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

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# 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:

- 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.
- 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.

The major and minor themes derived from the data analysis

Table 4

	Major themes		
	A changing relationship with God	Significant influences	Owning faith in God
Minor themes	Who God is	Supported by parents and families	Resolving inner conflict and dissonance
	What God does	Supported by friends and groups	Responding to God's presence
		Supported by Church, schools and teachers	

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 reponse 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 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.

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 stepbrother'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 siginificant 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"

(lines 390-391). 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

40-41). 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 rediscovered 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 intergral 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 on 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 is 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 - Idid 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 throuh 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?*