – actually approached me an’ said – because he knew I had – because he’s been praying before, an’ then said, “You were down you s-“ – an’ that “you should really like take courage” an’ he’s literally taught me what some of the basic s- – ah – like, yeah, he made me realize that I – I’d been wrong, made me admit to my – my – admit my pain and suffering an’ t- – to let it all go so I can deal with it (lines 148-154).

Kevin’s description highlighted the nature of his experience of salvation. It was somewhat like that described in the song Amazing Grace: “Once I was lost, but now I’m found / Was blind, but now I see.” The description of his salvation was the work of sacramental imagination revealing the presence and power of God in his world.

Kevin’s conversion ushered in a new world for him which was imaginatively constructed from elements of his life that meant little to him as a child but which, as a seventeen-year-old, he understood and appreciated.
When he was interviewed in the final month of his time as a secondary school student, he described himself as a servant of God. When he was a child, he engaged in the religious practices of his family with little understanding of their significance. Conflict at school sent him searching for ways of feeling good about himself and how to deal with the conflict. His search led him back to where he had been going for more than four years: the youth group that was part of the charismatic covenant community to which his parents belonged. The moment of his conversion came when he understood that the answers to his questions about himself and about relating well with others would be answered through faith in Christ. His understanding was the work of his imagination constructing for him a way of viewing his life that gave him a sense of instinctual satisfaction.

Cognitively speaking, when Kevin was a child, his imagination constructed realities that did not include God because he was not able to relate what he was experiencing with what he was taught about God. He reported in his interview that these images of his world failed him and his self-esteem plummeted. It was only when he started to understand the messages delivered in the youth group that he recognised the way out of his misery. The progress from concrete operational thinking to formal operational thinking that Piaget identified through his research into cognitive development provided an adequate interpretation that Kevin gave of the dawning of his understanding of the religious world in which he was placed by his parents.
Elizabeth’s conversion

Elizabeth’s story differed significantly from the previous stories because her life was not marked by emotional stress in the way Mikaela’s and Kevin’s lives were. Like Kevin but unlike Mikaela, she lived at home with her parents whom she loved and admired. Unlike Kevin, she did not experience rejection by her peers at school. Her image of God differed from Kevin’s image of God which he described as a master-servant relationship. In her first interview, Elizabeth imagined God to be like a father: “… the image of God is for me like a father, a father-type figure which has always been like that” (lines 29-30). Her memories of her relationship with God were positive. She stated that even as a child she imagined God to be like “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 40-43).

Elizabeth’s memories of her relationship with God and the emotions associated with that relationship differed significantly from those recounted by Mikaela who associated the word “parent” with the image of God who punishes people for wrongdoing. In her first interview, Mikaela admitted that the dominant childhood memory she had of God was of a being who punished people: “… if I didn’t do something right he’d punish me for it” (line 20). Whereas Mikaela associated fear with the God of her childhood, Elizabeth associated love with God from as far back as she could remember.

Like Mikaela, Elizabeth kept a journal as part of her involvement in the present study. She named her imaginary autobiography “Oxymoron” which
she defined as “where two opposites or contradictory ideas meet” (line 3). Whereas Mikaela described her life as “ups and downs and sometimes felt like I wasn’t moving at all” (Mikaela’s journal, line 11), Elizabeth described hers as “opposite or contradictory thoughts, feelings and actions being experienced in the same moments” (lines 4-5). What was a “huge jigsaw puzzle” for Mikaela, was a tension between opposites for Elizabeth, almost like the dialectic described by the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, whose doctrine of opposites represented his attempt to describe the dynamic and changing character of being.

One part of the dialectic was her positive outlook on life. Elizabeth recognised that her life up to the present was happy and her basic attitude was one of gratitude. “I am so thankful to God for giving me my parents and brothers and sister,” she wrote in her journal (lines 21-22). This was reflected in the chapter headings of her imaginary biography. For instance, her first chapter was about the gift of her family and the second chapter, which she called “Moulded Under Blue Skies and Sunshine” (line 27), recounted the influence of her parents and siblings who “guided and moulded me to be the best person I can be, and taught me without even knowing it with their great example” (lines 31-32). The early part of her biography presented a marked contrast to the early chapters of Mikaela’s biography.

Elizabeth looked upon her life as being like a fairy tale come true. The narrative that she constructed reflected this in the title of the third chapter of her imaginary biography. She titled it “The White Fairy Visits Me” (line 34) and referred to the fairy who turned the wooden puppet Pinocchio into a human
person. It was her way of referring to the experience of growing up and becoming able to think and decide for herself.

This part of the dialectical framework that was Elizabeth’s imaginative construction of her life — recall that the title of her imaginary autobiography revealed the dialectic — was kept in tension by those events in her life which caused her to reflect on her relationship with God. Those events amounted to her experience of disequilibration. The first experience that she mentioned concerned coming to an awareness of the challenge of the Old Testament image of God as a supreme being who sought revenge against evil doers. In her first interview, she explained the changes that had been taking place in her faith in God:

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 … (lines 69-76).

Elizabeth’s imagination contributed to her search for a greater understanding of God by keeping before her the apparent contradiction between images of God that she had accepted without thought and the images of God that she found in the Bible.

Another event in her life that caused her to re-evaluate her image of God came from the experience of leadership in the Lutheran youth group that
was attached to her parish Church. She was invited to be a leader in the group, a position she found herself ill equipped to fill. For instance, she felt inadequate when called upon to pray spontaneously. In her second interview, she reported: “I could always like pray with myself to God by myself. I’ve been doing that forever, but like I’d have trouble praying with other people, you know, but I’d do it, like I’d do it at camps” (lines 82-84). The expectations of her as a leader in the youth group “disturbed” her. The image that she created of herself included references to her decision to have nothing more to do with God — “I don’t want to have any thing to do with this God stuff anymore” (lines 103-104) — and about holding back from participating in religious ceremonies, such as the Maundy Thursday ceremonies at her church. These “negative” experiences contrasted with references to seeking the advice of her best friends and choosing to resist the temptation to remain uninvolved in her church liturgies.

Finally, in her journal, she wrote about making bad choices: “I have also been put into some bad situations where I made wrong choices. The healing process and growth I experienced from this has really brought God closer to me” (lines 83-85). What she had done was not evident from the text of her journal, however, it was clear from her use of the words “bad” and “wrong” that she had engaged in activities that stirred her conscience. The resolution of her situation was described in positive terms: she used the words “healing” and “growth” which denoted the experience of Christian salvation. The implication was that she had sinned against God. To be reconciled with God and to rid herself of the guilt that she felt, she sought God’s forgiveness. Studies in attachment theory highlight the influence of parental attitudes on
adolescents’ images of God. For instance, Potvin (1977) and Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) concluded that adolescents with supportive parents tended to believe in a forgiving God. Elizabeth was supported by her parents in her faith development and their love for her was part of the imaginative construction of her conversion. Central to her conversion experience was the “healing process” to which she referred.

It was reported in the discussion of Harris’ (1987) model of religious imagination that there were five factors that affected the work of contemplative imagination: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups, such as Christian youth groups. It was established in the discussion above that Elizabeth used her reflective skills to imaginatively compose and develop the image of God as a loving Father who was always ready to forgive those who strayed.

To this function of her contemplative imagination must be added her reading of the Bible. It was in that context that Elizabeth mentioned the struggle she had with the Old Testament images of “God as a, y’know, revengeful thing” (First interview, lines 75-76). She also struggled with reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. She admitted: “It’s hard. It’s harder. My Bible’s got like footnotes type things that explain things. It takes ages to read a bit and then read all the footnotes” (lines 395-397). The concepts did not fit easily in the framework that she had constructed. In her first interview, Elizabeth reported that she tried to assimilate the images by “trying to
understand” (line 74) them. However, that was unsuccessful, so she tried other ways of dealing with the “disturbance” in her mind:

“Ah, sometimes I just dismiss them. But, but, um, I don’t know, but maybe go discuss it with someone, or just – I know it’s hard, like, the Old Testament’s hard” (lines 79-81).

That she would discuss her difficulties with others was taken to be a sign that she could not dismiss the idea of a punishing God.

Elizabeth supplemented her reading of the Bible with other forms of spiritual reading. For instance, in her second interview, she remembered reading a book called The Five Love Languages and related it to her dominant image of God:

I know that my love language is touch and I think – I think that that might – well, it occurred to me that that might have a – be a part of, or influence the whole, you know – that’s every, every image – every image that I like the most, is – is – involved touch (lines 11-15).

However, by this time in her story, her dominant image of God had shifted to include her experience of the independence that came with graduating from secondary school.

Elizabeth was mentored in her faith journey. The support of close friends was a significant feature in the accounts given by Mikaela and Kevin of the changes in their faith. In both cases, the support amounted to an invitation to join a community of faith. While Elizabeth was already a member of a community, that is, the youth group that she attended regularly, the invitation she received from her friends was to a deeper commitment to God. Mikaela
and Kevin expressed appreciation for the support they gained from their friends as they developed their relationship with God. Elizabeth also acknowledged her indebtedness to her friends. In her journal, she wrote: “My Christian friends have taught me by example how to make God a huge part of my life and have helped me through some difficult issues in relation to God” (lines 87-89). She attributed her conversion to their influence.

In the discussion about Mikaela and Kevin, reference was made to the role of ascetic imagination in their experiences of conversion. One of the signs of the ascetic imagination at work, and the one that was most evident in Elizabeth’s account of her faith journey, was defined as “self-acceptance.” Through her interviews and the journal that she kept, Elizabeth acknowledged that one of significant changes in herself that she had come to appreciate was the development of her ability to think for herself. Mikaela also had made the same observation. In Elizabeth’s case, the recognition of her increased capacity for independent thought was accompanied by awareness and acceptance of being responsible for the choices she made. As noted earlier in the present discussion, one of the factors in her conversion was her growth in maturity during her final year of secondary school. It enabled her to imaginatively re-compose her image of God to include the possibility of forgiveness and healing. In the concluding paragraphs of her journal, Elizabeth captured the spirit of this shift in her world with the following statement:

I would like to try and express the huge debt I owe to God for all of the wonderful gifts he has given me so far in my life and for sticking with me
when I stuffed up or didn’t want to have anything to do with him anymore (lines 222-225).

Like Mikaela and Kevin, Elizabeth showed concern for others. In her first interview, she explained her motivation in the following way: “... the thing of not – not helping is – or standing around and letting something bad happen is as bad as doing it” (lines 195-196). She conveyed the image of herself being prepared to stand up for the weak. One of her earliest memories was of her efforts to befriend a boy in Year 6 who was socially isolated, an action that was supported by her parents. Elizabeth’s concern for others seemed to be restricted to the community in which she lived: her family, her local Church, her school and her circle of friends in the youth group that she attended. Unlike Stephen, whose conversion will be discussed next, she did not show any awareness of social or ecological issues. But that did not mean that she was not idealistic. In her journal, she stated: “I would like to make a difference to people’s lives in small ways” (line 192). Elizabeth constructed an image of herself as someone who cared about others and who wanted to do what she could so that they could experience being loved as she was loved.

The fourth way of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) is sacramental imagination. As noted in the discussion of Kevin’s conversion, sacramental imagination draws attention to the signs of God’s presence and power in the lives of people. In the course of describing how her friends assisted in her conversion, Elizabeth revealed the work of sacramental imagination in the construction of her image of being saved by God. Her imagination brought together perceptions of her rejection of God and of God’s
salvation through the agency of her friends. The clearest description of her experience was found in her journal:

Recently I experienced the first time in my life I was ready to give the whole Christian thing away because it seemed so unfair. I was very angry at God. But I didn’t leave it at that. After my own research didn’t help or get any answers, I went to talk to some of my Christian friends who are my age and understand the struggle. They helped me through this difficult time and my relationship with God was strengthened because I doubted but came back to him. My friend Serica said that that shows real faith. If I can stick with God and he sticks with me after a “fight” like that, I know that we can do anything together (lines 211-219).

Like Mikaela and Kevin, Elizabeth relied on her friends to help her validate her experience of God in the midst of her struggle with what she perceived to be the demands of God on her.

John H. Westerhoff III (2000) described faith as a journey that is made in stages. He called the stage that children typically show as “affiliative” faith. Many adolescents pass through a “searching” stage during which they have doubts about God’s relevance or even existence. Eventually, people show signs of having an “owned” faith similar to the understanding that Elizabeth expressed in her journal about her hopes for her relationship with God:

I want to strengthen the feelings and beliefs I have in God. I know that with him I can do anything. I want to find some way to ease the doubts I feel about my faith, to find a way to answer the questions that seem unanswerable. I think that with a lot of hard work this kind of relationship
with God is possible. I know that I have the persistence and will to learn more about him (lines 206-210).

Elizabeth’s imagination constructed what has been referred to above as a new world order, that is, the way she saw her life at the time of her second interview differed significantly from how she viewed it when she was younger.

Elizabeth’s account of her faith journey bears out the truth of the observation made by Fortosis & Garland (1990) that the experience of disequilibrium will always occur because in the human mind there is a tension between the desire to accommodate new information and the contrary desire to maintain what is understood already. Her conversion came about because her personal circumstances no longer supported her image of God. Encouraged by her friends, she chose to believe that God was also merciful as well as loving. The belief that she was forgiven was her way into her new world, her conversion. That belief was based on the possibility that her imagination constructed from the array of memories she drew on in her attempt to make meaning of her life.

*Stephen’s conversion*

When Stephen was young, his parents divorced. In his journal, he recalled that it did affect him, but the story he told showed that he coped with the divorce well. In his first interview, he described his father as “a pretty big influence on my thoughts” (line 53) and his mother as “a really good role model” (line 402). The emotional stability that he experienced was reflected in the way he wrote about his life in the journal that he kept as part of his involvement in the present study. Stephen presented an outline of his
imaginary biography which he titled “Snakes and Ladders” (line 10). The title was a dialectic made of the “many obstacles” (the snakes) in his life and the “many helping hands along the way” (lines 12-13) (the ladders) which he identified as his family and friends.

Whereas the radical changes in faith reported by Mikaela and Kevin were born from personal suffering, the changes reported by Elizabeth and Stephen were much less dramatic. Elizabeth’s created reality revealed that her gratefulness for the gift of her family and her Christian friends was the dominant emotion. Against this backdrop she recounted the change in her relationship with God that came about because she chose to take responsibility for developing the relationship. In some ways, Stephen’s account was similar. Like Elizabeth, he was grateful for the support he received from his parents. His relationship with them provided him with the stability that he needed for him to develop his relationship with God just as the relationships Elizabeth enjoyed supported her efforts to draw closer to God. However, whereas Elizabeth made her journey in the company of her friends in the youth group to which she belonged, Stephen’s autobiographical memories were of a faith journey that became increasingly a private journey: he constructed an image of himself being self-sufficient and making a contribution to society. In his first interview, he shared his dream for the future: “I want to be like a mechanical engineer, but I want to design like cleaner cars so that they don’t pollute the world as much” (lines 260-261).

In chapter 5, it was shown that there were two events in Stephen’s life that he considered important in his search for God. The first occurred when he
was in Year 10. One of his teachers confronted him about his mistreatment of a fly. The second event occurred when he was in Year 11. It was the surfing accident suffered by his cousin. Both events challenged his attitude towards life and his relationship with God.

Both events produced in him experiences of disequilibration. He accommodated the new attitudes and beliefs by modifying his beliefs and values to align them with the changes in his attitudes. His account of the fly incident in his second interview gave an insight into how his imagination worked to accommodate Miss Scott’s belief about the rights of the fly:

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. So that’s one small thing. But 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 92-104).

Autobiographical memory is an interesting phenomenon. Stephen switches back and forth from being the observer to being the participant in the event. His emotions were stirred by the memory of what he had done two
years before he was interviewed. He felt guilty. He was also willing to speak
about the incident: it was clear from the construction of the account that he
had learned an important lesson about life from it. His description of his action
implied his thoughtlessness. Being self-absorbed, he gave no thought to the
rights of other beings.

Stephen’s “fly” story was composed of memories that were brought
together to build an argument in support of his teacher’s belief about the
sacredness of life. The assimilation of her beliefs required changes in his own
beliefs and values. The story covered two years of his life, from when he was
in Year 10 to the time of the interview which took place just before he
graduated from secondary school. By this time, he had come to the belief that
God allowed people to make their own choices. It was God’s role to guide and
strengthen them so that they dealt with life in dignified and hopeful ways.

It was shown earlier in the present chapter that the search for
understanding or finding reasons is influenced by the processes of
equilibrium. Recall that disequilibration is a cognitive process that is oriented
towards equilibration through the interaction of the complementary processes
of assimilation and accommodation. The movement towards equilibrium is not
a single act, but continual movement. Fortosis & Garland (1990) stated that
“one’s view of reality is not passively registered but is actively constructed by
continually relating new information to existing knowledge” (p. 639).

The analysis of the stories told by the participants revealed five factors
that affected the work of their imaginations: the need for quiet to facilitate self-
reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the
support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups of friends. These factors influenced the development of and use of the contemplative imagination. Stephen’s account of his life and his changing relationship with God reflected the presence of some of these factors. For instance, the changes that he observed in his way of praying pointed to the work of his contemplative imagination and reflected the radical nature of the changes in his faith. In his first interview, he described prayer as being “like a one-on-one with God, so you hear him and he hears you” (lines 112-113). He revealed that he always started his prayer by thanking God, although he did not know what started him doing that. In his second interview, he added:

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 64-69).

He contrasted his style of praying with the use of common prayers, like the Our Father: “I make my own prayers up which I believe is more in depth because I’m thanking him. It’s like thanking a friend for doing certain deeds” (lines 74-76).

This change in his religious behaviour reflected the change in his understanding of God and how he could relate with God. It is worth noting that the way he perceived God to be was also the way he described his parent to be in their treatment of him. It is suggested that Stephen constructed his beliefs about God based on his experiences of the love his parents showed
towards him and the freedom they gave him to make his own choices. For instance, at the time of his first interview, Stephen had his driver’s license and he would drive to his father’s place “on Wednesdays” for dinner and then “drive back to my Mum’s ’cause all my stuff’s there” (lines 359-360).

Stephen noted the change in his attitude to life from being arrogant as a child to being embarrassed about his selfishness and lack of sensitivity. While he saw this and other changes as signs of his maturity, the change also reflected his imagination drawing together memories of his past attitudes and behaviours to create the image of someone with respect for life, as noted in his reflection on the “fly” incident. His present attitude, which was the work of his imagination synthesising his experiences to compose a reality that brought “instinctual satisfaction,” was disclosed during the first interview. In response to a question about how his belief in God shaped his life, he responded:

“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 (lines 150-153).

This attitude and its underlying belief was an expression of his life as he conceived it and it was created by his ascetic imagination. As outlined above, the ascetic imagination can be found working through revelations of self-acceptance, concern for others and the world, and also in the freedom to love and be creative.

Stephen’s humility was evident in his account of the “fly” incident. It was also recognised in his attitude towards his cousin’s accident. In his
journal, he wrote: “After much soul searching I realised that God did not control this, but he did give Andrea the strength to get through this” (lines 60-62). The account he gave of his life contained numerous references to the need for God’s guidance and help. The second most frequent form of prayer after his prayers of thanksgiving were prayers for help. He relied on divine intervention in his life. For instance, during his first interview, he spoke about the relationship between his belief in the “Golden Rule” (“Do unto others ….”) and his prayer:

the way I picture God is the way I ask him for help. Yeah, like I said before, just the way he works, just gives you signs or sometimes, I don’t know, like I’ll ask for help and then all of a sudden a song on the radio will have the lyrics that I need to hear, just stuff like that (lines 156-160).

Stephen’s use of ascetic imagination was evident also in his construction of himself as someone concerned for others and for the world. His family and friends were the first to be remembered when he prayed. In his interviews, he recalled situations related to his concern for the environment and people’s responsibility for maintaining it. For instance, in his first interview, he stated: “… sometimes I believe that God is disappointed in the way we’ve been treating the earth … we’re not living the life we should be” (lines 168-174). This theme did not appear in his journal, however, during his second interview, he related it to another theme from his first interview, namely, his interest in Buddhism. He was not critical of his Christian heritage.

The change from mistreating a fly to being concerned about the way people mistreated the earth amounted to a form of ecological conversion, a
term used by Pope John Paul II (2001) to describe contemporary concern for and commitment to, protecting the environment. Stephen’s interest in the environment and his reflection on the issue as an aspect of his faith, were aspects of the world he created from the information he gathered as a student of Geography and through watching the news on television. His statements illustrated clearly how disequilibration can occur with just a question, a statement, an image, or an event. The new information contradicted part of his created reality. The conflict was resolved at a higher cognitive level with the formulation of principles that governed his beliefs and values, such as: “If everyone had faith and believed in sharing then everyone in this world could have a house over their head” (First interview, lines 188-189) and “… if you’ve got something you don’t need to give it to people who do” (lines 199-200).

The way that Stephen perceived his cousin’s surfing accident and her subsequent rehabilitation also showed aspects of how the imagination assisted his conversion. In his first interview, when he was questioned about her accident, he recalled her courage and described her as “a really strong-willed person” (line 23). The image he created of his cousin was composed from memories of the advice his father gave him “so much good advice” (line 382).

As stated in the discussions about the conversion experiences of Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth, the imagination composes images that are sacramental, that is, they convey, as signs, the presence and power of God in the world. Stephen's sacramental imagination composed the reality of God’s involvement in his life in three ways. First, he believed that his cousin’s
determination to overcome the injuries she sustained in a surfing accident was a sign of God’s presence in her life. As he explained in his first interview, his experiences of her strength of spirit validated his belief that God “gives us strength and helps us when things are really hard” (lines 8-9). Second, he had come to believe that God spoke to him through everyday events which became signs of God working in his life to help him. He explained his belief in the following way:

… just the way he works, just gives you signs or sometimes, I don’t know, like I’ll ask for help and then all of a sudden a song on the radio will have the lyrics that I need to hear, just stuff like that (lines 157-160).

His imagination constructed his image of God present in the world and intent on communicating with him through his senses, in this example, through his sense of hearing.

Stephen’s openness to God’s presence in his life had changed radically from his childhood belief that God was responsible for everything that happened. In his interviews and his journal, he communicated his belief that people were responsible for creation. It was noted above that he expressed concern about their lack of concern, their irresponsibility. The possibility of salvation for the human race was constructed on his experience of his parents’ love for him as a sign of God’s goodness to him. Their love and support for him created the image of how God wanted to work in people’s lives. He said in his first interview that: “… he puts us with who we need to be with to evolve into who we need to become (lines 232-233). He tried to respond positively to God’s presence, a point already made through reference to his hopes for his future and the future of humankind.
Stephen constructed or created the reality of his faith by describing the changes that it went through as he grew and developed from childhood into adolescence. At the time of his first interview, Stephen understood God to be the One who “gives us strength and helps us when things are really hard” (lines 8-9). This was the anchor point of his constructed faith.

Concluding remarks

The emotions reported on by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen were associated with religious experiences. Azari & Birnbacher (2004) discussed the relationship between emotions and religious experiences. They concluded that “religious experience emerges as ‘thinking that feels like something’” (p. 902). Their reading of the literature on the role of cognition and emotions in religious experience led them to state that “most theorists accept that many emotions, especially in humans, rely to some extent on cognitive processes and are largely culturally and socially determined” (p. 904). This was shown to be so with Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. Their imaginations drew on the experiences of their lives to create images of God that helped them negotiate their lives with a sense of hope for themselves.

When their imaginations engaged in the act of creating what Fischer (1983) called “the not-yet of the future” (p. 7), new worlds were created. Their conversion happened when the ways they related with the world shifted to accommodate new ways of imaging their relationship with God.
Summary

In this chapter, the second research question was addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focused on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion was the aspect under consideration in the present study. A model of how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was designed and applied to the data gathered from the participants in the present study. Insights from information-processing theories, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Thomas’ theory of perceptual activity, Perlovsky’s neural modelling field theory and Harris’ model of religious imagination were used to provide the detail needed to describe the work of the imagination in the faith development and religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the present study. In the next chapter, the third research question — *What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?* — will be examined. Recommendations will be made about how to address the goals of Catholic education outlined in the *Mandate* of the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia through engaging the imagination in assisting the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents.
Chapter 7: Religious education, conversion and the role of the imagination in evangelisation

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the second research question was addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focused on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion was the aspect under consideration in the present study. A model of how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was presented and applied to the data gathered from the participants in the present study. Insights from information-processing theories, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Thomas’ theory of perceptual activity, Perlovsky’s neural modelling field theory and Harris’ model of religious imagination were used to provide the detail needed to describe the work of the imagination in the faith development and religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the present study.

In this chapter, the third research question — *What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?* — is examined. The Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009-2915, from the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia replaces the earlier Mandate that was referred to in earlier chapters of the present study. The differences between the two documents relate more to production values than to the content. The additions of content and changes in wording have been taken to be responses
to questions of clarification of concepts, such as new evangelisation, primary proclamation and initiatory catechesis. The current Mandate (hereafter referred to as Mandate and abbreviated as M09) was used as a reference in the analysis of participants’ statements about how their schools, teachers and religious education classes assisted their faith development, including religious conversion.

In the previous chapter, the imagination was defined as the process of synthesising cognitive and affective experiences to produce new meanings. Pertinent to the discussion in this chapter is the understanding that the power to synthesise that is known as “religious imagination” produces images that promote faith in the divine. As it was stated in the previous chapter, to imagine is to touch the Holy, to reach out beyond the material, to experientially affirm that “... what we see was made by something that cannot be seen” (Hebrews 11:3 New Century Version). This chapter will present an argument for considering religious conversion as the work of the imagination which is stirred by school related experiences to engage in the dialectic of “reaching back” into memory while “leaning forward” to chart a course into the future. It will be shown that in the present study, the dialectic was promoted through teachable moments experienced by the participants both in school and outside the school environment.

Catholic education in Western Australia

The Catholic Church has always believed that it was instituted by Jesus Christ who gave it the mission of proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all people and to baptise those who believed. Recall that in
chapter 1 of the present study, it was stated that Pope Paul VI (1975) used the word “evangelisation” to name the mission of the Church. He defined its mission as the task of seeking “to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs” (EN, para. 18). Each Catholic school was founded as “a privileged place” (CS, para. 26) to help with carrying out the mission of evangelisation.

The Catholic Church’s understanding of its mission developed as it sought to respond to the various cultures it entered through its missionary work, as well as to the development of societies in the face of political and technological developments and the changing circumstances of people’s lives. Fowler (1991) listed five factors that impacted on human life globally in the twentieth century: liberation movements, global communications developments, a renewed interest in the ecology of the earth, the growth of global economics and an intercultural awareness of creation spirituality. It was the Church’s awareness of the stirrings of these forces and energies that prompted Pope John XXIII to call for a Council “to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century” (EN, para. 2). On the tenth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI (1975) recalled the direction of the Bishops of the Catholic Church who at the closing of the Council directed the Pope to provide “a fresh forward impulse, capable of creating within a Church still more firmly rooted in the undying power and strength of Pentecost a new period of evangelisation” (EN, para. 2). He was referring to “new
evangelisation” which was defined in chapter 1 of the present study as the evangelisation of “entire groups of the baptised [who] have lost a living sense of the faith, or [who] even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (RM, para. 33).

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1997) focused on “a crisis of values” that was evident in the rise of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism, as a major contributing factor in the decline of religious belief and practice in developed societies and consequently of the need for a renewal of evangelisation (CSTTM, para. 1). The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia acknowledged the “formidable challenges” facing Catholic schools in Western Australia. They recognised that in many Catholic families “God, religion, and religious people, all too often are perceived as irrelevant” (M09, para. 29). Even though about 80% of students attending Catholic schools in Western Australia have been baptised most do not have regular contact with a parish community and are not active within the Church. Their inability to integrate faith and culture as well as faith and life presents a serious challenge to Catholic schools and parishes alike.

The Catholic school was described in the Mandate as having two characteristics: first, the Catholic school focused on being a “good” school; and second, it taught its students how to integrate faith, culture and life. With respect to the first characteristic, the Bishops defined “good” by stating the aim of Catholic education: “The school must begin from the principle that its educational program is intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person” (M09, para. 19). Concerning the second characteristic, the Bishops
stated: “Learning to integrate faith and culture will help students develop a Gospel vision of Australian society. It will also help them to work out practical ways of promoting that vision to others” (para. 21). Two basic elements of the process of evangelisation that characterised the work of Catholic schools were named: Christian witness and ministry of the word. By the former, the Bishops meant being “a Christ-like presence and a Christ-like love to others” (para. 18); and by the latter, they meant that the Catholic school “uses words to proclaim the Good News in the same ways as did Jesus” (para. 18).

While all the participants reported on their experiences of being evangelised, four were chosen to illustrate how evangelisation by means of Christian witness and ministry of the word takes place in the various settings described in the study, that is, in the school environment, in the home and in the parish. If more participants were included, then the richness of the individual participant’s experiences would be lost in the restrictions placed on the discussion by having to report on all the participants. Conversely, to limit the discussion to a consideration of the experiences of just two participants would lessen the perception of the breadth of experiences of evangelisation that was evident in the data. So the decision was taken to consider the testimony of four participants: Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie.

Luke was chosen because he described well a range of experiences of evangelisation that included home, school and parish. Sophie attended the same school as Luke, but she was two years his junior. Her experiences provided some interesting highlights rather than contrasts to the experiences reported by Luke. To provide a balance, Frank and Glynna were chose
because they went to the same school together but were in different classes and came from families that were markedly different from each other. Frank grew up in a large family; Glynna was an only child. There were some interesting contrasts in parental and school influences reported by Frank and Glynna that held the promise of some valuable insights into evangelisation.

It was hoped that bringing the four together in a discussion about how Catholic schools evangelise would bring further light to bear on how the imagination assists religious conversion in Catholic schools. To further the discussion, the experiences reported by other participants will be included when needed to develop the insights gained from reflecting on the experiences of Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie. Moreover, in the deliberations about initiatory catechesis, the experiences of Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen will be included. Recall that the religious experiences of these participants were interpreted to be examples of religious conversion.

Christian witness and faith development

Pope Paul VI (1975) called Christian witness the “initial act of evangelisation.” He referred to Christians’ “capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good” and called Christian witness as “a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one” (EN, para. 21). It was volunteered by many of the participants that the witness to Christian beliefs and values by their schools and teachers was a positive influence on their faith development, but not always the most important influence.
In his first interview, Luke stated: “School’s had a big influence on me … yeah, school’s been a good influence” (lines 233, 238). He developed this theme by referring to the influence of his peers and also his religious education teachers. Luke’s focus was on listening to them and learning from them. He paid tribute to his peers who influenced him in his relationship with God. In his first interview, he acknowledged their positive influence on him in his religious education class: “… you get to hear everyone’s views and you can either reinforce yours or it can sorta make you think about it and delve deeper into it” (lines 234-236). However, it was the influence of his friends in the parish youth group and also in the liturgy bands in which he played that exerted the greatest influence. In his second interview, he explained their influence on his faith in the following way: “I’ve got some friends that are in the groups with me and they’re really good. I always go to them” (lines 118-119). In his first interview, he stated that his faith in God developed because of the company he kept — “just being with other people in the same sort of circumstances” (lines 191-192) — that is, he associated with people who were committed to developing their Christian faith. In his second interview, he explained:

… you can get so much guidance and good advice from them and just to be with people who feel the same way that you do helps you just so much to understand new things, like you have problems understanding, some doubts maybe, and just to talk them through with people, you just feel that so much better, like you fill in gaps (lines 71-76).

Apart from the influence exerted by his parents and the support of his parish priest who taught him how to pray, Luke acknowledged the influence of
the adults he met through playing in the liturgy band from an adjoining parish. In his journal, he wrote:

... there is one person who convinced me that God exists. I met up with this person through the band that I play in at Church and him and his wife are just awesome. They are like perfect people and will do anything to help you. This person is always happy and just has the perfect attitude to life. He has the ability to talk to people and make them feel really good about themselves and is just always so genuine. I just love being with him and his wife. They are just beautiful people (lines 45-52).

The approach adopted by these “beautiful people” epitomised the ideal Christian witnesses “who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good” (EN, para. 21). Their attitude and their influence on Luke exemplified also the ideal proposed by the Bishops in their Mandate (2009):

Young people need encouraging Christian witness from their fellow parishioners. In particular, they need to feel welcomed, supported and recognised. As members of the parish community young people need to be inspired and engaged by the parish community today (M09, para. 80).

Glynna’s experience of the influence of her school on her faith development was quite different from that reported by Luke. She admitted that peer pressure at school turned her away from expressing her faith in God:

Initially, it made me like less inclined to be like all religious-like, which is, you know, which wa – isn’t cool. An’ I s’pose I kinda gave in to like the peer pressures type thing, y’know, I sort of (pause) like and I got into
witchcraft an’ stuff like, like I was always interested in that type of stuff (lines 353-357).

She acknowledged that her attitude changed in Year 11, but did not attribute it to the influence of her friends, or her teachers. It seemed to come from her desire for autonomy and integrity: “… going to Church, and, y’know, being a Catholic, like not just in name, y’know, but by my actions an’ stuff that would make me like a better person, y’know” (lines 370-372). Recall that in chapter 4 it was revealed that Glynna had lost one of her friends when she was in Year 10. He died as a result of a car accident. She stopped going to Mass for about a month. Glynna recounted the occasion of going to “Christmas Mass” a few months after the death of her friend. She realised at Mass that “there was this whole community of people that like would support me if I needed it” (lines 323-324).

That she was offered the opportunity to become a Special Minister of Holy Communion, which she accepted, was a sign of the support and influence of the school, particularly the College chaplain who prepared her for the role. Glynna also spoke about the influence of her teachers. As with Luke, her references were to learning from them. She was critical of her Year 11 religious education teacher: “I really hated her at the start because she was so arrogant. And like I just thought, y’know, aw, how could someone be so like ignorant. You know, she refused to believe in evolution, y’know” (lines 396-399). Despite this, and for reasons that will be discussed below in relation to religious education, she concluded that it was the best religious education class that she had ever been in. Her Year 12 religious education teacher was a “really nice lady an’ stuff, but sometimes she gets angry and
we don’t really have class discussions” (lines 427-428). Glynna’s religious education teachers kept her thinking about her faith.

Frank also spoke about the impact of his school, his peers and his religious education teachers on his relationship with God. In his first interview, he acknowledged the “pretty big” impact of the school that he attended. Frank said very little about his friends: “Most of my friends aren’t very practising Catholics” (line 125). He described them as “good blokes” who did not criticise or ridicule him for his faith in God (lines 129-130). In his second interview, he drew attention to the support he received from those friends who were in his Year 12 religious education class: “We always have conversations like that, not your ordinary eighteen year-olds talk” (lines 46-47).

Frank spoke about the influence of his religious education teachers, particularly his Year 12 teacher who provided her class with opportunities for reflection on personal problems. In his first interview, he said she “helps you to keep calm and — um — maintain that relationship with God” (lines 212-213). Frank drew attention to the good example she set her students: “… the way she lives her life. Um — when she has a problem, she — ah — turns the other cheek…. She’s so strong in her faith” (lines 227-228, 232).

Sophie attended a state government primary school before enrolling in a Catholic school in Year 8. She acknowledged the difference between her state school and Catholic school experiences in terms of religious beliefs and values. Two comments by her were significant indications of the reality of Christian witness in her own faith development. First, she reflected on the impact of being in a learning environment where religious beliefs were shared:
“... being at a Catholic high school has changed because – um – just like you learn a lot from other people an' their beliefs an' stuff like that” (lines 41-43). Second, she discovered that in her Catholic secondary school, people’s Christian beliefs were practised as well as being taught: “Everyone wants to help, everyone – um – an’ jus’ that a– that sort of atmosphere has – um – has changed my faith because it’s more demonstrated than – um – taught” (lines 273-276).

While Sophie’s comments about the influence of her peers were very general, unlike the descriptions given by Luke and Frank, her statements about her teachers were quite detailed. She reflected on the faith that they shared with her and other students:

Actually a few of — a few teachers — um — the stories of their lives — um — an’ how they’ve coped, how they’ve — um — their belief an’ faith in God have helped them through. That sort of — um — just gives you inspir– more inspiration to believe (lines 244-248).

In her interview, she spoke about being inspired by some of her teachers because they shared the stories about their faith with her. For instance, Sophie spoke about “Mr Bruce, just talking to him and his stories an’ stuff, an’ how he only came about his faith” (lines 303-304) when he was a young adult, a story he shared with her on her Year 12 retreat.

Just as Sophie and Frank were influenced in positive ways by some of their religious education teachers, so too was Luke. In his first interview, he was asked about their impact on his relationship with God. He responded with a comment about their “views” becoming his “views”: 
Um — I find that their views become my views. Things they say you’ll remember and you’ll — just one day you’ll be thinking about that in the context and you’ll think back and say, “I remember someone said that.” And you’ll think about it. “Mm, that makes sense now.” It might not make sense at the time of the RE lesson but later on you’ll think back and “Yeah, I realise that now” (lines 267-273).

The changes in his faith were not immediate; they were gradual and subtle. His explanation identified the work of his imagination working with his memories to construct his belief system from his life experiences that included the witness his teachers gave through their religious education lessons. It can be concluded from his statement that Luke respected his teachers. He was happy to learn from them, a point that will be developed further in the discussion about the impact of religious education on faith development. In his journal, he summarised the impact of others’ influences on his faith development:

This is what is encouraging: to be around so many people that are just like me. I will try to be around people like this so that I can feel good and it reminds me of what is important in life. When I am with them I don’t think about other things in life. I just think about them and how good it is being with them (lines 90-94).

The encouragement that Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie received from their friends and teachers reflected the support of Christian witness as described in the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (1965). The authors of the decree identified the place of “sincere and patient dialogue” in the task of
freeing people from within (CS, para. 29) so that they can be brought “once more under the dominion of God the saviour” (AG, para. 11).

Evidence of the role of the imagination in constructing images of faith from the witness of people of faith

The work of Luke’s imagination was evident in the images that he constructed of his faith in God being confirmed by the witness of his parents, who created a loving family environment, and his friends who went to Church with him and who valued his friendship and shared their faith with him. Luke’s image of God affirmed his faith within the structure of this supportive environment. His was very much a stage three model of faith as described by Fowler (1981), a conventional Catholic faith that was confirmed also by the witness provided by the religious orientation of his school environment and by his teachers who explained theological concepts to him in ways that helped him to understand their relevance to his life eventually, if not immediately. Luke’s account of his faith showed how his imagination engaged in reaching back to his memories of things his teachers said to him about God-related matters that provided him with understanding of his life that allowed him to lean forward towards his future with a sense of well-being.

The same can be said of the experiences of Glynna, Frank and Sophie. Like Luke, they drew on their memories to validate their perceptions of God as a loving creator. Glynna’s faith in God was influenced by images of faith drawn from memories of her mother’s faith and the witness of her school and parish communities, however, the evidence did not show that the witness of her school and parish influenced her to cease blaming God for the death of
her friend. Despite her dismissal of her mother’s faith as being “a bit of an idiot” (line 522), Glynna constructed her image of God from memories of her mother’s practice of faith at home and memories of her father’s rational and pragmatic approach to life. The witness of her parents provided her with memories from which she used her imagination to construct a relationship with God that would support her as she prepared to move away from the structures of home and school into a more independent and more autonomous way of life associated with being a university student.

Frank’s account of his life presented a similar pattern. He acknowledged the importance of the witness of family, parish and school in his faith development. Frank imagined God to be friendly towards him and towards those whom he loved. It was shown above that his parents, his teachers and his friends behaved towards him in ways that supported and contributed to his image of God. References to the good example of his mother and his Year 12 teacher were made in previous chapters. The descriptions he gave of his experience of their behaviour towards him reflected and validated his description of God’s behaviour: “… knows all. Um – friendly, obviously. There for help. Ah, to make sure everything runs smoothly. Creator” (lines 4-5).

In her interview, Sophie spoke about being inspired by her teachers and supported in her religious education classes by her peers who shared their understanding of life. They helped her to create a positive self-image. Sophie focused more on action rather than reflection: what people did, that is, the faith to which they witnessed, spoke to her with greater power than what
they said. Early in her interview, Sophie revealed that she constructed her faith from memories of faith lived in her family and her school:

… as I grow up, or grew up, um — I pulled bits from my background — my fam— ’cause my family being Italian — um — the Catholic sort of f— um — faith and belief: from that — um — an’ I just constructed — Also my surroundings, like my school, I just constructed different pieces of what I form in my religion my faith… (lines 14-19).

Sophie’s faith was based on images of faith drawn from what she saw around her rather than on what she constructed from ideas. She opened her interview with the following statement: “I sort of construct the idea that if you believe in God, you shouldn’t question” (lines 3-5).

The faith development of Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie happened with the support of significant people in their lives, namely, their parents, close friends and teachers. The witness of close friends and of family, particularly parents, appeared to be more significant overall than the witness of teachers, however, it must be remembered that the work of the imagination, as Kant (2007/1781) observed, is often unnoticed, therefore, it was likely that not every significant influence was recalled by the participants. Moreover, as Luke recognised, what his teachers taught him was not always relevant immediately, but often became relevant later when he needed what he had been taught to make sense of his situation. It will be shown later in the present chapter, that the participants’ friends, parents and teachers contributed to the participants’ imaging of their relationship with God through teachable moments.
Christian witness and conversion

Religious conversion is an aspect of faith development and the goal of evangelisation. With respect to Christian witness, the difference between examples related to faith development and the examples related to conversion was one of degree rather than nature or even structure. In her first interview, Mikaela attributed much of her growth in faith to the school-based youth group to which she belonged and to the Catholic school that she attended: “I think it’s been through YCS and – just being around – being at St Clotilde’s probably played a big part” (lines 188-189). In her journal, she wrote: “The major point in my life where I really came to know God was when I first came to St Clotilde’s” (lines 64-65). She identified the motivation for change through the following statement:

Up to this point 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 (lines 65-68).

The theme of her parents’ divorce and its impact on her faith in God was developed in previous chapters. It was argued in chapter 5 that Mikaela experienced a crisis that sent her in search of salvation. The witness to Christian beliefs and values that some of her teachers and a few friends gave her at her secondary school provided her with a way through her self-pity and low self-esteem. She acknowledged the support she received from Joan at a time in her life when she was looking for the experience of belonging. Mikaela wrote about Joan’s influence in her journal:
Joan has strong faith and with her strong faith I came to believe that I too could have faith exactly like her. 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 35-39).

Joan was identified as the advocate of the Catholic faith that Mikaela felt drawn to embrace. Their friendship provided Mikaela with the haven that she needed while she came to understand and accept her self and her place in the world in which she lived.

The crises experienced by Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen were described in previous chapters. It was shown that they perceived their crises as being crucial to their relationship with God. Recall that it was stated earlier that Kevin realised that his friends in the youth group to which he belonged were happy and that their happiness was related to their faith in God. His unhappiness was the catalyst that motivated his search for the inner peace he witnessed in his friends — “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. But each time I did I was like unhappy” (lines 19-22). Just as Mikaela was prompted by the Christian witness of her best friend Joan to seek a personal relationship with God, Kevin, too, had a similar experience which confirmed for him what he felt was the solution to his unhappiness. He revealed in his interview:

I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, 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 36-40).

In both instances, close friends who acted as mentors, interpreted the experiences that Mikaela and Kevin had of being drawn into a relationship with God.

Elizabeth admitted to being negative about religious education during her time at secondary school. In her journal, she wrote:

I’m sure that there must have been times when I could have learnt something that would enrich my faith, but to tell you the truth, I went into almost every religion lesson with the attitude that it was a waste of time, and that any Catholic belief that differed from my own was wrong and outdated. Wrong, yes I know. I regret this, and wonder what I could have got out of religious education if I really tried. However, my faith has been challenged and changed and has grown due to many different people teaching me about my faith (lines 146-153).

Her final statement was a reference to the influence of people in the Lutheran Church, particularly those who attended the youth group to which she belonged. Yet, she admitted that her teachers influenced her. In her second interview, she was asked to comment further on their influence. She named one teacher but could not say in what way she had been influenced. “Um – but that doesn’t mean that the teachers didn’t influence me because some did. … I think of Miss Smith but I can’t say what” (lines 124-125, 128).

Despite her negativity about religious education, Elizabeth acknowledged: “… that doesn’t mean that the teachers didn’t influence me
because some did” (lines 124-125), however, she was not able to identify just how she was influenced by them. It was reported in the previous chapter that Elizabeth testified to the support of her friends at a time when she had decided to end her relationship with God. Their faith was an important factor in her decision to seek God’s forgiveness for her lack of trust. In her journal, she wrote: “My Christian friends have taught me by example how to make God a huge part of my life and have helped me through some difficult issues in relation to God” (lines 87-89). She also experienced the support of a close friend who acted as a mentor and who also interpreted her behaviour as a sign of God’s presence in her life. Elizabeth wrote in her journal: “… my relationship with God was strengthened because I doubted but came back to him. My friend Serica said that that shows real faith” (lines 215-217).

Whereas with Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth, the support and witness came from peers and, in particular, from close friends who acted as mentors, Stephen’s support came from his parents. In previous chapters, it was reported that his crisis of faith occurred because of his cousin’s surfing accident. Recall that in chapter 4, the theme of parental influence was identified as a significant factor in faith development and Stephen’s relationship with his parents was explicated. In his first interview, he outlined the basis for his friendship with his father: “… we like both love cars. He’s a surfer, I’m a body boarder, so we both love the waves. Footy. Just heaps of stuff. I’ve sorta grown into him. It’s just all things he likes I like” (lines 386-389). He described his father as a man of faith who went to Mass regularly and who was “a pretty big influence on my thoughts” (line 53). It was his father to whom he turned when his cousin suffered her accident and his father gave
him “so much good advice” (line 382). The relationship that he had with his father became the image of his relationship with God and he changed his belief about the relationship between God and creation to fit with his image of God. In this project of his imagination, Stephen was influenced by the witness given by his father to the power of faith in God.

Evidence of the role of the imagination in constructing images of the possibility of conversion from the witness of people of faith

Mikaela constructed the possibility of conversion from memories of experiences that motivated her to seek a radical change in her life. Considering the imagination as the dialectic of “reaching back” and “leaning forward,” the following interpretation was found to be warranted by the data. It has already been shown in previous chapters that in her account of her life, Mikaela presented two sets of memories that were diametrically opposed. The first set related to her parents’ divorce. She associated these memories with her low self-esteem. In her first interview, she referred to that part of her life as being a time of “low faith” (line 186) when she rejected the Church. The other set of memories became her source of hope. They pointed to a way out of her situation and the way to a positive future that was characterised by a strong faith in God and a sense of belonging in the Church. The “leaning forward” action of her imagination was represented by the realisation that she could become a Catholic and live with the sense of hope for herself that her friend Joan witnessed to in her life. It was Mikaela’s perception of her life that the definitive influence on her decision to become a Catholic was her friend Joan; however, she did not deny the influence of her school, nor her teachers.
It was stated above and in earlier chapters that Kevin attributed his conversion to becoming aware that the solution to his unhappiness lay in becoming a member of the charismatic covenant community to which his parents belonged. His realisation was constructed from memories of the witness of his friends in the youth group. What he remembered of the witness of his teachers to their faith was that it confirmed the decision he had made to develop his relationship with God and to place his trust in God and not in himself, or in any other means.

The role of Elizabeth’s imagination in her conversion was described in detail in the previous chapter of the present study. She acknowledged the support of her friends in the youth group to which she belonged and also the help she received from her family, especially her parents. These people witnessed to their Christian faith. In describing her conversion, she drew attention to the significance of the witness they provided. In her first interview, she reported that she was negative about the value of the religious education she received at her school: she was a Lutheran attending a Catholic secondary school. As she perceived her faith, she was unaware of the witness to Christian faith that her teachers gave. In her journal and during her second interview, she expressed regret about her negative attitude towards Catholicism, but her comment was directed more towards the theological content of what was taught in religious education rather than about the Christian witness of her teachers.

Stephen’s conversion was discussed at length in chapter 5. One of the factors that were considered was the influence of his parents on his image of
God and his faith development. Stephen did not comment on the witness of his teachers to their faith, although he did acknowledge that they motivated him to think about his relationship with God through what they said and taught. So his images of his relationship with God were drawn from memories of his parents’ love for him and teachable moments at school. He spoke and wrote about two religious education teachers, but he was referring to their skills as teachers and what they taught, but not to their faith. If they did influence him through witnessing to their faith, he was not aware of the impact of their witness on him. The significance of this to his religious conversion will be discussed below.

The stories of conversion recounted by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen pointed to the importance of Christian witness in their experiences of conversion; however, the stories did not highlight the role of the witness of teachers to Christian faith. As it was stated in chapter 4, for Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Luke, the significant sources of Christian witness were their friends and the youth groups to which they belonged. The witness provided by teachers confirmed for them the validity of their beliefs. In Stephen’s case, as also with Glynna, Frank, Sophie, Kevin and Elizabeth parental witness was significant factor in their faith development.

*Christian witness, faith and adolescent psychological development*

The stories of the eight participants under consideration in the present chapter have been recounted to draw out a fundamental difference between the two groups into which they were placed: Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen experienced significant crises of faith that represented turning points
in their lives. Erikson (1978) used the word “crisis” to describe the search for identity that is characteristic of adolescence. By “crisis,” he meant “a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (p. 5). While Glynna had to deal with the death of her friend, as was described in the previous chapter, it did not produce a significant change in her faith. As she described the situation, her awareness of the support of fellow Catholics was increased, but her relationship with God did not undergo any change.

Saker (2004) stated that adolescents who negotiate their identity crisis successfully “have a strong sense of the values and directions (that are consistent with their beliefs) and are generally at peace with who they have become” (p. 31). This was definitely the case with Mikaela. In her second interview, she spoke about the struggle she experienced in maintaining her relationship with God in the face of pressure from her friends. She admitted: “I wanted to be a sheep and they didn’t go to Church and so I didn’t go to Church” (lines 19-20). Eventually, she decided to be her own person. She said: “... 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” (lines 23-25). Her choice to think for herself and not to be dictated to by her friends reflected the emergence of her sense of personal responsibility identified by Paloutzian (1996) as characteristic of adolescence:

Adolescents begin to develop a sense of separateness and responsibility. They come to realise, perhaps only intuitively or unconsciously, that they are separate people subject to the same fundamental existential aloneness as every other person is. Along with this, however, come the
sense of individual responsibility for facing life and the dilemmas it poses (p. 127).

His view of adolescence provided an insight into the psychological dimension of Christian witness that was relevant to understanding the importance to Mikaela of Joan’s witness to her faith and to the faith development of adolescents in general. In the examples of faith development given above, the Christian witness that they experienced provided Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie with validation of their faith. Sophie felt “inspired” by the witness of her mother and her teachers, while Frank, Glynna and Luke reported on the encouragement that they received and on being motivated to think seriously about their relationship with God. Their statements demonstrated their awareness of their responsibility for the relationship that they formed with God and the maintenance of that relationship.

In the case of religious conversion experienced by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen, the awareness was of God’s invitation to a relationship as well as of their personal responsibility for maintaining it. Mikaela acknowledged her dependence of Jesus as her saviour. It was stated above that Kevin was aware that God wanted him to join the charismatic covenant community that ran the youth group to which he belonged. Elizabeth became aware of the mercy of God and the call to seek forgiveness for breaking God’s trust. Stephen expressed awareness of the moral responsibility for creation that people shared because of their humanity. He attributed his awareness to his faith in God. The increased awareness of their responsibilities as individuals was a consequence of their relationship with God. Those relationships changed and developed because of the witness
given by parents, peers, teachers, and institutions, such as the Catholic school. It was shown above that the influence of peers, particularly close friends was highly significant, particularly in cases of religious conversion. At the crucial moment in their lives, it was the witness of people who were close friends that counted. The Christian witness associated with the Catholic school provided a much-needed support for faith development, but there was no evidence of schools and teachers being significant factors in religious conversion. Ultimately, of course, it must be remembered that conversion is the work of God and not of people.

Ministry of the word and faith development

In the Mandate (2009), the Bishops identified the following forms of the ministry of the word as being integral to the curriculum of a Catholic school: primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis and religious education (M09, para. 43). They are thought of as moments “that are essential and different from each other, and that must be kept in view simultaneously” (CT, para. 18). The Bishops also distinguished between religious education and catechesis; they defined the latter as “an apprenticeship in the faith” (M09, para. 62).

Primary proclamation and faith development

The Bishops stated that primary proclamation was an essential part of the curriculum offered by a Catholic school and was required for the faith development of adolescents. They defined primary proclamation as the call to “accept (an) initial personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour” (M09, para. 44). Holohan (1999) outlined three contexts for this call to occur in
the curriculum of a Catholic school: first, when students are helped to “become more aware of God through creation;” second, when students are helped to realise that the desires for happiness, freedom, inner peace, goodness, personal meaning can be “satisfied fully only by the One who created the human heart;” and third, when students are helped to become aware that God offers to heal people from sinfulness and forgives sin through Jesus (p. 20). All three contexts can be found in the religious education curriculum mandated by the Bishops of Western Australia as well as in other areas of the curriculum of the Catholic school.

According to the Congregation for the Clergy (1998) primary proclamation “is addressed to non-believers and those living in religious indifference” (GDC, para. 61). All participants but Emily expressed belief in God and recognised Jesus as being the same as God or different from God in some way. For instance, in his first interview, Luke stated that Jesus was different from God. He imagined Jesus “with the beard, always smiling, his long hair — ah — white robe, all that” (lines 49-50). In his second interview, he said that this was the image that he remembered from holy cards. Luke believed that the power to change resided with God. He expressed uncertainty about the role of Jesus and did not make any statements about Jesus as saviour.

Glynna expressed a similar view about Jesus as that presented by Luke. She believed that “God controls like everything” (line 58). She described Jesus as “the compassionate, like really caring, like emotional side, you know, the part that’s capable of rage and anger and disgust and all that kind of stuff”
She recognised the humanity of Jesus, but did not express any views about his divinity, or of his role as saviour. Frank did not see any difference between Jesus and God. In his first interview, he admitted that “the Trinity’s a very, yeah, confusing thing” (line 35). He did not ascribe any role to Jesus. Moreover, when he prayed, his focus was God, not Jesus. Sophie stated that Jesus and God “were a bit different” (line 55). She described Jesus as “the physical form of God” (line 52). Unlike Frank, she prayed to Jesus, but she also prayed to Mary and “to family members that are passed away” (line 88).

The four participants did not reveal awareness of the role of Jesus as saviour. At the time of their interviews it was not perceived by them to be a part of their relationship with Jesus or with God. While belief in Jesus as saviour was part of the religious education programme at every year level, they did not allude to it in their comments about their experiences of religious education. Although they did not acknowledge his role as saviour, there was evidence to show that they had heard the call to acknowledge him as being divine as well as human. They did not make any statements that indicated that they recognised the handiwork of God in creation, but their stories were about their reliance on God. They relied on God in a Christian way. This was evident in their accounts of their lives. Luke, Glynna, Frank and Sophie were Catholics. Their religious lives included going to Mass in their parishes. Luke and Glynna went to Mass in their parishes regularly. Their involvement has been alluded to in previous chapters. While at school, Frank went every Sunday with his family. He stated that he had become less regular in his attendance after he left school. Sophie commented on “going to Church” (line
364) as part of her religious life. Finally, all four participants stated that their faith had grown stronger during their final year at school. Frank expressed the reason for this most forcefully in his first interview:

... it’s been reasonably strong I’d say in the last twelve months ‘cause, I mean, tryin’ to get through the TEE — um — hasn’t been easy. I’ve had a lot of — there’s a lot of deci- decisions to be made around this time, like y’ future, what to do, um — so I been — I been askin’ God “What about that work? What — what am I supposed to do? What’s my — my calling?” Um — yeah — it would be growing — would be pretty strong at the moment (lines 190-197).

To conclude, the evidence pointed to the participants’ lack of awareness of primary proclamation occurring in the schools that they attended. This does not mean that it did not take place. It has been shown that they had already responded to primary proclamation at some time in the past. The accounts of their lives that they shared indicated this. What they referred to in their stories that related to faith development was likely to be catechesis. This matter will be dealt with below.

Primary proclamation and conversion

Because primary proclamation is a call to conversion, it would be reasonable to expect that it had been part of the experiences of Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen, the four participants who experienced some form of religious conversion. In her first interview, Mikaela explained the difference between Jesus and God in the following way:
Jesus, he’s our saviour. God, he’s — he’s — well, he’s heavenly Father. Jesus came to this earth. He changed a lot of people. He brought religion, the Catholic Christian religion to the earth. He was — yeah — he gave his only — he gave his life up for everybody else, which not many people would do (lines 61-65).

At the time of her interview, Mikaela had come to accept Jesus as her saviour. She wrote later in her journal: “Jesus is my saviour and I thank God that he was here to help me remove the plank and see what was wanted for me” (lines 164-166). The source of her understanding was not evident from her interviews or her journal. All she could say was that she had started thinking in this way earlier in the year, her final year of secondary school.

It was stated above that the three ways that primary proclamation can be delivered were evident in the religious education curriculum of the schools attended by the participants. Therefore, Mikaela would have been exposed to primary proclamation in some form through her religious education classes, however, her account stated clearly that it was the influence of her friend Joan that helped her turn once again to God for help.

Kevin’s conversion was discussed in a number of chapters of the present study and from different perspectives. In relation to primary proclamation, his account of how he became a member of the charismatic covenant community to which his parents belonged provided an insight into the way primary proclamation works. Kevin explained that when he was in Year 10, that is, when he was 15 years old, he started to understand what motivated his friends in the youth group to which he belonged. It was stated
above that what his teachers witnessed to at school confirmed his own faith in God. In his comments about what he studied in religious education, he referred to the conflict between his beliefs and values in relation to marriage (a topic studied in Year 12) and the beliefs and values of some of his peers. By that time, he had become a student “evangelist” who engaged in primary proclamation in his religious education class.

Elizabeth’s story presented a valuable insight into the relationship between primary proclamation and conversion: the movement from on stage of faith to the next stage, as in Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith development involves primary proclamation as part of the catalyst for change. The details of Elizabeth’s background were stated above and in earlier chapters. Recall that she grew up in a faith-filled environment. Something happened to her that caused her to want to have nothing more to do with God. Her friends convinced her to turn back to God and to seek forgiveness. Their actions amounted to primary proclamation. Elizabeth reported that she had begun to reflect on the place of forgiveness in her life. This was part of her response to the call to accept Christ as her saviour.

The references to forgiveness in the stories shared by Mikaela and Elizabeth point to a central theme in Christian conversion. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) described conversion as “the movement of a “contrite heart,” drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first” (CCC, para. 1428). The desire for forgiveness, which was evident in the account given by Elizabeth, comes in response to primary proclamation. Mikaela’s desire to forgive those who burgled her mother’s
home was a response made by one who was confident that God was calling her to be a Catholic. That call was the first — primary — proclamation that she heard as an adolescent. It made sense to her and promised her a happy life. Her response was to forgive her trespassers.

Stephen’s story was recounted from various perspectives in previous chapters of the present study. He described two events that contributed to his conversion. The first was the fly incident and the second was his cousin’s surfing accident. Regarding the fly incident, his Year Ten teacher’s comment challenged him about his attitude towards life. Her words were like a primary proclamation; they cut through his arrogance to cause him to re-evaluate his relationship with God. In the following year, when his cousin suffered her surfing accident, he had changed. In his first interview, he described his father’s words to him as “so much good advice” (line 382). Whereas Mikaela and Elizabeth responded from the heart to the call to forgiveness, Stephen’s response was seen in the change in his understanding of how God related with people and helped them. Stephen reported his change in attitude towards God from being arrogant and blaming God when things went wrong in his life to recognising that God offers to strengthen people spiritually and emotionally to help them cope with adversity.

In chapter 5, Stephen’s conversion was discussed. It was stated there that his conversion was religious and moral, but not Christian. Part of the evidence given in support of that assertion was the focus of his prayers. Stephen thanked God and also asked God to protect his family and friends. He did not express sorrow for his wrongdoing, or pray for forgiveness for
others’ wrongdoings. Repentance was not part of his perception of his relationship with God. His recollection of the fly incident was a significant indicator of how her perceived his relationship with God. Miss Scott, his teacher, was compelled by what she believed and valued to speak out against his behaviour. He did not perceive her rebuke to be Christian in orientation. As he reflected on his life, his imaginative reconstruction linked her words with Buddhist beliefs but not with the words of Christ. If primary proclamation was part of the curriculum of his school, he had not received it in its completeness. Recall that in the opening statements of the present discussion of primary proclamation, reference was made to Holohan’s (1999) division of the curriculum of primary proclamation into awareness of God in creation, the recognition of the need for God to be happy and fulfilled in life, and the need for Christian salvation. Stephen’s response reflected his acceptance of the message about God’s presence in the world. His faith was like that of the Jewish people waiting for the coming of the Messiah, or like that of the followers of the Buddha.

Primary proclamation was described by Pope John Paul II (1979) as an essential moment of evangelisation that differs from other moments, such as initiatory catechesis and religious education (CT, para. 18). It was shown above that Stephen responded to primary proclamation as the call to accept God’s presence in the world as its creator whose concern for people was reflected in the help that they received to deal with life’s challenges. Of the other participants considered in the discussion of primary proclamation, only Mikaela showed awareness of Jesus as saviour.
The accounts given by Kevin and Elizabeth tended to understate the role of Jesus in their lives, although their perception of their deeper commitment to their relationship with God was evident in what they revealed through their interviews. Using the words of Pope John Paul II (1979), it would be rash to say that they appeared to be “hesitant … about committing their whole lives to Jesus Christ” (CT, para. 19). It would seem to be more reasonable to argue that the participants were not aware of hearing the call to “change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15, New Century Version).

The same could be said of the other participants in the present study. For instance, Alexandra constructed a theology of a transcendent divinity who worked through people to help those in need. Jesus was merely a messenger. Alyssa showed more interest in Gandhi and his values than she did in the life of Jesus and his role as saviour. Cameron’s believed that God was a silent presence who kept him company while he reflected on his life. Jesus was not important in that process. Cecil acknowledged the importance of his girl friend in leading him to reflect on his Christian faith. He admitted that he had not given much thought to who Jesus was or what his role was in his life. Emily had rejected the possibility of God existing and so Jesus was irrelevant. Gunter was attracted by images of the stigmata that appeared to be more important to him than any message about the redemptive role of Christ that was conveyed in the movies he watched. Like the others, Morgan did not show “any explicit attachment to Jesus Christ” (CT, para. 19). When she was asked to explain the difference between God and Jesus, she said: “Jesus was
just there to bring out his word” (line 26) and she referred to Jesus’ role as the one who re-stated God’s laws, such as the Ten Commandments.

The discussion of primary proclamation as a moment in evangelisation commenced with the following definition from the Mandate (2009): primary proclamation is the call to “accept (an) initial personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour” (M09, para. 44). It has been argued in the present study that the participants’ relationships with God were constructed by the imagination in a dialectic process of “reaching back” into memory while “leaning forward” to compose a reality that Fowler (1981) described as truthful in representation (p. 30). Apart from Mikaela, the participants did not describe Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. It was concluded, therefore, that with reference to the participants in the present study, the methods used by the schools attended by the majority of the participants failed to raise the participants’ awareness of Jesus’ promise of salvation. The methods might have been effective with other students, but that is not known from the sample used in the present study.

Initiatory catechesis

Initiatory catechesis was defined in the Mandate (2009) as the first stage of catechesis, the central activity of evangelisation. They stated: “Initiatory catechesis aims to help people mature from the initial conversion to Jesus Christ that results from fruitful primary proclamation, to deeper personal relationship with him” (M09, para. 52). Drawing on statements in the General Directory for Catechesis (1998), Holohan (1999) listed six interdependent tasks that comprised initiatory catechesis:
• “to promote knowledge of the faith”
• “to promote liturgical participation”
• “to promote moral formation”
• “to teach how to pray”
• “to educate for participation in Church community life”
• “to promote missionary initiation” (p. 22).

These tasks were mandated by the Bishops to be included as part of the Catholic school’s curriculum. Holohan (1999) quoted the General Directory for Catechesis (1998) to the effect that each catechetical theme included in the curriculum “has a cognitive dimension as well as moral implications” (GDC, para. 87). All three forms of the ministry of the word can be present in the same curriculum event, even during a religious education lesson, however, as the Bishops stated, initiatory catechesis is broader than the religious education lesson. It can be found in the inclusion of retreats, classroom and school prayer, liturgies, Christian service learning programmes, apostolic action and the celebration of feast days (M09, para. 58).

The majority of the participants in the present study described experiences of initiatory catechesis. These experiences were related to Church attendance, youth groups and school activities, such as school retreats. Membership of youth groups was discussed in previous chapters. Because most Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia conduct retreats for their senior students, it was decided to examine references to
retreats to determine the contribution they made as a form of initiatory catechesis to the faith development of the participants in the present study.

Cameron spoke enthusiastically about his experience of his school’s retreats conducted for Year 11 and Year 12 students. He claimed that they had a big impact on his faith. He stated:

... you go onto the retreat as one person and you definitely come out as someone else, someone that — um — you know better yourself an’ that you like more — um — yeah, you definitely undergo changes and you work out who your real friends are an’ you work out what you want out of life an’ how you’re gonna achieve that (lines 249-254).

The focus is on himself and his personal development. He did not perceive the retreat to be about his relationship with God, or with Christ. Holohan (1999) described retreats as catechetical experiences, that is, they are about how to live like Christ. Therefore, those who conduct retreats for students are meant to draw on the content of the six tasks of initiatory catechesis that were listed above. That means the retreat becomes a way of reflecting on life from the perspective of the Christian message. The General Directory for Catechesis (1998) described the work of the catechist in the context of the relationship between human experience and catechesis; its words were used as the measuring stick for students’ experiences of school retreats:

... experience, assumed by faith, becomes in a certain manner, a locus for the manifestation and realization of salvation, where God, consistently with the pedagogy of the Incarnation, reaches man with his grace and saves him. The (retreat leader) must teach the person to read his own lived experience in this regard, so as to, accept the invitation of the Holy Spirit
to conversion, to commitment, to hope, and to discover more and more in
his life God’s plan for him (GDC, para. 152).

If this was the intention of those who conducted the retreats to which
Cameron referred, then in his case, their objectives were not achieved.

A similar statement could be made about Frank who spoke about
retreats during his interviews. During his first interview, he listed the benefits
of his retreats as the “time to reflect,” to “listen to what everyone is saying”
and “time to relax” (lines 306-310). In his second interview, he described his
Year Twelve retreat as “an opportunity for – for growth within people and to –
to meet them to speak to them, to find – ah, to find out, y’ know, who they are”
(lines 257-259). Like Cameron, Frank did not describe the retreat as a
religious experience that strengthened his relationship with Christ.

Cecil’s experience of his Year 12 retreat was quite different. He
reported on the power of the witness to faith given by one student and how it
changed him:

There was one session when — um — people would get up and say —
like in front of everyone — how they — where they see God in their lives.
An’ they go through everything for some —. One girl who was saying she
lost seven close people — um — to cancer in one year — an’ she wouldn’t
have been able to get through it without praying. And then it kind of
clicked after the retreat that I could do that too (lines 16-22).

In his interview, Cecil spoke about two defining moments in his faith. The first
was the experience that he described above. The second was the support of
his girl friend who was active in her parish and encouraged him to participate
as well. He became her apprentice. She was his evangelist and catechist. While the school assisted his faith development through the retreat and through its religious education programme, he attributed the re-awakening of his relationship with God and his catechesis to his girl friend’s influence and his involvement in parish life, which included participation in the parish-based YCS (Young Christian Students) group.

Gunter also spoke about his Year 12 retreat experience in terms quite different from those used by Cameron and Frank. He referred to a liturgy that was conducted as part of the retreat: “… last year on Retreat — um — Mr Anderson conducting the liturgy. The way he conducted it sort of made everything sound really true an’ I think that was very good the way he did that” (lines 349-352). His use of the expression “made everything sound true” reflected Fowler’s (1981) observation stated above, that the imagination constructs reality truthfully; Gunter’s perception of the liturgy was of a prayer that reflected what he considered to be true about faith and life.

Sophie reflected on her experiences of retreats in Years 11 and 12. She contrasted her experience in Year 11 with what happened to her on her Year 12 retreat that helped her to grow closer to God:

I had a — a brilliant time on the Year 11 retreat, like it was — it was one of the best times in my life, but at — it really didn’t associate very much with — like it did with God, but it’s just because all my mates were on it an’ it was just a really good time. I think Year 12 retreat because at first I didn’t think it would live up to Year 11 retreat but it so it is so spiritual it didn’t matter — oh the surroundings were lovely because it was very quiet, very
peaceful, but — um — I think because I saw God in other people an’ that really, really shocked me, like some people I’ve known a majority of my life and I didn’t actually know them (lines 221-231).

Sophie’s experience of her Year 11 retreat was similar to that described by Cameron and Frank. The focus was on personal and social development. She did not associate God with the experience of the retreat. Her Year 12 retreat was significantly different. Like Cecil and Gunter, she regarded it as a religious experience. Sophie commenced her interview with a statement about constructing her faith from “my background … my family … my surroundings, like my school” (lines 15-19). Included in her image of faith in God was the realisation that she could not know people until she recognised God dwelling within them. Her discovery implied its inclusion in the content of the retreat programme.

The structure of the interviews reflected the thrust of initiatory catechesis for the purpose of discovering how the imagination assisted the process of conversion through evangelisation. The *Mandate* (2009) drew on the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998) to describe the work of initiatory catechesis. Using statements from the *Directory*, it is proposed that school retreats should be conducted to promote:

- “an authentic following of Christ, focused on his Person;”
- “education in the knowledge of the faith and in the life of faith;”
- enrichment of the whole person “at his deepest levels” by the word of God; and
- transformation of the person to take responsibility for professing their faith “from the heart” (*GDC*, para. 67).
The discussion conducted in this part of the present chapter focused on the extent to which participants’ perceptions of their retreat experiences reflected the aims of initiatory catechesis. It was concluded that for some participants there was awareness of the Christian focus that school retreats are expected to promote, whereas others perceived retreats to be experiences oriented towards personal and social development. Such a conclusion needs to be viewed in the light of the words of Pope Paul VI (1975): “Techniques of evangelisation are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. … Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic had no power over the heart of man” (EN, para. 75).

Religious education

Of the three forms of ministry of the word, religious education was mandated as the first learning area in the Catholic school curriculum. The content of the subject was outlined in the Mandate (2009):

Religious Education will contribute to the development of a sense of the sacred, a religious awakening in students. It will seek to ensure that students understand the foundational Christian belief that Jesus Christ is Saviour, as well as the Christian promise of Salvation. It will draw out the implications of this promise for students’ lives. It will aim to show at all times ‘how the Gospel fully satisfies the human heart’, particularly its deeper questionings and yearnings (M09, para. 64).

The Bishops described it as “an activity of evangelisation in its own right” (M09, para. 62). It complemented catechesis. However, as the Bishops stated in their Mandate, “many young people today receive little, if any,
apprenticeship in the faith in their families and parishes” (M09, para. 58) and so initiatory catechesis in Catholic schools becomes a crucial part of evangelisation in the educational setting. Through religious education and catechetical activities, such as “liturgies, prayer, retreats and Easter and Christmas celebrations” (M09, para. 58), Catholic faith is shared. Thus the curriculum of the Catholic school promotes “knowledge and understanding of the Gospel, as it is handed on by the Catholic Church, and of how those who follow Christ are called to live this Gospel in today’s world” (M09, para. 62). It also promotes reflection on catechetical experiences that form part of the life of the school as a Christian community to help students identify, understand and appreciate what the mystery of Christ offers believers (M09, para. 59).

While religious education and catechesis, particularly initiatory catechesis, are distinct yet complementary moments of evangelisation, they can and do occur simultaneously. Classroom topics about the Eucharist are not the same as a Mass celebrated with the class. Yet the catechesis that takes place through the celebration of Mass can also become part of the classroom for those who ready to apply what they are taught in relation to what they experience. In its role of complementing catechesis, religious education “strengthens catechesis students have received already, reinforces catechesis they are receiving currently and prepares for catechesis to be received in the future” (M09, para. 62). In reality, that is, in the course of teaching religious education, catechesis takes place when students are ready to learn more about the relationship they have formed with God through Christ. Some participants in the present student reported that their faith was strengthened through the experience of their religious education classes: the
lesson has become for them a form of catechesis.

Recall that in chapter 2 of the present study, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998) described religious education as “a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. [It] underpins, activates, develops and completes the educational activity of the school.” (*GDC*, para. 73) If this is the nature of the subject called “Religious Education” its purpose was stated clearly in the *Mandate* (2009): along with Christian witness and catechesis, religious education “expresses ‘the divine power of the Message’ (*M09*, para. 62). The data was examined to determine first, the attitude of the participants towards religious education, and second, what they remembered about the content of religious education. Third, statements about the importance of religious education were identified to determine whether or not the participants who made those statements considered religious education a significant contributor to their relationship with God.

**Students’ perceptions of religious education**

The participants were asked to reflect on the part that religious education played in their faith development. They were asked: “Has there been anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?” Some participants responded negatively, but the responses were generally positive. Luke was most positive about his experience of religious education classes. During his first interview, he offered the following comment: “You always come out of an RE lesson knowing something else, feeling that way, which is good” (lines 251-252). Glynna contrasted her
experience of religious education in Year 11, which she enjoyed, with her experience in Year 12:

... we were all really close and we felt really comfortable discussing like personal issues and this year I'm in the INSTEP class and like with — like it's like segregated ... and we don't really have class discussions an' stuff.

So, it's really different (lines 424-429).

In general, she enjoyed her religious education classes when she was challenged to think. She acknowledged that some of her peers preferred not to be challenged in class: “... it kind of made me realise that some people just can follow something mindlessly and that like that is not a good thing” (lines 450-452).

Frank spoke positively about his experiences of religious education, particularly his Year 12 class. During his second interview, he revealed his attitude through the following comment:

Um — jus’ thankful for those RE classes, yeah. It’s a protected environment — um — where everybody’s openly — they just talk about issues of life an’ — it was — it’s fantastic! I’m — I’m really glad that I went to a Catholic school and had that opportunity (lines 127-130).

Sophie also spoke positively about her experiences of religious education classes. She was inspired by some of her teachers and found the interaction with her peers stimulating: “... you definitely learn things from — um — others’ experiences, others’ challenge— others — like their challenges” (lines 314-316).
After leaving school, Mikaela admitted during her second interview, “I miss RE. Really do miss RE” (line 136). However, as she reflected on her experience of religious education at her school, she stated: “… last year’s RE was pretty boring” (line 137). Prior to that, the experience was positive and she revealed that she “enjoyed Year 11 most” (line 139). Kevin said very little about his experience of religious education classes. He learned about his faith from his parents, from attending his youth group and through participating in the life of the charismatic covenant community that he joined. He stated: “Most of the stuff, I’d been taught. It just like reminded (me)” (line 205) presumably of what he had learned about God and his Catholic faith outside school.

Elizabeth was negative towards religious education at her school. She admitted to being closed to anything her teachers had to say about Catholicism or what she construed to be Catholic teaching. She was Lutheran and her religious faith was grounded in her family’s religious affiliation. In her journal, she described her attitude towards religious education in the following way: “I can honestly say that I have never heard anything in RE that I didn’t already know. If I didn’t know it already I down right disagreed with it” (lines 144-146). As she developed the skills she needed to articulate her faith, she also recognised that her father, a Lutheran minister, was more open to Catholicism than she was and so she came to regret not having been more receptive in class. In her second interview, she stated: “… I probably should have and I could have like learnt something….” (lines 123-124).
In his journal, Stephen wrote: “Religious Education (has) not dramatically changed my religion. There are no real lessons challenging my faith” (lines 70-71). His use of the word “dramatically” did not negate the impact of religious education on his relationship with God. In his first interview, Stephen spoke positively about his experiences of religious education in Years 10 and 11. As a Year 10 student, his “ideas hadn’t developed” (line 313), but in Year 11 he was challenged by the teachings of the Catholic Church on stem cell research and abortion that were presented as part of the religious education programme. He found himself engaged in a struggle to form his own beliefs and values that would help him deal with his cousin’s accident. The passion of his involvement in his religious education class was evident in his struggle to understand why his cousin should have to endure her paraplegia. As a participant in the present study, he was invited to reflect on and write about the religious education he experienced in secondary school. He wrote in his journal:

Most people agree with the treatment of cancer through technology, even though it is prolonging life. Even down to colds and flue. We take medicine to get over it. Why shouldn’t people like Andrea be able to get over their spinal injuries (lines 89-93)?

The success of religious education as an evangelising activity depends in part on the attitudes of students. The 15 participants in the present study displayed a range of attitudes from dismissive comments made by Emily to the appreciative comments of Mikaela. Recall that the Bishops (2009) stated that religious education “expresses ‘the divine power of the Message’” (M09, para. 62); therefore, students’ positive attitudes towards religious education
are likely to assist religious conversion. The success of religious education depends also on the pedagogy of its teachers.

The pedagogy of religious education

Holohan (1999) described religious education as “a form of the ministry of the word” that facilitated the acquisition of knowledge that would “enlighten students’ experiences so that they are enriched by them” (p. 27). Teachers make use of various types of strategies to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. The strategies that they use form what is known as “pedagogy”. In relation to religious education, teachers make use of the “pedagogy of faith”. Pope John Paul II (1979) used the term “pedagogy of faith” to explain how catechesis should be enacted. He called for the development of a way of teaching about Christian faith that was based on the way God teaches through Revelation, that is, the divine pedagogy that can be found in both the Old and New Testaments, especially in the Gospel (CT, para. 58). This theme was developed further in the General Directory for Catechesis (1998): “… the Holy Spirit works through people who receive the mission to proclaim the Gospel and whose competence and human experience form part of the pedagogy of faith” (GDC, para. 52).

The data gathered from the participants showed the confidence they placed in many of their religious education teachers whose competence in communicating the content of faith was not questioned. For instance, in his second interview, Luke gave his perception of the competence of his religious education teachers:
… they definitely help understand the concepts. They can explain things in a good way that priests can’t. They’re – priests I find are very formal in their talking and they often talk about the old ways and put it in the old context, the Bible and stuff. But the RE teachers can put it in modern day terms for us and that’s a lot easier (lines 107-112).

In his first interview, Stephen recalled his Year 10 religious education teacher. He said that she “had the same sort of thoughts that I had.” He described her as “a really good RE teacher” and then explained why: “A lot of things she said I could relate to. She sort of spoke to us on our level like belief” (lines 304-306).

The task of putting the teaching of the Church in language that is accessible to teenagers was acknowledged by Pope John XXIII (1962) in his opening address to the Second Vatican Council: “What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms”. Pope John Paul II (1979) reiterated this theme. He encouraged teachers “to speak a language suited to today’s children and young people in general and to many other categories of people” (CT, para. 59). This process of “inculturation” (Holohan, 1999) was described in the General Directory for Catechesis (1998) as one of the greatest challenges faced by those engaged in evangelisation (GDC, para. 21).

Evidence of inculturation working in a religious education class was found in the account Luke gave of his experience of religious education. He
spoke about his teachers in a general way and acknowledged their influence on him. In his first interview, he stated:

Um – I find that their views become my views. Things they say you’ll remember and you’ll – just one day you’ll be thinking about that in the context and you’ll think back and say, “I remember someone said that.” And you’ll think about it. “Mm, that makes sense now.” It might not make sense at the time of the RE lesson but later on you’ll think back and “Yeah, I realise that now” (lines 267-273).

Luke reported that his teachers made him think. Other participants made similar comments. For instance, Glynna stated in her interview that her Year 11 religious education teacher “refused to believe in evolution” (line 399). This upset her, however, as the year progressed, she changed her mind about her teacher: “An’ like I kind of realised how like I don’t know if she was doing it on purpose to make us question ourselves more” (lines 404-405). Glynna came to the conclusion that because of her teacher’s approach, she thought more about her faith. Sophie did not say that her teachers made her think, but they did inspire and encourage her to be more faithful to God.

It was clear from the story that Mikaela told that she thought deeply about her faith. In her first interview, she said:

I’ve had pretty good RE teachers as well. Miss Jones, a very good RE teacher. Mr Smith was — like Miss Jones gave me like that little push I needed. She go “Talk to the Father. He’s pretty good about stuff like this.” And then Mr Smith made me think, like “Why am I thinking this about
Mikaela reflected on what her teachers said in her religious education classes. Her desire to become a Catholic became the measure of what she experienced in class. The questioning alluded to above in her comment about the impact of her teachers on her faith was just one aspect of the thinking she engaged in through her participation in her religious education classes. She also arrived at judgments based on what she heard and her own thinking. For instance, she reported on a lesson in her journal. Based on her teacher’s comments to some students who were misbehaving in class, she concluded:

I began to think what Jesus would do. Would he tease someone if they deserved it when the majority of the people teased didn’t deserve to be teased? … Miss Jones then began to tell them that teasing was due to people having a low self-esteem. This made me think that people with a low self-esteem may also have low faith in God and be pretending to be Christians for their parents but not for themselves (lines 102-109).

What the teacher intended to be a statement of appropriate behaviour, presumably from a Christian perspective — it was delivered in a religious education class — could be considered to be primary proclamation, however, for Mikaela, who had already expressed belief in Christ as her saviour, it was a form of catechesis.

Kevin also acknowledged the influence of his teachers on the way he viewed his faith in Christ. Like Sophie, his teachers encouraged him to continue developing his faith through his involvement in all those activities at
school that were related to the practice of his faith, such as attending Mass in the College Chapel and being involved in the liturgy choir. In the following statement, Kevin referred to the witness to their faith that his teachers gave. Their experience of faith in Christ validated his experience:

… their impact is quite significant because I see the — how religion has affected my RE teachers’ life an’ stuff an’ so I take that into account. And it really inspires me to like be more like Chri — yeah, like Christ (lines 208-211).

Stephen was also challenged by his religious education teachers to think about his faith. In his first interview, he referred to “a few class debates which evolved my thoughts” (lines 314-315). The debates provided him with opportunities to think about ethical issues related to his cousin’s paraplegia:

If I was asked what year challenged my faith, I would have to say that Mr Jones Year 11 class challenged me. There were many heated debates; the two main ones would have been abortion and stem cell research (lines 72-74).

He rejected the Church’s teaching on abortion and stem cell research but remained focused on the sacredness of life, particularly the lives of people whom he knew.

Religious education methods

Pope John Paul II (1979) gave directions about methods to be used in catechesis. Heeding the call from the Fourth General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops (1977) “for the restoration of a judicious balance between reflection and spontaneity, between dialogue and silence, between written
work and memory work” (CT, para. 55), he stated that the principle of “fidelity to God and fidelity to man” had to be used in determining which methods to use. In the General Directory for Catechesis (1998) it was stated “method is at the service of revelation and conversion” (GDC, para. 149), that is, catechesis:

… requires a process of transmission which is adequate to the nature of the message, to its sources and language, to the concrete circumstances of ecclesial communities as well as the particular circumstances of the faithful to whom catechesis is addressed (GDC, para. 149).

Even though catechesis is distinct from religious education and generally found in the Catholic school curriculum outside of the religious education class, nevertheless, both moments of evangelisation require methods that serve revelation and conversion and that often find the two moments occurring simultaneously, or in tandem. Many of the teaching methods employed in religious education can be found in use in catechetical activities that focus on reflection and dialogue. Following the Fourth General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops (1977) and Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation Catechesi Tradendae (1979), Nichols & Cummins (1980) described three modes of teaching that could be used in catechesis and religious education: presentation mode, search mode, interactive mode (p. 23ff). Examples of these modes were found in the transcripts of interviews and journals provided by some of the participants.

The presentation mode makes use of didactic methods, such as lectures and talks, including the use of audio-visual aids, such as music, songs, pictures, graphics, video clips and the use of the Internet. It was
characteristic of the accounts given by most of the participants that they could not remember much about what their teachers said in class. Most participants did not share any memorable statements or phrases given in religious education classes. However, there were some exceptions that pointed to the importance of the presentation mode in religious education and the contribution of people’s input to evangelisation.

Recall the example cited above of Mikaela’s account of her Year 10 religious education teacher who confronted some of her students in class about their attempts to justify their bullying of another student. The teacher’s lecture about the injustice of bullying was an example of the presentation mode used for the purpose of evangelisation. The incident caused Mikaela to think about her own attitude towards people and to recognise that she needed to change her beliefs about people to fit in with her faith in Christ:

My belief I now find to be wrong is that some people have NO good in them. But Miss Jones proved it through a story about a saint who began his life stealing and then converted his evil ways into Catholicism and then before he died became a priest (lines 111-114).

The presentation mode can be used creatively as the example above has illustrated. Storytelling is a valuable aid in the pedagogy of faith as Mikaela attested in her journal entry. Her story communicated clearly how catechesis takes place through the agency of religious education: when the religious education teacher presents Christian teaching clearly, those students who have accepted faith in Christ are likely to reflect on the message and apply it to their lives.
The search mode teaches through discovery. When used well, it encourages students to become independent learners. It is characterised by flexibility in learning styles, that is, the learner can use a variety of means to assist learning, such as reading, listening, or doing. For instance, Elizabeth reported in her second interview that she had been reading a book about the languages of love. She had concluded: “I know that my love language is touch” (line 11). In the interview, she applied her discovery to her enduring image of God as a loving father who held his child’s hand, her hand. Elizabeth’s “spiritual” reading was a form of catechesis that took place out of school and was related to her involvement in her youth group. Recall that she had admitted that her negative attitude towards religious education prevented her from being engaged in thinking more about her faith as a result of the class she attended.

The search mode can be thought of as attitudinal rather than merely intentional, that is, rather than being used by the teacher, it is the activity of the student who seeks answers. For instance, in her journal, Alexandra reported that the most important religious education lesson that she could remember was the talk given by a visiting speaker whose message was about making the most of opportunities in life. She wrote:

The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 60-63).

It was stated earlier in the present chapter and also in previous chapters, Alexandra used what she learned in this lesson to confirm her belief that God
worked through people to take care of those in need. She saw herself as God’s instrument in supporting her mother. Alexandra’s perception of the event did not present any evidence that revealed her school’s intention for including the guest speaker in the religious education curriculum. Information from outside the boundaries of the data provided by the participants indicated clearly that the guest speaker was a motivational speaker who was engaged by Alexandra’s school to encourage its Year 12 students to strive to make the most of the opportunities afforded them through their curriculum. Alexandra interpreted the experience in a religious sense. She called it “a religion lesson which changed my view of my faith” (line 57). It was a form of catechesis, admittedly, at a basic level, which strengthened her faith in God. She did not link it with her belief that Jesus had the power to save her. What the school proclaimed about Christ through its religious education programme and its catechetical activities had not yet prompted her to consider her life in the light of her stated relationship with Jesus which she expressed as “Just like to pray and ask for mercy and for— to — to forgive, for forgiveness” (lines 10-11).

The interactive mode in religious education includes such strategies as discussions, debates, role-plays. Of the three modes of teaching this was the one that the participants referred to most often. For instance, Stephen enjoyed debating, discussing and arguing. He wrote in his journal that in Year 11 “there were many heated debates” (line 73). In his first interview, he stated that the debates “evolved (his) thoughts” (line 315). The debates that interested him the most were those about abortion and stem cell research. He said:
I disagreed with a lot of the Catholic beliefs, but yeah, pretty much most of them. I agreed with a lot of them and disagreed with a lot of them, but I found that there was no middle ground with me (lines 321-324).

The experience must have affected him deeply. The debates took place in the early part of Year 11 and he recalled them more than twelve months later in the context of his cousin’s surfing accident that was referred to earlier in this chapter and in earlier chapters. His accounts of the debates in his first interview and also in his journal indicated that he had heard the Christian message about the sacredness of life and had accepted it, as he understood it. What he rejected was the Catholic Church’s teaching about the rights of the foetus and the limits to the human power to make decisions about life and death.

In this part of the discussion, the illustrations of the methods employed by religious education teachers were drawn from the accounts given by Mikaela, Alexandra and Stephen. Any set of participants could have been formed to provide illustrations of the methods used in religious education. These were chosen because they went to the same secondary school, and experienced the same religious education programme. Mikaela and Stephen were in the same cohort, but their stories were quite different and they each took from their religious education lessons different sets of ideas that helped them to form and develop their relationship with God and to articulate it for the purposes of the present study. What was obvious in the perceptions of the three participants chosen was the uniqueness of each person’s call and response. Evangelisation is the mission of the Church; conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit.
Teachable moments

The impetus for the Catholic Church’s renewal of its understanding of evangelisation came from the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1974. In response to the direction the Synod gave to future reflection on evangelisation, Paul VI (1975) stated clearly the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of evangelisation. He wrote:

It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelisation; it is he who impels each individual to proclaim the Gospel, and it is he who in the depths of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood…. Through the Holy Spirit the Gospel penetrates to the heart of the world, for it is he who causes people to discern the signs of the times — signs willed by God — which evangelisation reveals and puts to use within history (EN, para. 75).

What the participants perceived to be true of themselves and the world, that is, what their imaginations constructed for them as the reality of God’s presence in their lives and in the world, is what the Church presents as the work of the Holy Spirit. It was established in the present study that there were particular moments in the lives of the participants that proved to be turning points or times of great significance to them in their relationship with God. These can be called “teachable moments.” For instance, the fly incident recounted by Stephen was a teachable moment for him.

Educators acknowledge the existence of “teachable moments” in curriculum events, that is, unplanned moments that arise when a teacher has the opportunity to share insights or explain concepts that students are willing
and motivated to learn. In the previous chapter of the present study, the concept of disequilibration was introduced to help explain how the imagination assists faith development. From a cognitive perspective, teachable moments occur when people experience disequilibration with or without the conscious intervention of the teacher. Fortosis & Garland (1990) quoted Piaget’s (1950) definition of disequilibration: “The state of tension or disturbance in which elements of a person’s world no longer seem to fit the “reality” which he has created” (p. 633). As it was explained above, Mikaela learned from the lecture about bullying that her teacher delivered that she could no longer condemn any person as bad. The lesson that she described in her journal was a teachable moment for her.

Teachable moments generally are serendipitous. Often they occur without teachers being aware of them. Recall the discussion about Stephen and the fly earlier in the present chapter. He reported: “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). The change in Stephen’s attitude towards life and the development of his faith happened away from the class, but the catalyst was that one moment and an unplanned rebuke from his teacher. It was truly a serendipitous event in his life that changed him profoundly. A chance encounter with Stephen three years after he had left school revealed that he had just returned from a trip to Asia where he had participated in filming a documentary on endangered species.

Teachable moments can be engineered by creating disequilibration in the lives of students. Fortosis & Garland (1990) advocated the use of
Scripture to show students that God nurtured people by allowing them to experience disequilibration that occurred naturally and sometimes by intervening to disturb their equilibrium. They referred to the Gospel story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-42). Jesus disturbed the woman out of her apathy by speaking with her, a violation of Jewish law that forbade him to speak with Samaritans, about life with God. To restore her own sense of equilibrium she accommodated what he said by declaring to her friends: “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Do you think he might be the Christ” (John 4:29 New Century Version)? The story that Mikaela’s teacher told her class in the course of her lecture on bullying had much the same effect on Mikaela.

In its action of reaching back into memory and leaning forward to shape the future, the imagination creates what Fowler (1981) referred to as the “best fit” which does not have to resonate with the prevailing worldview. For example, consider the conversion of St Paul. He was engaged in ridding the world of the heretics who followed Jesus of Nazareth. In one teachable moment, when he was rendered physically incapable of fighting off an unseen enemy, he was converted and became one of the heretics:

So Saul headed toward Damascus. As he came near the city, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"
Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?"
The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up now and go into the city. Someone there will tell you what you must do." (Acts 9:3-6 New Century Version).
Saul’s Damascus experience changed his life changed radically as the rest of the story told in the *Acts of the Apostles* attested.

It was shown in chapter 5 of the present study that the religious conversions experienced by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen came through the experiences of “teachable moments”. For instance, Mikaela described attendance at her Catholic secondary school and joining the Young Christian Students group at school as her “Damascus” experience. She heard God’s call to become a Catholic through that experience. Kevin’s teachable moments were not school-related but were centred in his youth group experience. Elizabeth had a similar experience. Stephen’s “Damascus” experience happened in a Year 10 class. His understanding of God that he constructed with the insights gained from that experience, helped him to deal with his cousin’s paraplegia.

The teachable moments that were reported in this chapter were experiences of being evangelised. Those moments sometimes involved Christian witness, such as Luke’s encounter with a family involved with the liturgy band in his parish. In his journal, he wrote: “... there is one person who convinced me that God exists. I met up with this person through the band that I play in at Church and him and his wife are just awesome” (lines 45-47). He also described his encounter with his parish priest who taught him how to pray and the support he received from his friends in the youth group: “He taught me how to pray properly and generally being with other people who are not afraid to pray helps you” (lines 196-198). These were teachable moments in his life that confirmed for him the truth of the faith that his parents had shared.
with him when he was growing up, a faith that was supported by his parish and the schools he attended.

Just as teachable moments contribute to the work of the imagination as it creates a reality that is Christian, they can contribute also to the creation of a reality that is religious but not Christian. The teachable moments that occurred in Stephen’s life confirmed for him the existence of God, but were part of his imaginative construction of a worldview that seemed to him at the time he explained it to be more Buddhist than Christian. He said in his 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). He experienced a religious conversion that was moral and ecological and he remained open to being Christian and Catholic.

Summary

In chapter 6, the imagination was described as a dialectic action of “reaching back” and “leaning forward” to create new realities that guide people into the future. In the present chapter, the understanding of evangelisation presented by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia in the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009-2015 was used as a structure to examine how the imagination assisted the faith development and religious conversion of some of the participants in the present study. The two elements of evangelisation, namely, Christian witness and ministry of the word were used to examine the participants’ perceptions of the impact of their school experiences on their relationships with God.
Many of the participants in the present study identified Christian witness as a powerful agent of evangelisation in their lives. It was shown that for most of the participants the significant experiences of Christian witness were not located in the schools they attended. For four participants, the witness to their faith by close friends and teachers assisted the process of conversion. The ministry of the word, in the form of primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis and religious education, was shown to be part of the process of evangelisation that the participants experienced. Religious education was acknowledged by the participants to be a valuable aid in their faith development. The competence of their religious education teachers was acknowledged by most of the participants. They provided experiences for them that helped them to grow in faith through a process of personal reflection that seemed to happen away from the classroom experience. The participants also described catechetical experiences, some of which seemed to happen simultaneously with the teaching of religious education. Finally, it was shown that the concept of “teachable moments” was helpful in coming to understand how the imagination assisted the faith development and conversion of the students involved in the present study. It was found that the imagination made use of memories of the experience of teachable moments to construct the reality of the participants' relationship with God. Most of the participants reported that reflection on those moments of evangelisation led to the strengthening of their relationship with God.

The final chapter is a summary of the overall study with recommendations being made for the improvement of the evangelisation of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools and for further research.
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.
References


Granqvist, P. (2006). On the relation between secular and divine relationships: An emerging attachment perspective and a critique of the


Appendix 1: Letter to student

Richard Patrick Branson
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Armadale, WA, 6112
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Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Dear student,

Thank you for agreeing to consider being a participant in my research project. I am writing to you to give you more details so that you will be able to decide whether or not to continue with your involvement.

As you are aware, I am a student of the University of Notre Dame Australia. I am enrolled as a candidate in the university’s doctoral programme. The subject of my research is the role the imagination plays in the religious conversion of adolescents. Sometimes, conversion experiences are quite dramatic, however, I am sure that for most of us, religious conversion happens slowly and quietly. I am interested in the signs of the inner activity that happens in people’s lives as they experience their conversion to God.

I have restricted the field of my study to Year 12 students attending Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth. This is quite deliberate. I teach religious education to Year 12 students and I am impressed with their thoughtfulness and the insights they have into their faith and into life.

I have written to your parents. If you want to participate in this project, I will need their permission for your involvement. I have included a reply form which acknowledges your willingness to be a part of the project with your parents’ approval. All you have to do is for you and your parents to sign it and send it back to me in the stamped addressed envelope that I have included. Then I will arrange to interview you.

The interview, which is the first part of your participation in the project, will last no more than 45 minutes and will be about the experience of change in your life and the place God has in the changes that have been taking place.

In the course of the interview, I might ask questions that you do not want to answer. You should feel free to decline to answer questions that make you feel uncertain, or vulnerable, or perhaps may anger you. I realize that I am entering a very private world and that I am a guest. The people I will interview will tell me only as much as they feel comfortable revealing to me.

I would like to tape the interview. This will help me produce a faithful record of our conversation. If at the conclusion of the interview, you decide not to proceed with your involvement then I will delete the file from my recorder.

If you choose to continue, then I will transcribe the interview and send you a copy for you to read. You will have the opportunity to let me know if I have misunderstood you or for you to make changes to what you said. I will check with you a few days after you have received the transcript and arrange to interview you again if you want to make any changes to the transcript.
I would like you to keep a journal. The subject matter of your journal writing is set out in the document that I will give to you at the conclusion of the first interview. Some students have taken up to six months to complete the journal, even though I suggest in its introduction that you take only a month. For some students, writing is a difficult task. For others, their lives are so full that they find it hard to make time to think deeply about the matters raised in the journal. Should you choose not to write the journal, then I would like to interview you a third time as outlined below.

When I have completed the analysis of the first interview, I will contact you again to arrange for a time to interview you a second time. I will do this to clarify anything you might have said that perhaps I haven’t understood or explored with you sufficiently in the first interview. Again I will tape the interview, transcribe it and provide you with a copy of the transcription.

At some point about half-way through your first year away from school, I will contact you again to interview. This could be the second or third interview, depending on whether or not you choose to do the journal. I would like to interview you at this time because the experience of leaving school can bring about changes in your relationship with God and those changes provide insights into your school experience. As with the other interviews, I will tape this one, transcribe it and then send you a copy.

At some point about twelve months after the final interview, I will provide you with a written statement of the findings of my research. You will have the opportunity to reflect on my findings and provide any insights or corrections that you feel comfortable in giving me. Whatever changes I make will be shown to you before I go any further with my research.

In my writing, I will give you a fictitious name and invent details, such as the name of the school you attend. You will be invited to give yourself an alias. I will maintain contact with you during the writing phase of my study and provide you with copies of what I write not only for your own interest, but especially to make sure that your anonymity is preserved in my writing and that I have represented you fairly wherever you can identify yourself in the text of my writing.

During my research, all documents, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents. I will be the only person with access to the information that will be stored on my computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against loss of data.

If you want to participate in this project and you have your parents’ permission, please complete the acceptance form that I have included with this letter. On receipt of your form I will contact you to arrange a time to interview you at school one afternoon when we are both free.

Yours sincerely,

Pat Branson B.A., M.Ed.

1st July, 2004
Appendix 2: Letter to parent/caregiver

Richard Patrick Branson  
49 Amethyst Crescent  
Armadale WA 6112  
Phone: 9399 7359  
Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Dear Parents,

My name is Pat Branson. I am a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College in Rockingham. At present, I am working part-time on a PhD at Notre Dame. My thesis is about the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents in Catholic secondary schools. Recently I spoke to the Year 12 students at school about my research and invited them to participate in it. Your daughter indicated that she would be willing to consider being part of the programme which will involve up to twenty students. Your permission is needed before I will accept her involvement in the research, hence my letter to you. I have included an acceptance form with my letter to your daughter.

In my role as a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College, my main area of responsibility is religious education. Over many years of teaching the subject I have come to recognize the importance of the role of the imagination in the religious development of adolescents. My studies are directed towards making clear what appears to be happening in the faith lives of senior secondary school students when they make choices that reflect changes in their relationship with God.

If your daughter participates in the programme, she will be asked to contribute in the following ways: **First**, she will create a fictitious identity for herself. This helps to preserve her anonymity. When results of the research are published no one will know who participated in the research.

**Second**, there is an interview which lasts about forty-five minutes. It will be recorded. A copy of the transcription will be given to your daughter to make sure that it is accurate and to allow for further comment by her. I would conduct the interview one afternoon after school and at school or at a time that best suits her.

At the conclusion of the interview, I will offer her the opportunity of keeping a journal for about a month. The subject matter of the journal is her faith journey and the part religious education and her religious education teachers have played in her journey. If she chooses to write the journal, then I will not conduct the second interview.

**Third**, I will interview her a second time. This interview is conducted to clarify statements made in the first interview. This interview is also recorded and transcribed. A copy of the interview will be given to her and there will be opportunities for her to respond.

**Fourth**, at some point in the middle of the following year, I will make contact with your daughter again to interview her a third time. I do this because leaving school often creates changes in a person’s relationship with God. The changes provide further insights into the influence of school experiences on the faith development of adolescents. As with the other interviews, this one will be recorded and transcribed and a copy given to your daughter.
As the letter to your daughter indicates, she may withdraw at any time from the research project and for any reason. If that does happen, all materials, including original documents, computer disks and CDs will be given to her and there will be no reference made to her contribution in the report I write as part of my research programme.

Perhaps you are concerned about what happens to the information that is provided. It is divided up into statements (Each student typically would contribute about 300 statements.). These are sorted into a set number of categories and the statements from each particular category brought together and sorted again into a second set of categories. By this time, the only person who would know who made each statement would be me. The work I have done up to this point has revealed some significant features of how some Year 12 students image their faith and the part that parents, siblings, friends and religious education teachers play in this.

During my research, all documents, tapes, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents, or transcribing tapes. No information will be stored on computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against data loss. The only other person who see the data in its raw form is my supervisor, Dr Anthony Imbrosciano who is a member of the College of Theology at NDA. He knows the students only by their fictitious names.

The direct involvement of your daughter in the project is relatively short and will involve about two hours hopefully over twelve months. My research programme, including the writing phase, will continue to the end of 2006. If you would like to be kept informed as to the outcomes of the research, I am only too happy to produce a summary and post it to you. The final document will be at least two hundred pages in length.

If you are prepared to allow your daughter to be part of the project, please sign the acceptance form. When I receive it, I will make contact with your daughter and arrange a time with her to interview her. If you have some concerns that have not been addressed in my letter to you, please feel free to ring me.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Pat Branson, B.A., M.Ed.
1st July, 2004
Appendix 3: Acceptance form

Student Participant Acceptance Form

Dear Mr Branson,

I, ……………………………………….. agree to participate in your research project on the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I understand that you will interview me and ask me to keep a journal for about a month; and you will show me transcripts of what I give you to make sure that they reflect what I know to be true about myself. I accept that what I say and write will be subject to analysis and the findings of the research will be published. I also understand that I shall be able to withdraw from the project at any point and if I do that you will not include anything I have said or written in your research.

Signed: ……………………………………..

Date: ___/____/_____  

Parental Permission Form

Dear Mr Branson,

I give my child …………………………………. permission to participate in your research into the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I would like/would not like* to be kept informed about the progress of your research.

Signed: ……………………………….

Date: ____/____/_____  

* Please put a line through the response that does not apply.

Student’s Details

Please complete the following:

First Name: ………………………………….  Family Name: ……………………………..

Address: ………………………………………………………

Phone: ………………………………..  Email: …………………………………

Fictitious First Name: ………………………….  Fictitious Family Name Initial: ……….

Richard Patrick Branson B.A., M.Ed.,  
49 Amethyst Crescent  
Armadale  WA  6112  
Phone: 9399 7359  
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Appendix 4: Interview schedule #1

What do you believe about God?

- Have you always thought about God in this way?
- What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?
- In what ways is your faith in God today different from what it was some years ago?
- Is Jesus different from God? If he is, tell me about the differences? Are these differences important to you? Was there ever a time when you didn’t see any difference between God and Jesus?
- And what about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?
- Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?
- To whom do you pray most often: God? Jesus? or the Holy Spirit? Why?

How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?
- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?
- In what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and fulfillment?

What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

- What have people said or done that has contributed or not contributed to your relationship with God?
- Why were these words or actions so important to you? How did they relate to your life?

Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months? Why?

- What has been the impact of your school on your faith?
- Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about and relate to God?
- Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?
- What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?
- Comment on the place of prayer and liturgy on the development of a relationship with God.

What people have played a significant part in your faith development?

- What have your parents said or done that has prompted you to grow closer to God or to move away from God?
- How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?
- What stories from your life describe how each of your parents has influenced you in your relationship with God?
Appendix 5: Interview schedule #2

You have been interviewed once and you have completed a journal. Thankyou for maintaining your involvement in this research project.

In this interview, we will re-visit the broad themes reflected on previously so that you may add anything further to what you have stated already.

Your anonymity will be maintained and whatever you say will be handled respectfully. Should you decide to withdraw from the project, I will remove any reference to what you have stated and delete all quotes from what you have given or will give in this interview.

Do you have any questions about what I have just said?

The Themes

- You have been reflecting on how your faith has changed as you have been growing up. Is there anything further you would like to add to what you have stated in the past about the changes you have experienced?

If nothing is said about images of God, then the following will be asked:

- What would you like to add about how your image of God has changed over the years?
- Do you have anything further to say about the people, such as parents, siblings, friends, others and events that have influenced your relationship with God? with Jesus? with the Holy Spirit?
- What else would you like to add about prayer and your relationship with God?
- Is there anything that occurs to you about your experience of school, of religious education classes, teachers and peers that you would like to say at this point?

After each theme has been dealt with, the following question is asked:

- Would you like to expand on anything you have just said?

After the themes have been covered …

- Is there anything you would like to add to what you have stated that we have not covered to this point?

After the subject has finished a statement similar to the following is made:

- Thankyou for your help with this project. I will transcribe this interview and send you a copy. If you would like to make any changes or additions to what you have said you may contact me. In a few weeks, I will send you a draft of what I have written so that you may comment further if you wish. I welcome any comments you would like to make because your contribution to this point has been invaluable. Thankyou again for your help.
Appendix 6: Journal writing tasks

Week 1

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story? Reflect on why you would name it in that way. How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings. Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

Week 2

Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn’t exist and that God cares or doesn’t care for you. Describe the situation. Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognize God’s presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself. Describe how your thinking about God changed because of your encounter with this person or event.

Week 3

Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson. Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief? How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

Week 4

Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book? Give the chapter a title and explain its significance. How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

After looking back over what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?
Appendix 7: Use of closed questions and rich data

The following extract was taken from Mikaela’s first interview (lines 410-437).

**Interviewer:** Was there anything they would have said or done prior to that that would have drawn you closer to God?

**Mikaela:** Never! Its – the ritual was youth group Friday, Sunday Church. And that’s the way all it was. And in between all that my parents separated and divorced.

**Interviewer:** And yet they still went to Church?

**Mikaela:** Yeah, just sort of Christians – um – pretend.

**Interviewer:** Do you see your Mum as a “pretend” Christian now?

**Mikaela:** Um – no, not so much. Like she wants to go back to Church but there’s ALWAYS something that she has to do or has to be done that will make her not go to Church and I remember hearing ages and ages ago that the Devil tries to put things there that aren’t that urgent but you think they are so – I sort of started not thinking like that. Before I go to bed I make sure I pray even if I have – even if I’m - I know I’m about to fall asleep, even if I know I’m about to pass out, I make sure I pray and then I’ll go to sleep. Um – I remember Michael said to me he can’t EVER go to sleep unless he prays. He’ll sit there in the dark go “Yep! This is pretty boring.”

My Dad – my Dad – um – he goes – he goes “What are y’doing on Sunday?” I say, “I’m going to Church.” An’ he goes, “Aw yeah, that’s good.” I go, “Why don’t you come?” “I can’t. Mirna won’t let me.” But Mirna goes to Church with me sometimes. So I can’t understand that. But – um – Mum – one of the main reasons – Mum an’ me – oh, I said I don’t wanna go to the Church she wants to go to an’ I think she’s too scared to go by herself. But I think my sister will end up going with her.