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

Volume 1

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Declaration

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

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

AG  *Ad gentes divinitus.* Vatican II (1965)

CCC  *Catechism of the Catholic church.* (1994).


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

CT  *Catechesi tradendae.* Pope John Paul II (1979).

DV  *Dei verbum.* Vatican II (1965).


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


IC  *Inter oecumenici* [Instruction on the proper implementation of the 

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

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

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

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


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

Introduction

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

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

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

The research intention

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

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

Background to the study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Substantial and original contribution to knowledge*

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

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

Research questions

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

1. Is it possible to interpret students’ disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?

2. What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?
3. What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?

Definition of terms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

Faith

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

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

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

*Human faith*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious Faith

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

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

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

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

Fowler’s understanding of religious faith was criticised by Dulles (1994) for the following reason: liberal theology — the category in which he placed the theologies of H. Richard Niebuhr, Smith, Tillich and Fowler — attempted to ground faith in human experience and the human condition and placed the origins of faith in the human search for meaning and significance. His position reflected the teaching of the Catholic Church: faith is grounded in God’s self-communication and God’s invitation to each person to be in relationship with the divine (CCC, para. 93).
Christian Faith

Christian faith was the third form of faith identified early in the present chapter. The name suggests that it is the faith that relates to the Christian tradition. The discussion that follows will present a Catholic understanding of Christian faith. The Catholic Church teaches that people are made children of God by faith and baptism for the purpose of giving praise to God in the celebration of the Eucharist (SC, para. 10). This Christian faith is both individual and communal and its goal of union with Christ can be achieved only through faith, the sacraments of faith and through “the cycle of celebrations in which, throughout the Church’s year, the paschal mystery of Christ is unfolded” (IC, para. 6). The Church teaches that “… by faith, man freely commits his entire self to God, making ‘the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals,’ and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him” (DV, para. 5). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) gives the following characteristics of Christian faith: Faith is a grace freely given by God (para. 153, para. 162), a human act (para. 154, para. 155), is intelligible (para. 156-159), a free act (para. 160), is necessary for salvation (para. 161) and the beginning of eternal life (para. 163).

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

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

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

Conversion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Christian Conversion**

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

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

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

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

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

_The process of conversion_

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

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

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

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

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

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

The imagination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious imagination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious education and catechesis

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

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

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

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

*Religious Education*

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

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

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

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

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

*Catechesis*

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

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

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

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

The differences between catechesis and religious education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIM</th>
<th>Catechesis</th>
<th>Religious Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To promote maturity of Christian faith</td>
<td>To promote understanding of Christian beliefs and practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESSES METHODOLOGY LOCATION</th>
<th>Formation</th>
<th>Catholic educational pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mature family, parish and Catholic school faith communities</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>School community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>READINESS</th>
<th>Depends upon stage of conversion</th>
<th>Depends upon religious learning readiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLES</th>
<th>Catechetical principles</th>
<th>Catholic educational principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECEIVERS</th>
<th>Groups at same stage of conversion</th>
<th>Students within the same school Year Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCULTURATION</th>
<th>Gospel presented in an inculturated way</th>
<th>Content incultrated in a context with the same systematic demands and rigor as other school disciplines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPTH</th>
<th>Needs to be appropriate to the receivers' level of conversion</th>
<th>Same depth of knowledge as other school disciplines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

After Holohan (1999), p. 32.

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

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

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

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

Approaches to research

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

Contrasting research methodologies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Theoretical framework for research*

![Diagram showing relationships between different fields of study related to research in religious education.]

- Phenomenology
- Hermeneutics
- Hermeneutical phenomenology
- Epistemology
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis
- Participants’ perceptions of their faith in God
- Psychology of religion
- Structural-developmental theories
- Religious education and catechesis
- Australian Catholic education
- New evangelisation
- Movement one: *Researching Catholic education in Australia*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Movement three: Hermeneutics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Movement four: Phenomenology**

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

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

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

Research design: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Movement six: Psychology of religion

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

Ethical considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summary

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

Introduction

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

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

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

Data Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2

The interviews and journals

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

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

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

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

Sample selection

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

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

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

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

The participants

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

Alexandra

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

Alyssa

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

*Cameron*

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

*Cecil*

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

Elizabeth

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

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

Frank

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

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

Gunter

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

Kevin

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

_Luke_

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

_Mikaela_

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

*Morgan*

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

*Sophie*

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

**Stephen**

Stephen’s parents separated and divorced when he was very young. He moved from the country to a beach suburb north of Perth and he lived there with his mother and younger brother. Stephen admired his mother and he described her as a “really, really good person”. She was his “best mate.” His relationship with his father was built on common interests and respect. Whenever he stayed with his father, he was encouraged to go to Mass. He reported that his religious development underwent a dramatic change when he had to come to terms with a surfing accident suffered by one of his cousins. His “soul searching” led him to accept that God did not control such things but did give people the strength to face adversity.

**Data Analysis**

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

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

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

*Using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)*

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

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

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

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

Reading the transcripts

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

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

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

Coding the data

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

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

Table 3

_The general categories and their definitions_

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

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

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

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

Using memos

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

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

Figure 2

Category coding tree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs about God</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trinity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
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<td>Significant people</td>
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<td>Significant events</td>
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This category seems to be present in a number of places throughout the interviews. So far, the notion of God being transcendent is very strong. However, it is not a vengeful God, or an abusive God who is described, but one who is forgiving, gentle, caring and, as Frank says, "affectionate".

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

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

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

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

Identifying major themes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations of the study

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

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

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

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

Summary

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

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

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

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

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

The themes

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

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

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

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

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

Table 4

The major and minor themes derived from the data analysis

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Minor themes</th>
<th>Major themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>A changing relationship with God</td>
<td>Significant influences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who God is…</td>
<td>Supported by parents and families</td>
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<td>What God does…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Supported by Church, schools and teachers</td>
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First major theme: A changing relationship with God

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

First minor theme: Who God is…

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In my trouble I called to the Lord. I cried out to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice; my call for help reached his ears.

(Psalm 18:6 New Century Version)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second major theme: Significant influences

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

Third minor theme: Supported by parents and family

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin found acceptance and feelings of belonging through attending 24:7, the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community youth group. He joined the
group when he was in Year 8, but it wasn’t until he was in Year 10 that he started to take notice of what the leaders were trying to teach him. He described himself as an “outcast” when he was in primary school and in the early years of secondary school. Kevin said that he did not care about himself. The acceptance that he found in the youth group and the help he was given by the group leader, helped him to let go of his pain and suffering so that he could deal with it through his faith in God.

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

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

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

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

Most participants admitted that they did not attend church regularly on Sundays. None made any statements about the purpose of liturgy or of the central theme and significance of the Catholic Mass. Most focused on the Catholic Church law about Sunday Mass obligation. Morgan went to Mass every Sunday with her mother. She stated her position clearly: “You shouldn’t have to go to Church all the time. I mean once in a while is fine…” (lines 275-
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 his life. It was his belief that religion existed for this reason. To ensure that he had control over religion in his life, he created an image of God that supported his view of religion.
Cecil’s account of his life provided little evidence of experiences of conflict between his beliefs and what was happening in his life. The changes in his relationship with God that he reported in his interview seemed to happen as a result of the influence of three women in his life. As outlined above, he gave an account of how his mother, his girlfriend Samantha and Joan, the adult assistant to the YCS group in his parish, encouraged him to adopt beliefs and practices that would enhance his relationship with God. In his interview, he spoke about the place of prayer in his life and his return to regular attendance at Sunday Mass, however, there was no indication that these happened to counter negative experiences or influences. His situation was not unlike that of Luke, whose case will be discussed below. Cecil’s perception of the development of his relationship with God was an outcome of his growing maturity and the support of people who were significant to him and admired by him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, “It’s got as much right to live as you do.” And I’ve never done it since. … But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you … (lines 92-97).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seventh minor theme: Responding to God’s presence

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

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

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

Glynna’s prayer-life changed also and the changes reflected various influences on her, including her mother’s example, the importance given to prayer at school, and the death of one of her classmates. In her interview, Glynna said, “But over the past couple of years … I’ve sort of gone back to how it was a bit when I was little and returned to praying” (lines 29-30).

She prayed to Jesus and sometimes to Mary: “I say the Hail Mary, or the Hail, Holy Queen, ‘cause I like the words of the Hail, Holy Queen” (lines 141-143). Sometimes she prayed to certain saints. She was influenced by her mother, who had established a prayer room in their home, a space that she came to appreciate because it was a peaceful place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summary

This chapter presented an analysis of the data gathered through interviews and journals from 15 participants. The method of analysis was adapted from the methodology employed in IPA. Three major themes and seven minor themes emerged from the data and they were used to construct statements about changes in the participants’ relationships with God. It was shown that most participants perceived the changes to be part of growing up; in some cases, participants reported that their beliefs about God were
challenged by personal situations. They acknowledged the influence of their parents, family members, friends, youth groups, schools, teachers and the Church on their relationship with God. Most participants gave evidence to show that their beliefs were modified or changed to help them deal with changes in their lives.

In keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA as a research approach, the following chapters will present interpretations of the data that are supported by studies in various disciplines, including theology and cognitive psychology, as well as studies in developmental psychology. Chapter 5 will present a response to the first research question to be addressed in this study asked: *Is it possible to interpret students' disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?*
Chapter 5: Adolescent faith and religious conversion

Introduction

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

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

The participants described themselves as active agents in what they perceived to be their relationship with God. Those whose accounts might be labelled “stories about religious conversion” did not experience a sudden life-
changing event over which they had no control, as happened with St Paul on the road to Damascus, however, one student did report feelings of euphoria when she recognised that God wanted her to become a Catholic and she accepted this as her call from God.

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

Gelpi (1998) stated that the crisis that leads to conversion can be precipitated by a variety of catalysts (p. 13). Rambo stated that the catalysts for change may be “religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin” (p. 44). Köse (1996) noted in his study based on interviews with 70 native born British converts to Islam that the majority of more than 15,000 cases of conversion documented in research literature from 1899 to the 1950s (Christensen, 1963 and Starbuck, 1988/1911) were “a part of the inevitably intense social and psychological changes of adolescence that are essentially
a normal form of adolescent development” (p. 253). Drawing on more recent and extensive body of research literature (Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998; Starbuck, 1899; Ullman, 1983, 1989; and Zinnhauer & Pargament, 1998), Paloutzian et al. (1999) proposed that:

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

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

In the previous chapter, three major themes were identified in the accounts given by the participants: changing relationships with God, significant influences, and owning faith in God. The three themes embraced the disciplines of theology, sociology and psychology. In this chapter, the
discussion of religious conversion will require a dialogue between the three disciplines. In the spirit of interpretative phenomenological analysis, every effort will be made to ensure that the integrity of the perceptions of the participants is not compromised.

Mikaela’s conversion

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

St Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is used as the model of what Richardson (1985) and Granqvist (2003) referred to as the classic conversion paradigm. St Paul did not seek conversion: it happened to him suddenly. He was subject to forces beyond himself and was a passive recipient of conversion which was radical and complete. His life changed and there was a total break with the past. In a real sense, he became a new person. Richardson described such conversions as “once is enough for a lifetime” (italics in original, p. 165).
By contrast, Mikaela was an active agent in her own conversion. In response to changed circumstances in her life, she sought conversion and the changes that she embraced lasted until her circumstances changed again. Richardson (1985) and Granqvist (2003) proposed the emergence of an alternative paradigm, of which Mikaela’s conversion would be an example. In this paradigm, as Granqvist (2003) described it, “the conversion is portrayed as being gradual, and no particular change of the self is said to occur as a consequence of the conversion” (p. 175).

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

Changes in Mikaela’s relationship with God

Renowned Catholic theologian and biblical scholar Carlo Martini (1982) defined conversion in terms of the impact of changes in belief and commitment on the one who experiences conversion. He wrote that a convert: must experience an upheaval of his or her mental world, a change of horizon, a “conversion.” There must be a real transformation of subjects and their world. Those whose focus had previously been on themselves or
on a set of false values, even if of a religious kind, must now opt clearly for
the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (p. 62).

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

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

When she was thirteen, her parents separated and eventually divorced.
In her journal, she reflected on the impact of her parents’ actions and wrote
that “it was like being on a bungee jump that didn’t rebound” (Mikaela’s
Journal, lines 18,19). The emotion in her choice of this image is evident also
in her perception of God’s role in her life. She wrote: “I didn’t believe that God
existed and that if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life” (Mikaela’s Journal, lines 68-70).

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

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

She confessed her love of God, her faith in God’s mercy, and her hope for eternal life. Her reference to her life being better than a fairy tale stands in
stark contrast to her memory of what her relationship with God was like when she learned of her parents’ decision to divorce.

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

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

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

I’ll give you an example. Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt yep – I’m gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them. That’s the first thing that came into my head.
I wasn’t angry. I wasn’t disappointed as much as I thought I would probably would have been, but I actually thought, “Yep, I’m gonna go out and help them because they’ve obviously got a problem that can be fixed” (lines 117-124).

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

*The influence of significant others*

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

Adamson, Hartman & Lyxell (1999) drew on the research of Allen et al. (1984), Grotevant & Cooper (1986), and Youniss & Smollar (1985) to highlight “the importance for adolescent development of maintaining emotional closeness to … parents, while simultaneously developing a psychological independence” (p. 22). They concluded from their own study that parents
“form a secure base from which the adolescent can explore her/himself and
the world” (p. 29). Research carried out by Birgegard & Granqvist (2004),
Shaver (1990) has shown that the religiosity of parents contributes
significantly to the faith development of their children. In the present study,
each participant’s context holds elements that are unique to the participant
and, in some instances, predispose some to seek to change their relationship
with God. In the case of Mikaela, her relationship with her parents, her close
friends and the YCS group to which she belonged all contributed in significant
ways to her experience of conversion.

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

Mikaela’s relationship with her parents

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

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

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

I used to shut myself away from the world and mostly through the hurt that I had felt as a result of my parents break up and the continual abuse that I suffered from my Dad’s abusive and negative behaviour. Up until that
point I didn’t believe that God existed and that if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life (lines 65-70).

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

Mikaela’s relationship with her peers

Paloutzian et al. (1999) described stage four of Rambo’s model of religious conversion as “the point of contact between the potential convert and a new religious or spiritual option” (p. 1072). Gelpi (1998) interpreted the point of contact to be “an advocate of a particular religious tradition” which could take “individual or communal form” (p. 14). Fowler (1981) used the term “sponsor” by which he meant, “the way a person or community provides affirmation, encouragement, guidance and models for a person’s ongoing growth and development” (p. 287). He alluded to the role of the sponsor in the
initiation of people into the Christian community. Leavy et al. (1992) wrote about the need for trust and sensitivity in the sponsoring environment (p. 32ff) and described the role of the Catholic school in sponsoring the faith of its members (p. 154ff). These forms of mentoring, namely by an individual, a convert’s family, by a faith community, and by the convert’s school, were evident in the accounts given by the participants.

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

For Mikaela, safety and security were guaranteed and experienced through belonging to the Church that her friends attended. She stopped going to the Church to which her parents belonged and chose instead to go to Mass with her friend Joan at the local Catholic Church. Her desire to belong somewhere led to her decision to become a Catholic. In her journal, she reported the positive effect of her decision. Before discussing this aspect of her conversion, it seems relevant to consider her perception from the perspective of her motivation. Flynn (1999) used Maslow’s (1943) theory of human motivation to identify an hierarchy of needs in the data gathered from
Year 12 students for his research into the culture of Catholic schools in Australia. Flynn concluded that values relating to happiness, self esteem and spiritual and religious meaning were appropriated by the students he surveyed in a pattern that reflected Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Mikaela’s story of her relationship with her parents and the development of her faith in God also reflected the basic structure of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Her concerns were not related to physiological needs, but to other higher needs, such as those related to security, her social life, esteem and the desire for growth in her relationship with God. She perceived herself to be deprived of the sense of belonging that she had as a young child and she sought it with her friends and their Church. The search that she undertook reflected her need to think well of herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The self-reflection evident here was that of a person seeking to act independently of her peers. Mikaela wanted to be her own person and to act consistently with the beliefs and values she had chosen when she was younger. She expressed her hopes for her future in the following statement couched in the form of a chapter from her imaginary biography:
The floor I’m on right now is *Under Construction*: to rebuild my life and do the things that I planned to do when I was younger and find friends who are wanting the same things from life as I want and not trying to make me feel insignificant. To find God again in my life and instead of asking him for things just receive what he thinks is good for me (lines 49-53).

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

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

_Owning faith in God_

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to Fowler (1981), one consequence of religious conversion is the change in the contents of faith that he defined as “the realities, values,
powers and communities on and in which persons ‘rest their hearts’” (p. 273). Mikaela reported changes in her perception of her relationship with God. As it was stated above, she described it as moving from being “complicated” to being “complex” (Mikaela’s first interview, lines 28-46). She defined “complicated” as “I didn’t get along with him very well.” Mikaela explained the change as a shift in her perception of God’s willingness to forgive her for wrongdoing. Her “complicated” God acted like a parent and she was concerned that God would not forgive her, whereas her “complex” God would always forgive her if she was sorry for her wrongdoing.

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

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

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

Given the absence of a reliance on scripture or scriptural images in Mikaela’s account of her life, the changes in her contents of her faith can be explained better using Babin’s (1965) characteristic of egomorphism. He concluded that subjective factors, such as Mikaela’s experience of her parents’ separation and divorce, “profoundly influence the adolescent’s
understanding of God” (p. 49). Like Erikson, Babin viewed adolescence as a quest for identity. Mikaela declared that she did not want to be like her parents. She experienced their unforgiving stance towards each other and she could not forgive them for the pain of insecurity that they brought on her. She replaced their love with the love of her friends, particularly Joan, who encouraged her to go to Mass with her. In this context, she idealised God as a forgiving father.

Kevin’s conversion

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

Changes in Kevin’s relationship with God

In the interview, Kevin reported changes in his relationship with God. He described God as “like the supreme being sort of. He’s like the — like all-
powerful, like the — like master sort of thing. So like I’m his servant” (Kevin’s interview, lines 5-7), however, his relationship with God was not always like this. Kevin gave an insight into his faith in his early teens:

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

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

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

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

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever experienced suffering?

Kevin: Yes. Actually I have. More than one occasion where I’ve been really down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally and
Kevin believed that his suffering was part of God’s plan. His statement “It took me a long while to get to understand that bit” suggests that intellectual development is part of the suffering. He reported that he did not turn to God until he was in Year 10 when what he was being taught in the Disciples of Jesus youth group started to interest him.

In his apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of human suffering (Salvifici Doloris), Pope John Paul II (1984) identified the relationship between suffering and conversion. He stated: “Suffering must serve for conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject, who can recognise the divine mercy in this call to repentance” (SD, para. 12). The pontiff presented the teaching that conversion is the response to the call to repent which is the heart of the Good News. In this context, suffering is understood to be the result of sin and bears some relationship to conversion. Gutierrez (1987) named the relationship between sin and suffering the doctrine of temporal
retribution, that is, people suffer as a consequence of sin and their suffering can be viewed as a form of punishment for sin and as part of redemption. Pope John Paul II (1984) acknowledged the existence of the doctrine of temporal retribution, however, he also stated that there can be suffering without guilt and referred to the story of Job whose story is about the suffering endured by a just man. Such suffering served to strengthen goodness “both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God” (SD, para. 12).

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

Evidence of religious conversion can be identified in changes in a person’s practice of praying to God. Kevin moved from being uncertain about God to being committed to being God’s servant. This was reflected in his prayer life. When he was a young child, his parents taught him how to pray. That is all he said about his childhood prayer. Clearly something happened to him because he eventually arrived at a time in his life when he would pray daily for about an hour “that probly be in the morning, so — um — in the
mornings, so I’m prepared — I can take school on s-sort of get the Holy Spirit to clear my head a bit so I can have more self-control” (lines 68-70). He believed that through prayer God would give him guidance. He described the structure of his prayer time in the following way:

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

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

*The influence of significant others*

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

Kevin’s story lends support to the findings of Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) who cited studies (Granqvist, 1998, 2002, 2003; Granqvist & Hagekull,
1999, 2002; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) that presented evidence of the correspondence between the religiosity of individuals with a strong attachment to their parents and the religiosity of their parents. Their review of relevant literature led them to formulate the hypothesis that “repeated experiences with sensitive caregivers also produce correspondence between a positive model of self/others and an image of God as loving and caring” (p. 1123). In Kevin’s case, it will be shown that the role of caregiver extended beyond the family to the youth group.

Kevin’s relationship with his parents

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

As happy as Kevin’s home life appeared to be from his account — he felt safe and secure — his parents were not able to shield him from conflict at school. The crisis for Kevin was the treatment he received at the hands of students at school. When he was asked about his experiences of suffering, he replied: “More than one occasion where I’ve been really down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally and s-so I — I — I was just — I call on the Lord to really — ah — get me through the rough times an' — yeah — so” (lines 114-116).
He revealed that “in primary school I was sorta the outcast sort of thing” (line 140). Later in the interview, he explained how he had been teased:

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

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

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

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

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

The changes in Kevin’s faith in God can be viewed through the use of Fowler’s model of faith development: Kevin moved from a Mythic-Literal stage of faith, with its emphasis on the unquestioning acceptance of the community’s faith story, to a Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith, with an equally unquestioning acceptance of the community’s mores. While he did not reject what his parents had taught him – it was consistent with what the youth group leaders taught their members – he widened the circle of teachers to include the youth leaders as significant others alongside his parents. His conversion was an intensification of the faith in which he had be raised, however, its influence was not necessarily cognitive. The emotional factor was significant. For instance, Kevin reported that his best friend in the youth group told him, “My be- — closest friend came to me said he had a strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right
thing” (lines 38-40). Despite his articulate rendering of his story and his ease with the theological interpretation of his experiences, Kevin’s story of his conversion focused on his emotional well-being.

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

Owning faith in God

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

because I turn — was turning eighteen then, they asked if I wanted to go on a seminar sort of thing — um — to sort of discern or decide or make a decision if I wanted to join this community. And so I look — really looked into that and — an’ that was like the turning point literally in my life because — because like I felt God calling me to join this community (lines
A conversion is a “turning point.” Kevin had been converted but he was an active agent in the process because he sought knowledge of how to deal with his low self-esteem.

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

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

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

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

**Concluding remarks**

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

**Elizabeth’s conversion**

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

Changes in Elizabeth’s relationship with God

Through her interviews and the journal that she kept as part of the data gathering procedure for this study, Elizabeth revealed that her understanding of God was undergoing changes. During her first interview, she described God as caring and loving. God is one who helps, guides and forgives. She rejected the idea that God is “this force in the sky that dictates … and that you have to appease” (lines 8, 9). When she was asked about her image of God, she responded by describing God as “a father-type figure” (line 29). She had grown up with an image of God being like a father. She continued with her description:
When I did journaling in RE, the same image of always came out of — like a hand, holding in a massive hand, or, um, or just like a — or even a mother or father holding a little baby, or on the shoulder — um, y’know, carrying, warm and safe. Um — well, y’know, the thing of guiding, with holding the hand, guiding and helping (lines 38-43).

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

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

Ooh, it’s — it’s gone from, um, from a thing of always, y’know, just having God there as a father to rely on, to — like I’m realizing now that you have to — um — that there’s other aspects that you’ve gotta work towards, or — like you’ve gotta try to be the best you can, not just keep saying “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” So, like, and trying to understand, whereas before I’d just
dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a — y’know —
revengeful thing, trying to understand it more, or, you know, or explore
something — (lines 70-77).
What she was experiencing was a form of cognitive dissonance that was
brought on by her realisation that her past mental behaviours (“before I’d just
dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a …”) were
inadequate.

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

While the images that Elizabeth used to communicate her beliefs about
God reflect the concrete operational thinking associated with childhood, her
awareness of the paradoxical shows that she recognised her responsibility to
develop and maintain her relationship with God. In a statement on the multiple
dimensions of religious development, Streib (2005) drew attention to the
debate about post-formal operations and research into cross-domain variance
(p. 5). To summarise the argument presented in his paper and apply it to the
narrative given by Elizabeth: there is no doubt that there was more than cognitive development involved in what Elizabeth revealed through her statements about her relationship with God. What was evidenced in her interviews and her journal was her awareness of the transcendence of God.

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

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

Elizabeth believed that the Holy Spirit dwelt within believers and made its presence felt. In her second interview, she said she believed it was like a “power to be able to do good things” (lines 56-57), however, she did not pray to the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth acknowledged in her first interview that she
prayed to God and to Jesus. When she was a child, she prayed every night. In her first interview, she said: “You say your prayers at night with your parents, but it’s not that much of a big thing” (lines 24-25). She continued:

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

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

Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) proposed that:

Regarding the safe haven aspect of attachment, one of the best documented findings in the psychology of religion is that believers turn to God in situations of distress. Such situations are diverse and include loss through death and divorce (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000, 2002; Loveland, 1968), emotional crises (James, 1902; Starbuck, 1899), and relationship problems (Ullman, 1982), all of which are likely to activate the individual’s
attachment system (Bowlby, 1969). In situations such as these, the most likely religious response is to pray rather than to visit Church (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975), suggesting that private prayer may function as a religious analog to attachment behaviors (see Kirkpatrick, 1999) (pp. 1122-1123).

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

The influence of significant others

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two: Moulded Under Blue Skies and Sunshine

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

Her description of her childhood is significant for a number of reasons. Elizabeth recognised the signs of her own development. The love and care she received in her family provided her with her internal working model of herself as worthwhile. Her beliefs about God were a reflection of her internal
working model of a caring parent. As a child, she received knowledge and used what she was taught to construct a world that reflected the love of her family and the love of God.

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

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

Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) were of the view that “aspects of attachment function in a similar way for the believer in relation to God as they do for the child in relation to his or her parents” (p. 1122). In her first interview, Elizabeth described her mother as a “feeling type person” (line 440). She stated that she learned to trust in God from her mother. Her father was the thinker in the family. He taught her how to set a good example for others. His influence was evident also in her involvement in their parish. Elizabeth reported how she contributed to the Sunday liturgies held in the parish to which her family belonged. At the time of her first interview, she had been involved in the parish liturgy for at least three years, sometimes helping with the children’s liturgy and sometimes helping with the singing by playing guitar. She did not appear to be enthusiastic about the experience and she readily accepted the word “duty” as a description of her involvement. She concluded her comments with “I like it and everything but I only go for the sermon” (Elizabeth’s first interview, lines 436-437). The sermons were preached by her father.
In her interviews and in her journal, she provided examples of the impact of her parents and siblings on her faith development. For instance, she recalled her mother’s tenderness and compassion. Her father challenged her to be open to the theology taught in her Religious Education classes. Her sister had a profound impact on her. She said: “I find a lot of her words coming out of my mouth” (lines 375-376).

Elizabeth’s relationship with her friends

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

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

This was the experience that Elizabeth had when she joined the youth group attached to the Lutheran Church. The “new religious style” adopted by her owed much to the influence of her close friends in the youth group. She reported in her second interview that she admired Katy who was her mentor in
the youth group: “… she keeps influencing me more and more, not like a lot, not just with God things, but the kind of person I am” (lines 31-33). Elizabeth modelled her prayer style on what she observed when Katy prayed:

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

Owning faith in God

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

Chapter Three: The White Fairy Visits Me

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

Mutuality is an important aspect of Elizabeth’s religious conversion.
Streib (2001) offered the following observation about its importance in considerations about faith development:

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

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

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

Concluding remarks

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

Crucial to understanding Elizabeth’s conversion experiences has been the concept of mutuality. Her desire to belong in a wider community, which was born from her experience of a loving family, was satisfied by her involvement in the youth group attached to her Church. Streib (2001) intimated that mutuality can be a limiting factor in the religious development of individuals, meaning that the desire to belong can contribute to the creation of a religious ghetto mentality. Elizabeth was aware of this in herself. She explained in her first interview that she reacted negatively to the theology presented to her in her religious education classes: “When I sometimes come home from school real annoyed at something Catholic that some one of my teachers had told me, I’d go home and start saying it to Dad and he would defend the Catholics” (lines 461-464). What surprised her was her father’s
defence of the right of teachers in a Catholic school to present Catholic teaching. She reflected on this admission in the first interview. Some months later during her second interview, she added: “... like ’cause of the Catholic thing, I really didn’t even give it a chance – um – which like I probably should have and I could have like learnt something, or got something out of it, I’m sure (lines 121-124). The change of attitude indicated here points to the development of an openness that Fowler would propose as part of the movement towards a more mature faith and definitely a sign of conversion.

Stephen’s conversion

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

The adolescent’s sense of God

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

Babin called the second process “egomorphism.” He used the term to refer to those findings of research conducted in the 1950s in France and Canada into the role of ego in adolescents’ statements about their experiences of God. He defined egomorphism as “a mentality and form of expression in which one’s concept of God or relationship with God seems profoundly determined by the psychosociological conditions of the subject’s
personality” (p. 42). He stated that researchers concluded that subjective factors profoundly influence adolescents’ understandings of God. He reported the following characteristics of the influence of subjective factors: “On the one hand, they distort divine reality with the forms and demands of adolescent subjectivity; on the other hand, they greatly involve the adolescent’s personality in his understanding of God” (p. 41).

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

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

> By faith man freely commits his entire self to God, making “the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals,” and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him. Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he
must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and “makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth” (para. 5).

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

**Stephen’s changing relationship with God**

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

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

Sometimes I believe that God is disappointed in the way we’ve been treating the earth, like that’s why there’s like natural disasters. There’ve
been more disasters, like natural disasters, recorded in the past two hundred years than in the previous thousand and, y’know, like just trying to let us know that we’re not living the life we should be (lines 168-174).

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

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

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

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

Throughout this part of the interview, and also in the second interview conducted some months later, the uncertainty communicated in the expression “could be like that” was evident. His focus was on God and not the Blessed Trinity. For instance, in the second interview he was asked to comment on his image of the Holy Spirit. He replied: “I’ve never really though
– this is not good. Last time I said that it was the – I can’t remember. The Holy Spirit hasn’t changed not greatly because I haven’t thought about it enough for it to evolve (lines 49-52).”

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

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

His parents sent him to a public school for his primary schooling. Then he attended a Catholic secondary school. When he was asked about the
impact of Religious Education lessons on his faith, he focused on the debates held in Year 11 about life issues, such as abortion and stem cell research. He wrote with some passion in his journal about the debates and the position he defended was opposed to the teaching of the Church:

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

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

As it was noted with Kevin and Mikaela, Stephen’s relationship with God changed because of crises in his life. However, while the crises experienced by Mikaela were precipitated by her parents’ separation and divorce, as well as the loss of a close friend, Stephen’s crises came from different quarters and appeared to be less dramatic. The first crisis occurred when Stephen was in Year 10, specifically, in a Year 10 Religious Education class. The word crisis is used here in the sense that Erikson (1968) used it: to describe turning points in the experience of living. For him, a turning point, like conversion, was “a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (p. 96). In chapter 4, it was reported that Stephen’s attitude towards life changed when his teacher challenged him about his treatment of a fly (p. 170). In his second interview, he recalled an incident that took place in his
Year 10 Religious Education class: “This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, ‘It’s got as much right to live as you do.’ And I’ve never done it since” (lines 92-94). Stephen then linked this experience to his understanding of Buddhism:

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

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

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

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

Stephen’s thanksgiving prayers acknowledged the power of God at work in his life and the lives of those whom he loved. This content of his faith remained unchanged in his life. What did change was his realisation that God
was not responsible for those things that caused him to suffer. As stated above, the greatest obstacle that he had to deal with was his cousin's surfing accident which left her a quadriplegic. He recalled that as a child, he blamed God whenever he suffered. Now he had come to consider the small signs of recovery experienced by his cousin as answers to his prayers.

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

The influence of significant others

The most significant people in Stephen’s life were his parents. Even though they had divorced and lived separate lives, Stephen still felt very much a part of their worlds. He enjoyed good relationships with his mother and father. They provided him with the stability and security that he needed to deal with issues that impacted on his relationship with God as he perceived it to be.
As a child, Stephen went to Mass with his father whenever he stayed with him. His father went to Mass every Sunday. Even though as an adolescent he became less regular in attending Mass with his father, Stephen believed that his father’s influence was instrumental in the development of his faith in God. He stated in his second interview: “(It was) my Dad being a practising Catholic which led me to going to Church which like my faith evolved from that” (Stephen’s Second Interview, lines 57-58). Stephen discovered that he and his father had similar interests: surfing and cars. He reported that in recent times he had grown closer to his father. He said, “Me and my Dad have become mates pretty much over the past two years. Like, he was my mate before that but he was like more of a father figure” (Stephen’s first interview, lines 372-375). When he was asked about what brought about the change in their relationship, he responded with “Um – how much advice he gave me with my cousin’s accident, so much good advice” (lines 381-382).

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

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

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

Over time, Stephen developed a religious view of life. His relationship with God reflected his relationship with his parents. Using attachment theory, Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) researched the possible relationship between childhood attachments, religious beliefs and conversion. They posited two contrasting hypotheses about the nature and direction of an individual’s relationship with God. The first is the “compensation hypothesis” and the second is the “mental model hypothesis.” The “compensation hypothesis” suggests that belief in a loving, personal God can be a substitute for the absence of a loving relationship with parents or other primary caregivers. The “mental model hypothesis” states that a person’s relationship with God is built on earlier experiences of attachment, such as relationships with parents or other primary caregivers.
The latter has relevance to Stephen’s case. The “mental model hypothesis,” which Birgegard and Granqvist (2002) called the “two-level correspondence hypothesis” (p. 1123), is based on Bowlby’s (1969) work on children’s internal working models of attachment (often referred to in the literature as IWMs). Early relationships, such as Stephen’s relationship with his mother, provide the basis for future attachment relationships, as in the case of Stephen’s belief in God as a powerful creator who offers him support and strength as well as guidance. Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) reported that “perceived attachment to a primary caregiver appears to influence religious stability and change over time” (p. 638). Stephen’s conversion was gradual. It reflected his intellectual development and his willingness to address crises in his life from within the social framework of his family. The role of his teachers and his secondary school will be dealt with in a later chapter.

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

_Owning faith in God_

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The change in faith experienced by Stephen did not happen overnight. It was gradual and volitional, that is, he was the active agent of his own conversion. This is not to say that conversion was his intention. It happened because of the quest for answers to questions that confounded him. In his journal he reflected on the surfing accident suffered by his cousin Andrea. He wrote, “I thought that if there was a god, why would he let this happen” (line 59). As he acknowledged in his first interview, when asked about the reasons for the change in his relationship with God, it happened also because of his growth in maturity:
Ah – just maturity, like I don’t have – I don’t – I dunno, I sometimes put myself in like his position, not that he could, but what would you have done, like you can’t watch everyone at the same time. I dunno, just a bit of thought on the matter (lines 45-48).

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

Concluding remarks

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

Unlike the other participants whose stories have been presented in this chapter, Stephen was open to religious influences from outside his Catholic upbringing. He was taken with concepts found in Buddhism, particularly the notion of reincarnation. This seemed to fit well with his understanding of a transcendent and benign Creator who guided and strengthened those who
believed in God. Stephen did not believe in a vengeful god intent on punishing people. Rather, he believed that God allowed people to suffer the consequences of their actions. Consequently, he placed emphasis on behaving ethically. For him to have moved from a position of arrogance, as he termed it, when as a child he would blame God for what went wrong in his life, to his present view of God who wants people to take responsibility for the world and for creation is clearly a sign of his religious conversion.

Summary

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

In the chapter, the contexts of the religious experiences of the participants in the present study were discussed using the major themes identified in the previous chapter, namely their changing relationships with God, the influence of significant others on their faith development, and their ownership of their faith. Insights into the religious conversion of the four participants were gained through the application of the findings of attachment theory as well as theological and psychological principles. Rambo’s seven-stage model of religious conversion and the understanding of faith development presented by James Fowler, the principles adolescent faith postulated by Babin and the overarching psychosocial principles proposed by
Erikson, Piaget and advocates of attachment theory were used to clarify the
position adopted in the present study with respect to religious conversion.

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

- Despite the formulation of theories of faith development, particularly the stage theory of James Fowler, individual differences are significant. These differences include the intellectual, emotional and social factors affecting the lives of adolescents. Family dynamics, psychological factors and emotional ties are likely to be significant in conversion.

- It is likely that conversion will take place, even gradually, only if there is a crisis, be it major or minor, which precipitates the desire for a deeper relationship with God.

- Attachment figures play a significant role in the religious conversion of adolescents. Where they provide a secure environment, and are themselves religious, then adolescents are more likely to be religious as well. In such circumstances, if adolescents are predisposed to explore their faith, then it is likely that conversion will take place and it will tend to be gradual.

- Attachment figures can include peers, particularly in youth groups sponsored by faith communities. Such groups provide the security needed for adolescents as they explore their beliefs about God and develop their relationship with God. In concert with their intellectual and social development, conversion is likely to happen gradually. Again, individual differences are a significant factor. Each of the youth groups referred to in this chapter has its own ethos and its own pedagogy.
Judging from how Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth told their stories, it is likely that youth groups have their own unique ways of helping their members grow in faith.

• Concepts belonging to structural-developmental theories, such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development, have proved to be useful tools for interpreting statements made by the participants about changes in their relationships with God. The increase in intellectual powers that comes with intellectual development provides part of the environment needed for religious conversion.

• The desire for personal meaning and significance is part of the intellectual development experienced by adolescents. This desire can be an agent in bringing about religious conversion.

• The emotional life of the adolescent seems to be critical in religious conversion and can be observed through signs of the desire to belong. The concept of mutuality proved to be a useful tool for explaining some of the experiences reported by Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth.

The opening statement of the chapter introduced the first research question of the present study: *Is it possible to interpret students’ disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?* The question was answered in the following way: first, the findings of three researchers, notably James Fowler (1981), Pierre Babin (1965) and Lewis Rambo (1993), were used to provide a framework for the interpretation of the accounts provided by the four participants: Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen; and second, the findings of research conducted into the relationship between attachment theory and religious beliefs were used to interpret the
four participants’ perceptions of the changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion. In the next chapter, the second research question — *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* — will guide the discussion of the role that the imagination plays in religious conversion.
Chapter 6: The imagination and religious conversion

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Figure 5**

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

*Reaching back: memory, emotion and the imagination*

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

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

*Information processing theories and the imagination: memory and emotion*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cognitive development and the imagination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

_Leaning forward: the imagination, understanding and will_

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

The imagination and understanding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ascetic imagination and faith development

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

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

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

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

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

Creative imagination and faith development

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

When creative imagination is considered as the meeting of these two principles, then it should be possible to find creative imagination at work wherever new ideas emerge about the relationship between the divine and the human that give expression to the possibilities that flow from such a relationship. For example, in the present study, the participant named Alexandra had resolved an impasse between her beliefs about God and the experience of trauma in her life by deciding that her family’s relationship with God had changed. She wrote in her journal: “I believed God had abandoned my family. I thought that God wouldn’t have all these events in less than three months to my family” (lines 50-51). Her conclusion was not satisfying. Her journal traced her search for more satisfying understanding of God’s participation in her life. As stated in chapter 4 above, Alexandra found inspiration in the message of a guest speaker. In her journal, she wrote:
The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 61-63). This was only part of the solution to her impasse. She came to realise that God worked indirectly through people to help those in need. In her first interview, she revealed: “I think that - um - God can act as another human being trying to help stop the suffering” (lines 122-123). Alexandra cast herself in that role and explained in her journal that she regarded her life as an opportunity to “help others to become strong when faced with difficult problems” (line 66). Everything was connected and in this interconnectedness lay the resolution to the dissatisfaction she experienced in her relationship with God. Creative imagination provided her with a way forward in her life and in her faith.

Sacramental imagination and faith development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evidence of the imagination in religious conversion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If I just follow him, I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I even will. He knows more than I would ever realise. So if I follow his lead, my life will not only be a fairy tale but something better (lines 151-153).

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

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

Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt “Yep, I’m gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them.” That’s the first thing that came into my head. I wasn’t angry. I wasn’t disappointed as much as I thought I would probably would have been, but I actually thought, “Yep, I’m gonna go out and help them because they’ve obviously got a problem that can be fixed” (lines 118-124).

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

… for the last couple of months, I’ve been praying about, for everyone else and not for myself as such. And I remember hearing ages and ages ago somebody says ‘If you pray for somebody else, God will give you something in return.’ So I – every night I’d say, ‘Please bless people, please, the people I love and the people that don’t like me, that I don’t get
along with.’ It’s just – I dunno – even though I would – I’d never want to wish anything bad on anybody any more anyway (lines 171-179).

Even though there is the suggestion of self-interest in the statement quoted above, her admission that she did not want to think ill of anyone showed that her focus had become the good of others and not just her own situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just as Mikaela found herself trying to forge her identity out of experiences of rejection and acceptance, so, too, did Kevin. The rejection by his peers at school and his lack of self-control—he spoke about praying “in the mornings, so I’m prepared – I can take school on s-sort of get the Holy Spirit to clear my head a bit so I can have more self-control” (lines 68-70)—were countered by the feelings of self-worth generated through his involvement in the youth group. For instance, he spoke about the power of the share group to which he belonged: “… we talk about our problems an’ stuff, so – and they really hold you accountable for your faith. And so you’d get stronger ‘cause of that” (lines 174-176).

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

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

I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, my be- – closest friend came to me said he had a strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right thing (lines 36-40).

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

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

I do the Sign of the Cross an’ then I would call on God to – an’ ask him what he would want me to do for the day. An’ then I would – then I’d probly get into some Bible – reading the Bible and then I’d s-say a decade of the Rosary an’ then to conclude. An’ as well as writing in my prayer journal all the stuff I’ve been reading in the Bible that really speaks to me (lines 74-79).
This was the structure of his prayer, often in the morning before going to school. Typically, he would spend about an hour alone in prayer. His commitment was to doing God’s will. He was convinced that God spoke to him through the Bible. When he was asked to explain what he meant by his prayer journal, he responded:

... when I’m praying I get sort of like a word, some like words that just come out, an’ I believe that’s God telling me stuff that’s called “prophetic word,” what I call the prophetic word an’ so – and so I’m open to that. Sometimes I don’t write anything because I haven’t – he doesn’t do it all the time but just I write – sometimes I just get this feeling that I have to write this word (lines 82-87).

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

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

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

The second aspect of Christian asceticism was evident in his concern for the salvation of his peers at school. In his interview, Kevin reflected on his mission to evangelise his fellow students. He described his mission in the following way: “There are a lot of people – kids that don’t believe in Christ an’ so I feel compelled to like take a l- – like leadership role, so I’ll – ah - be a role model sort of thing for them” (lines 178-181). The particular context that he used was singing in the choir at a school Mass. He explained how he witnessed to them: “I’m at Mass – go to – at the liturgy choir. Some people would like sit and then I’d encourage them to kneel and if they don’t – don’t
like if they need some explaining about the Mass, I’d gladly do that” (lines 183-185).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it’s – it’s gone from, um, from a thing of always, y’know, just having God there as a father to rely on, to – like I’m realizing now that you have to – um - that there’s other aspects that you’ve gotta work towards, or – like you’ve gotta try to be the best you can, not just keep saying “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” So, like, and trying to understand, whereas before I’d just dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a – y’know – revengeful thing, trying to understand it more … (lines 69-76).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Stephen’s conversion*

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

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

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

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

This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, “It’s got as much right to live as you do.” And I’ve never done it since. So that’s one small thing. But Mr Jones’ class last year would a been one of the biggest RE things. But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you just – But that’s what the Buddhists also believe. Like they don’t, they don’t kill flies, or anything. I’ve spoken to a – like someone that follows Buddhism only last month and they don’t own fly spray. Like they treat their animals with respect ’cause they believe that it could be like your grandmother or your grandfather that’s done something bad that have to learn a lesson, so you treat them with respect ’cause you never know who they are (lines 92-104).

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

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

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

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

as a child I just prayed like the same prayer every night. But now I actually thank God for certain things, ask him favours and so I suppose I look at God as a mate more so than someone you’re just repetitive towards. So although it’s decreased, it has also become – um – more personal (lines 64-69).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding remarks

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

When their imaginations engaged in the act of creating what Fischer (1983) called “the not-yet of the future” (p. 7), new worlds were created. Their conversion happened when the ways they related with the world shifted to accommodate new ways of imaging their relationship with God.
In this chapter, the second research question was addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focused on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion was the aspect under consideration in the present study. A model of how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was designed and applied to the data gathered from the participants in the present study. Insights from information-processing theories, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Thomas’ theory of perceptual activity, Perlovsky’s neural modelling field theory and Harris’ model of religious imagination were used to provide the detail needed to describe the work of the imagination in the faith development and religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the present study. In the next chapter, the third research question — *What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?* — will be examined. Recommendations will be made about how to address the goals of Catholic education outlined in the *Mandate* of the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia through engaging the imagination in assisting the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents.
Chapter 7: Religious education, conversion and the role of the imagination in evangelisation

Introduction

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

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

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

Catholic education in Western Australia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christian witness and faith development

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

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

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

In his journal, he wrote:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up to this point I used to shut myself away from the world and mostly through the hurt that I had felt as a result of my parents break up and the continual abuse that I suffered from my Dad’s abusive and negative behaviour (lines 65-68).

The theme of her parents’ divorce and its impact on her faith in God was developed in previous chapters. It was argued in chapter 5 that Mikaela experienced a crisis that sent her in search of salvation. The witness to Christian beliefs and values that some of her teachers and a few friends gave her at her secondary school provided her with a way through her self-pity and low self-esteem. She acknowledged the support she received from Joan at a time in her life when she was looking for the experience of belonging. Mikaela wrote about Joan’s influence in her journal:
Joan has strong faith and with her strong faith I came to believe that I too could have faith exactly like her. Joan though she didn’t know it was the person I placed my getting Catholicism on. I needed her to help me to guide me and give me advice when a lot of my other friends turned me away from the right path (lines 35-39).

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

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

I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, my be- — closest friend came to me said he had a
strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right thing (lines 36-40).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Christian witness, faith and adolescent psychological development*

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

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

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

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

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

Ministry of the word and faith development

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

*Primary proclamation and faith development*

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

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

Glynna expressed a similar view about Jesus as that presented by Luke. She believed that “God controls like everything” (line 58). She described Jesus as “the compassionate, like really caring, like emotional side, you know, the part that’s capable of rage and anger and disgust and all that kind of stuff”
(lines 59-61). She recognised the humanity of Jesus, but did not express any views about his divinity, or of his role as saviour. Frank did not see any difference between Jesus and God. In his first interview, he admitted that “the Trinity’s a very, yeah, confusing thing” (line 35). He did not ascribe any role to Jesus. Moreover, when he prayed, his focus was God, not Jesus. Sophie stated that Jesus and God “were a bit different” (line 55). She described Jesus as “the physical form of God” (line 52). Unlike Frank, she prayed to Jesus, but she also prayed to Mary and “to family members that are passed away” (line 88).

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

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

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

**Primary proclamation and conversion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Initiatory catechesis*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious education

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

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

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

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

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

Students’ perceptions of religious education

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

… we were all really close and we felt really comfortable discussing like personal issues and this year I’m in the INSTEP class and like with — like it’s like segregated … and we don’t really have class discussions an’ stuff. So, it’s really different (lines 424-429).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pedagogy of religious education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I’ve had pretty good RE teachers as well. Miss Jones, a very good RE teacher. Mr Smith was — like Miss Jones gave me like that little push I needed. She go “Talk to the Father. He’s pretty good about stuff like this.” And then Mr Smith made me think, like “Why am I thinking this about
God?” “What has happened to make me think about God like that?” (lines 366-371).

Mikaela reflected on what her teachers said in her religious education classes. Her desire to become a Catholic became the measure of what she experienced in class. The questioning alluded to above in her comment about the impact of her teachers on her faith was just one aspect of the thinking she engaged in through her participation in her religious education classes. She also arrived at judgments based on what she heard and her own thinking. For instance, she reported on a lesson in her journal. Based on her teacher’s comments to some students who were misbehaving in class, she concluded:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious education methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teachable moments generally are serendipitous. Often they occur without teachers being aware of them. Recall the discussion about Stephen and the fly earlier in the present chapter. He reported: “I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, “It’s got as much right to live as you do.” And I’ve never done it since” (lines 92-94). The change in Stephen’s attitude towards life and the development of his faith happened away from the class, but the catalyst was that one moment and an unplanned rebuke from his teacher. It was truly a serendipitous event in his life that changed him profoundly. A chance encounter with Stephen three years after he had left school revealed that he had just returned from a trip to Asia where he had participated in filming a documentary on endangered species.

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

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

So Saul headed toward Damascus. As he came near the city, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?"

The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up now and go into the city. Someone there will tell you what you must do." (Acts 9:3-6 New Century Version).
Saul’s Damascus experience changed his life changed radically as the rest of the story told in the *Acts of the Apostles* attested.

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

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

Just as teachable moments contribute to the work of the imagination as it creates a reality that is Christian, they can contribute also to the creation of a reality that is religious but not Christian. The teachable moments that occurred in Stephen’s life confirmed for him the existence of God, but were part of his imaginative construction of a worldview that seemed to him at the time he explained it to be more Buddhist than Christian. He said in his second interview: “My religion is Catholicism, but my faith – like I said before, I have many beliefs of different religions, like Buddhism, reincarnation, so therefore I use them differently” (lines 86-88). He experienced a religious conversion that was moral and ecological and he remained open to being Christian and Catholic.

Summary

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

The final chapter is a summary of the overall study with recommendations being made for the improvement of the evangelisation of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools and for further research.
Chapter 8: Findings and recommendations

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

The mission of the Church: Evangelisation

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

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

In chapter 1, it was stated that the present study was undertaken to satisfy the desire to know what role the imagination played in the religious conversion of adolescents. The desire was personal and it was stirred by the many and varied
experiences of teaching religious education in Catholic secondary schools over a period of almost forty years. The use of creative strategies to engage the minds and hearts of students prompted questions about the role of the imagination in teaching and learning. Over time, this reflection led to the much deeper and more fundamental matter of the imagination’s role in the religious conversion of adolescents. The findings of the study relate not only to the purpose of the study, that is, to describe the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents, but also to its context, which is the Catholic school system in Western Australia, and the qualitative methodology that was used to conduct the study.

The context of the study

Catholic schools are mandated to evangelise, that is, through their curriculum, to seek to convert their students solely through the divine power of the message that the Church proclaims. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) ushered in changes in the Catholic Church’s reflection on how its mission ought to be carried out in Catholic schools. The sociological impetus for the changes in understanding was outlined in chapter 1. In summary, the Catholic Church had grown through a process that placed initiation and instruction before conversion. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2005) stated that in 2001 only about 15% of the five million Catholics in Australia attended Mass regularly. It was assumed that the degree of participation in the life of the Catholic Church was one measure of religious conversion and, in particular, of
Christian conversion. Given the Catholic Church’s use of the term “new evangelisation” in the context of Catholic education, it was concluded that in Catholic schools, most students were being taught in through the curriculum about how to live as Catholics before they had accepted faith in Christ. The renewal of evangelisation that took place after the Second Vatican Council addressed this issue. The immediate background to the present study was the *Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2001-2007* from the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia. The Bishops directed that all Catholic schools engage in the evangelisation of their students through a process that highlighted the importance of Christian witness and ministry of the word, which included primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis and the teaching of religious education.

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

*The power of Christian witness*

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

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

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

Ministry of the word: Primary proclamation

Christian witness invariably involves primary proclamation, that is, speaking about Christian salvation in the hope that it leads to conversion of minds and hearts. Holohan (1999) described primary proclamation as sharing beliefs about God’s presence in creation, helping others to recognise that human fulfilment comes from and leads to God, and showing them that forgiveness and healing from sinfulness and sin comes from faith in Christ. The participants of the present study communicated their perceptions of primary proclamation.

It was evident that all but one of the participants recognised and accepted that God created the universe and that God “alone can satisfy completely” their deepest yearnings (M09, para. 47). While all the participants responded to questions about the relationship between God and Jesus, most described Jesus as God’s messenger but did not identify him as saviour. Of the four participants who mentioned the forgiveness in the context of their Christian faith, only two, namely Elizabeth and Mikaela, provided extended reflections on the personal dimension of forgiveness in a Christian context.

Ministry of the word: Initiatory catechesis

In chapter 7, initiatory catechesis was defined and evidence presented of the participants’ awareness of and appreciation for some of the various elements
that were listed as ways Catholic schools engage in catechesis, namely school Masses, prayer, participation in the Lenten programme known as Project Compassion, membership of school-based Catholic youth groups, such as the Young Christian Students movement, structured class discussions about religious and moral beliefs and values, and school retreats. Little was revealed about most of the elements listed. For some participants, senior school retreats were important events, however, as was indicated in chapter 7, the dominant perception was that retreats provided opportunities for personal and social development rather than Christian formation. Of the two references to Project Compassion, one was a criticism of the lack of concern shown by students for the needy. In general, while the schools attended by the participants engaged in initiatory catechesis, they did not have a strong influence on the participants’ perceptions of their faith.

Ministry of the word: Religious education

Religious education was mandated by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia as the first learning area of the curriculum taught in Catholic schools. In general, the participants expressed appreciation for the efforts of their religious education teachers. They expressed confidence in their teachers’ abilities to explain the Church’s teachings in ways that they could understand. Broadly speaking, they perceived the subject to be about moral and ethical issues that were dealt with through discussion and debate. Only two participants mentioned conscience formation as a significant factor in living a Christian lifestyle. Only one
student stated that she reflected on what Jesus would do in her situation. Prayer was mentioned as a part of their personal faith but never as a class activity. The most significant references to prayer were in relation to the support given by peers in youth groups. It was not a significant aspect of the content of their religious education classes. In general, then, what the students appreciated related more to primary proclamation than to initiatory catechesis. It was concluded that this was more an indication of what was important to the participants at the time they were involved in the present study and not of what was delivered by the religious education teachers.

Methodology: A phenomenological study

To be able to describe the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the study, it was important to adopt an approach that allowed them to communicate their perceptions of their faith in God. Thus the study was phenomenological in intent and design. By means of semi-structured interviews and a journal-writing activity that explored the integration of faith and life from personal and educational perspectives, data was gathered and then categorised using qualitative data analysis software. The approach known as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to guide the analysis and the discussion of the results of the analysis.

The phenomena of faith development and religious conversion exhibited psychological characteristics that were examined using various theories that had been developed to explain aspects of human behaviour. Bowlby's (1969)
attachment theory was found to be useful in explaining aspects of the religious development of the participants in the present study. It was shown in chapter 5 of the present study that where there was parental support the attitude towards commitment to a relationship with God was positive. This was in keeping with studies done of the application of attachment theory to the faith development of adolescents and adults. It was found that where there was support from home for their stated beliefs, the participants were happy to remain in the relationship with God, as they perceived it to be. What was also found in the present study was the gradual emergence of the positive influence of peers who were friends and who had strong religious affiliations. This form of attachment proved to be critical to the experience of conversion as reported in chapter 5.

Statements made by a number of participants concerning the developmental aspect of their faith related to cognitive development. For instance, Luke commented that what he was taught in class did not always make sense at the time it was taught, but it did later on. Kevin described his conversion in terms of his growth in understanding. Frank also acknowledged the reality of cognitive development by referring to the relationship between having a greater understanding of life issues and maturity.

Piaget’s (1950) concepts of equilibration, disequilibration, assimilation and accommodation provided a useful means for discussing the changes in students’ perceptions of their relationship with God. It was found that conversion could be explained as the movement through accommodation from a state of disequilibration (the experience of a crisis of faith, in oneself, or in God) to a state
of equilibrium (or equilibration as Piaget called it) where there is a dynamic balance between one’s created reality and what constitutes one’s environment. When Kevin was interviewed he was in a state of equilibration. He spoke confidently of his faith in God and his mission to evangelise his peers at school. Stephen stated that his faith had plateaued; he was comfortable with what he believed about God and he resisted any change in his understanding about the sacredness of life that was put to him as Church teaching.

Piaget’s understanding of human cognition also provided a way of understanding how catechesis works in continuing the process of conversion. A Catholic understanding of conversion emphasises the gradual and ongoing, lifelong process of conversion. The dynamic nature of equilibration and disequilibration was reflected in what the participants revealed about how their thinking about God changed. One example quoted in chapter seven was a Year 10 religious education lesson that Mikaela described in her journal. What her teacher said in class caused her to re-think her beliefs about the goodness of people. Her tendency to judge some people as bad and unredeemable was challenged and only by accepting her teacher’s viewpoint was she able experience some peace of mind, that is, equilibration. Mikaela admitted that she became aware of the change in her attitude and her beliefs only when she was in Year 12. That the majority of participants did not acknowledge Jesus as saviour does not mean that they will not do so in the future. Some of the participants acknowledged that their religious education teachers made them think and it was shown that changes in their relationship with God came about through reflection.
The work of the imagination

In chapter 1, Bednar’s (1996) definition of the imagination as the intellectual faculty that “unifies the processes of the mind and heart” (p. 169) was adopted. In chapter 6, the concept of the imagination was developed further through references to its connection with feelings, understanding and will and through relating it to the experience of the numinous in life. The work of the imagination was described as being like a dialectic “reaching back” into memory while “leaning forward” to compose a future that represents the best fit of past and present.

It was found that the participants constructed images of their faith based on memories of their relationships with significant others, such as parents, and best friends. Kant (2007/1781) described the action of the imagination as being almost unnoticed and often recognised only in hindsight when people acknowledge the differences between the reality they create in the present from the one they created in the past. For instance, the conversions described in chapter five reflected the power of the imagination constructing images of happiness that were part of a renewed commitment in faith to God. The adequacy or fit of the newly constructed image of faith demonstrated the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

Recommendations

Four general themes emerged from an examination of the very findings outlined above. The themes were used to guide the articulation of the
recommendations advanced below. The first theme concerned the faith development of senior secondary students. The second theme related to the continued development of Christ-centred curricula. The third theme highlighted the need for further teacher development in the area of evangelisation. The fourth theme was about the need for further research.

First recommendation: Regarding the faith development of senior students

That the religious education curriculum for senior secondary students includes a study of how faith develops; that students are provided with an understanding of the psychology of human development; and that the process of evangelisation, particularly the importance of Christian witness, primary proclamation and initiatory catechesis be expressed to them.

Second recommendation: Regarding the development of Christ-centred curricula

That schools develop curricula that enhance the value of Christian witness across the learning areas; that schools’ evangelisation plans include the systematic development of peer ministry programmes, including establishing youth groups that evangelise; that the role of the imagination in faith development be a major pedagogical principle; and that the principles of equilibration and disequilibration be incorporated in the design of the pedagogy of faith that is implemented in each Catholic secondary school.
Third recommendation: Regarding teacher development

That school staff members be shown how to recognise in themselves the need for conversion and the signs of the Spirit at work in their lives; that they be educated to see their work in terms of new evangelisation; and that they understand the importance of the Christian witness to faith that they give to their students.

Fourth recommendation: Regarding further research

That action research projects be developed to promote a deeper understanding of how teachers can become more effective in their evangelisation of adolescents.

That studies of peer ministry in Catholic secondary schools be undertaken to establish a model of ministry that promotes evangelisation.

Concluding statement

The assertion that the Holy Spirit is the eye of the soul was made in chapter 1 of the present study. The Spirit seeks to guide the “blind but indispensable faculty of the soul,” that is, the imagination as Kant (2007/1781) conceived it to be. Pope Paul VI (1975) drew these ideas together in his description of evangelisation as “the gentle action of the Spirit” (EN, para. 75). Through the imagination, the Spirit “stirs up the new creation, the new humanity of which evangelisation is to be the result, with that unity in variety which
The "new creation, the new humanity" is the outcome of the conversion of mind and heart and the product of the imagination. Thus it can be said that the role of the imagination in the conversion of adolescents is to gently — and in some instances suddenly and forcefully — move them to the realisation that they have been created by the Father, redeemed by the Son and transformed by the Spirit.
References


Granqvist, P. (2006). On the relation between secular and divine relationships: An emerging attachment perspective and a critique of the


Appendix 1: Letter to student

Richard Patrick Branson  
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Armadale, WA, 6112  
Tel. 9399 7359  
Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Dear student,

Thank you for agreeing to consider being a participant in my research project. I am writing to you to give you more details so that you will be able to decide whether or not to continue with your involvement.

As you are aware, I am a student of the University of Notre Dame Australia. I am enrolled as a candidate in the university’s doctoral programme. The subject of my research is the role the imagination plays in the religious conversion of adolescents. Sometimes, conversion experiences are quite dramatic, however, I am sure that for most of us, religious conversion happens slowly and quietly. I am interested in the signs of the inner activity that happens in people’s lives as they experience their conversion to God.

I have restricted the field of my study to Year 12 students attending Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth. This is quite deliberate. I teach religious education to Year 12 students and I am impressed with their thoughtfulness and the insights they have into their faith and into life.

I have written to your parents. If you want to participate in this project, I will need their permission for your involvement. I have included a reply form which acknowledges your willingness to be a part of the project with your parents’ approval. All you have to do is for you and your parents to sign it and send it back to me in the stamped addressed envelope that I have included. Then I will arrange to interview you.

The interview, which is the first part of your participation in the project, will last no more than 45 minutes and will be about the experience of change in your life and the place God has in the changes that have been taking place.

In the course of the interview, I might ask questions that you do not want to answer. You should feel free to decline to answer questions that make you feel uncertain, or vulnerable, or perhaps may anger you. I realize that I am entering a very private world and that I am a guest. The people I will interview will tell me only as much as they feel comfortable revealing to me.

I would like to tape the interview. This will help me produce a faithful record of our conversation. If at the conclusion of the interview, you decide not to proceed with your involvement then I will delete the file from my recorder.

If you choose to continue, then I will transcribe the interview and send you a copy for you to read. You will have the opportunity to let me know if I have misunderstood you or for you to make changes to what you said. I will check with you a few days after you have received the transcript and arrange to interview you again if you want to make any changes to the transcript.
I would like you to keep a journal. The subject matter of your journal writing is set out in the document that I will give to you at the conclusion of the first interview. Some students have taken up to six months to complete the journal, even though I suggest in its introduction that you take only a month. For some students, writing is a difficult task. For others, their lives are so full that they find it hard to make time to think deeply about the matters raised in the journal. Should you choose not to write the journal, then I would like to interview you a third time as outlined below.

When I have completed the analysis of the first interview, I will contact you again to arrange for a time to interview you a second time. I will do this to clarify anything you might have said that perhaps I haven’t understood or explored with you sufficiently in the first interview. Again I will tape the interview, transcribe it and provide you with a copy of the transcription.

At some point about half-way through your first year away from school, I will contact you again to interview. This could be the second or third interview, depending on whether or not you choose to do the journal. I would like to interview you at this time because the experience of leaving school can bring about changes in your relationship with God and those changes provide insights into your school experience. As with the other interviews, I will tape this one, transcribe it and then send you a copy.

At some point about twelve months after the final interview, I will provide you with a written statement of the findings of my research. You will have the opportunity to reflect on my findings and provide any insights or corrections that you feel comfortable in giving me. Whatever changes I make will be shown to you before I go any further with my research.

In my writing, I will give you a fictitious name and invent details, such as the name of the school you attend. You will be invited to give yourself an alias. I will maintain contact with you during the writing phase of my study and provide you with copies of what I write not only for your own interest, but especially to make sure that your anonymity is preserved in my writing and that I have represented you fairly wherever you can identify yourself in the text of my writing.

During my research, all documents, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents. I will be the only person with access to the information that will be stored on my computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against loss of data.

If you want to participate in this project and you have your parents’ permission, please complete the acceptance form that I have included with this letter. On receipt of your form I will contact you to arrange a time to interview you at school one afternoon when we are both free.

Yours sincerely,

Pat Branson B.A., M.Ed.

1st July, 2004
Appendix 2: Letter to parent/caregiver

Richard Patrick Branson
49 Amethyst Crescent
Armadale WA 6112
Phone: 9399 7359
Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Dear Parents,

My name is Pat Branson. I am a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College in Rockingham. At present, I am working part-time on a PhD at Notre Dame. My thesis is about the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents in Catholic secondary schools. Recently I spoke to the Year 12 students at school about my research and invited them to participate in it. Your daughter indicated that she would be willing to consider being part of the programme which will involve up to twenty students. Your permission is needed before I will accept her involvement in the research, hence my letter to you. I have included an acceptance form with my letter to your daughter.

In my role as a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College, my main area of responsibility is religious education. Over many years of teaching the subject I have come to recognize the importance of the role of the imagination in the religious development of adolescents. My studies are directed towards making clear what appears to be happening in the faith lives of senior secondary school students when they make choices that reflect changes in their relationship with God.

If your daughter participates in the programme, she will be asked to contribute in the following ways: First, she will create a fictitious identity for herself. This helps to preserve her anonymity. When results of the research are published no one will know who participated in the research.

Second, there is an interview which lasts about forty-five minutes. It will be recorded. A copy of the transcription will be given to your daughter to make sure that it is accurate and to allow for further comment by her. I would conduct the interview one afternoon after school and at school or at a time that best suits her.

At the conclusion of the interview, I will offer her the opportunity of keeping a journal for about a month. The subject matter of the journal is her faith journey and the part religious education and her religious education teachers have played in her journey. If she chooses to write the journal, then I will not conduct the second interview.

Third, I will interview her a second time. This interview is conducted to clarify statements made in the first interview. This interview is also recorded and transcribed. A copy of the interview will be given to her and there will be opportunities for her to respond.

Fourth, at some point in the middle of the following year, I will make contact with your daughter again to interview her a third time. I do this because leaving school often creates changes in a person’s relationship with God. The changes provide further insights into the influence of school experiences on the faith development of adolescents. As with the other interviews, this one will be recorded and transcribed and a copy given to your daughter.
As the letter to your daughter indicates, she may withdraw at any time from the research project and for any reason. If that does happen, all materials, including original documents, computer disks and CDs will be given to her and there will be no reference made to her contribution in the report I write as part of my research programme.

Perhaps you are concerned about what happens to the information that is provided. It is divided up into statements (Each student typically would contribute about 300 statements.). These are sorted into a set number of categories and the statements from each particular category brought together and sorted again into a second set of categories. By this time, the only person who would know who made each statement would be me. The work I have done up to this point has revealed some significant features of how some Year 12 students image their faith and the part that parents, siblings, friends and religious education teachers play in this.

During my research, all documents, tapes, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents, or transcribing tapes. No information will be stored on computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against data loss. The only other person who see the data in its raw form is my supervisor, Dr Anthony Imbrosciano who is a member of the College of Theology at NDA. He knows the students only by their fictitious names.

The direct involvement of your daughter in the project is relatively short and will involve about two hours hopefully over twelve months. My research programme, including the writing phase, will continue to the end of 2006. If you would like to be kept informed as to the outcomes of the research, I am only too happy to produce a summary and post it to you. The final document will be at least two hundred pages in length.

If you are prepared to allow your daughter to be part of the project, please sign the acceptance form. When I receive it, I will make contact with your daughter and arrange a time with her to interview her. If you have some concerns that have not been addressed in my letter to you, please feel free to ring me.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Pat Branson, B.A., M.Ed.

1st July, 2004
Appendix 3: Acceptance form

**Student Participant Acceptance Form**

Dear Mr Branson,

I, ............................................. agree to participate in your research project on the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I understand that you will interview me and ask me to keep a journal for about a month; and you will show me transcripts of what I give you to make sure that they reflect what I know to be true about myself. I accept that what I say and write will be subject to analysis and the findings of the research will be published. I also understand that I shall be able to withdraw from the project at any point and if I do that you will not include anything I have said or written in your research. 

Signed: .............................................

Date: ____/____/____

**Parental Permission Form**

Dear Mr Branson,

I give my child ............................................. permission to participate in your research into the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I would like/would not like* to be kept informed about the progress of your research.

Signed: .............................................

Date: ____/____/____

* Please put a line through the response that does not apply.

**Student’s Details**

Please complete the following:

First Name: .............................................  Family Name: .............................................

Address: .............................................

.............................................

Phone: .............................................  Email: .............................................

Fictitious First Name: .............................................  Fictitious Family Name Initial: ............

Richard Patrick Branson B.A., M.Ed.,

49 Amethyst Crescent

Armadale WA 6112

Phone: 9399 7359

Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au
Appendix 4: Interview schedule #1

What do you believe about God?
- Have you always thought about God in this way?
- What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?
- In what ways is your faith in God today different from what it was some years ago?
- Is Jesus different from God? If he is, tell me about the differences? Are these differences important to you? Was there ever a time when you didn’t see any difference between God and Jesus?
- And what about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?
- Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?
- To whom do you pray most often: God? Jesus? or the Holy Spirit? Why?

How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?
- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?
- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?
- In what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and fulfillment?

What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?
- What have people said or done that has contributed or not contributed to your relationship with God?
- Why were these words or actions so important to you? How did they relate to your life?

Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months? Why?
- What has been the impact of your school on your faith?
- Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about and relate to God?
- Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?
- What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?
- Comment on the place of prayer and liturgy on the development of a relationship with God.

What people have played a significant part in your faith development?
- What have your parents said or done that has prompted you to grow closer to God or to move away from God?
- How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?
- What stories from your life describe how each of your parents has influenced you in your relationship with God?
Appendix 5: Interview schedule #2

You have been interviewed once and you have completed a journal. Thankyou for maintaining your involvement in this research project.

In this interview, we will re-visit the broad themes reflected on previously so that you may add anything further to what you have stated already.

Your anonymity will be maintained and whatever you say will be handled respectfully. Should you decide to withdraw from the project, I will remove any reference to what you have stated and delete all quotes from what you have given or will give in this interview.

Do you have any questions about what I have just said?

The Themes

• You have been reflecting on how your faith has changed as you have been growing up. Is there anything further you would like to add to what you have stated in the past about the changes you have experienced?

If nothing is said about images of God, then the following will be asked:

• What would you like to add about how your image of God has changed over the years?
• Do you have anything further to say about the people, such as parents, siblings, friends, others and events that have influenced your relationship with God? with Jesus? with the Holy Spirit?
• What else would you like to add about prayer and your relationship with God?
• Is there anything that occurs to you about your experience of school, of religious education classes, teachers and peers that you would like to say at this point?

After each theme has been dealt with, the following question is asked:

• Would you like to expand on anything you have just said?

After the themes have been covered …

• Is there anything you would like to add to what you have stated that we have not covered to this point?

After the subject has finished a statement similar to the following is made:

• Thankyou for your help with this project. I will transcribe this interview and send you a copy. If you would like to make any changes or additions to what you have said you may contact me. In a few weeks, I will send you a draft of what I have written so that you may comment further if you wish. I welcome any comments you would like to make because your contribution to this point has been invaluable. Thankyou again for your help.
Appendix 6: Journal writing tasks

Week 1

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story? Reflect on why you would name it in that way. How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings. Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

Week 2

Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn't exist and that God cares or doesn't care for you. Describe the situation. Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognize God's presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself. Describe how your thinking about God changed because of your encounter with this person or event.

Week 3

Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson. Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief? How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

Week 4

Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book? Give the chapter a title and explain its significance. How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

After looking back over what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?
Appendix 7: Use of closed questions and rich data

The following extract was taken from Mikaela’s first interview (lines 410-437).

**Interviewer:** Was there anything they would have said or done prior to that that would have drawn you closer to God?

**Mikaela:** Never! Its – the ritual was youth group Friday, Sunday Church. And that’s the way all it was. And in between all that my parents separated and divorced.

**Interviewer:** And yet they still went to Church?

**Mikaela:** Yeah, just sort of Christians – um – pretend.

**Interviewer:** Do you see your Mum as a “pretend” Christian now?

**Mikaela:** Um – no, not so much. Like she wants to go back to Church but there’s ALWAYS something that she has to do or has to be done that will make her not go to Church and I remember hearing ages and ages ago that the Devil tries to put things there that aren’t that urgent but you think they are so – I sort of started not thinking like that. Before I go to bed I make sure I pray even if I have – even if I’m - I know I’m about to fall asleep, even if I know I’m about to pass out, I make sure I pray and then I’ll go to sleep. Um – I remember Michael said to me he can’t EVER go to sleep unless he prays. He’ll sit there in the dark go “Yep! This is pretty boring.”

My Dad – my Dad – um – he goes – he goes “What are y’doing on Sunday?” I say, “I’m going to Church.” An’ he goes, “Aw yeah, that’s good.” I go, “Why don’t you come?” “I can’t. Mirna won’t let me.” But Mirna goes to Church with me sometimes. So I can’t understand that. But – um – Mum – one of the main reasons – Mum an’ me – oh, I said I don’t wanna go to the Church she wants to go to an’ I think she’s too scared to go by herself. But I think my sister will end up going with her.
The role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools

Volume 2

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Doctor of Philosophy
College of Education
University of Notre Dame Australia
2010
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Interviewer: Alexandra, thanks for agreeing to being interviewed for this project.
Alexandra: No probs.
Interviewer: I wanted to ask you what you believe about God.
Alexandra: Um - I believe that in a way he does exist. And - ah - I believe that he gave us free will 'cause, um, he thought it would be better for us to have a - make our own decisions and to choose what is right and what is wrong.
Interviewer: Okay. And have you always thought about God in this way?
Alexandra: Um, pretty much.
Interviewer: Okay. What about your image of God? Do you have an image of God?
Alexandra: Um, not a full image, just I believe that he's like in everything alive, like in plants and animals an' stuff like that that has - that is - um - a creation, seen as a creation.
Interviewer: Yes. Okay. Do you have any words that you would use to describe your relationship with God?
Alexandra: Um, (short pause) maybe (pause) a word would be - um - ah, just a friendly relationship, I guess.
Interviewer: Okay. Would you like to talk about that more, why you have chosen the word “friendly”? 
Alexandra: 'Cause like - um - aw there’s not much - many words I could describe 'cause - um – it's – 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 and like personal relationships an' like your relationships with your parents an’ stuff like that, yeah.
Interviewer: So, are you saying to me that when those relationships are difficult, then it's difficult for a relationship with God?
Alexandra: Yeah, because like I connect God with also my parents so i- like it is hard sometimes if we have a fight or something like that - to think that I’m close to God.
Interviewer: Yes, good. So, in what ways is your faith today different from what it was some years ago?
Alexandra: Um - I believe a bit more now 'cause - um - when I was younger, I wasn’t sure. And as I grew up I went to like - I ca- as I - as I came from a primary school Catholic and to a Catholic high school it really more developed my ideas of God an’ everything that ....
Interviewer: Okay, is Jesus different from God? And if he is, what about the differences?

Alexandra: Um, differences would be that I believe that God is one apart - is apart from Jesus and Jesus is - was sent as a messenger, messenger as well to the humanity.

Interviewer: Is that difference between Jesus and God important for you?

Alexandra: Um - I guess when he - I was younger 'cause I was just starting to learn about a religion and about God an' Jesus an' everything that they've done.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who isn't - who doesn't believe in God?

Alexandra: Um - (plaintively) Oh -

Interviewer: It's hard isn't it.

Alexandra: Yeah. Um (pause) prob'ly I would explain it as a-nother being that is - um (pause) I dunno. Um – it's like being like Jesus at the same time. It's all Jesus God rolled into one. But, yeah, yeah, something like that.

Interviewer: Something like that.

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. When you say “all rolled into one” is there any more you want to add to that?

Alexandra: Like they – they're - um - connected together to - like as a s-more simpler form, I guess.

Interviewer: Did you say “as a more simpler” -

Alexandra: As a more simpler form like - um - I dunno.

Interviewer: You're not sure what you mean by that?

Alexandra: No, like -

Interviewer: Okay.

Alexandra: Not too sure.

Interviewer: If I came back to that question some time later -

Alexandra: Yeah, maybe.
Interviewer: Okay, I'll leave it with you to think about. Alright. You talked about prayer a while ago, so do you pray?

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. To whom do you pray?

Alexandra: I pray to Jesus and to God.

Interviewer: How often do you pray?

Alexandra: Every night.

Interviewer: And how do you pray?

Alexandra: Um - I pray either by going to my local Church, or jus’ in my personal prayer, like in my room.

Interviewer: When you pray, what’s your prayer like? It is like set prayers? Or are they prayers you make up, or what?

Alexandra: Yeah, it's a - bit of both 'cause sometimes I might end it with an Our Father, or a Hail Mary, but at the same time I do like - try to like thank God for like - I -know, jis' good things. Yeah.


Alexandra: Probably to Jesus, y’know.

Interviewer: Why?

Alexandra: 'Cause like I said, I see him as more of a connection to God. And I jis’ feel str- more strongly if I pray to Jesus he'll get (short pause) there.

Interviewer: Okay. How are you feeling?

Alexandra: Alright.

Interviewer: You're doing really well. Yeah, really well. Okay. How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Alexandra: Um - I guess like little things like - um - being good to others. Like if I see like someone having problems I like to help them out as much as I can. And jus’ like - um - I dunno, like being nice people. Um - in general, like if someone’s teasing someone, like jus’ try to protect them, or stand up for them if they can’t do it.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. So what impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Alexandra: Um – It’s - when I see suffering it really is painful and it’s affect- it’s affected me 'cause I do think - try to think - um - beyond like - or they deserve it or they don’t deserve it, an’ stuff like that. I try to think, “Well, if it's supposed to - if it’s happening, it's supposed to happen. It's God’s - at the same time it’s God’s will. But - um - suffering, I guess, I think that - um - God can act as another human being trying to help stop the suffering.
Interviewer: Yes. So God in a sense allows the suffering and yet wants to stop the suffering.

Alexandra: Yeah, 'cause he wants to see us help each other out.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the impact of your faith on your attitude towards death.

Alexandra: Um – jus' like the after life, I guess. Like, I believe that we all like are eventually reunited and are all together and happy all - and everything’s good and there’s no bad.

Interviewer: So that’s your vision of heaven?

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. What about death itself?

Alexandra: Death - um – jus’ like at the pre- at the moment of death?

Interviewer: Particularly when you think about death.

Alexandra: Um – Let’s see - um - I guess that - um - my reli- my faith has taught me that - um - I guess that God wants them to be that they’ve decided - that God’s decided that they’ve lived enough and that they deserve it to go there.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the ways your faith helps to give your life a sense of purpose?

Alexandra: Um - just that the things I do. Like now that I’m leaving - um - I guess - things that I do, like courses I take, an' stuff like that, I believe that God does like lead me into that path to my destiny.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you have any sense of the path you’re being led down now?

Alexandra: Um – it’s - it gets confusing definitely ’cause you want to do it right ‘though you’re not too sure.

Interviewer: Is that a form of suffering?

Alexandra: Um - not really suffering. It's just (pause) a - a sense of like - you ha- you have to make your mind up. You have to make your own decisions. And that God won’t tell you to do this or that.

Interviewer: So what are you saying about God?

Alexandra: Um - that he does interact with - but through other people. I believe that. Yeah.

Interviewer: What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Alexandra: I guess like (pause) like you said, like death - um - had a big influence on me and that’s influenced me to go - get closer to get to God, to get closer to God.

Interviewer: Is that something you find difficult to talk about?

Alexandra: Oh, sometimes, yeah.
Interviewer: What have people said or done that has contributed or not contributed to your relationship with God?

Alexandra: Oh I don't get really influenced by people, um - like e- except for like um - like priests - priests and people like that that have had their experiences, I do get influenced.

Interviewer: So is there anything a priest might have said to you in the past that you remember?

Alexandra: Um – Jus’, I guess, to believe in myself and, I guess, the Church an’ my faith.

Interviewer: And to believe in yourself: how do you see that helping you with your relationship with God?

Alexandra: ’Cause God does in- influence people in their own - in his own manner. And like it might not be directly but it can be like - like I said through - through other people like -

Interviewer: Like priests.

Alexandra: Yeah, like priests and like your own parents.

Interviewer: So there are no words or actions that seem important to you that you can remember?

Alexandra: Um – Jus’ like little talks that prie- in my primary school they did. Um -

Interviewer: Can you remember one in particular?

Alexandra: I'm trying to.

Interviewer: It's okay if you can’t.

Alexandra: Not really.

Interviewer: Yep. That’s alright. Well, we’ll move on. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Alexandra: Um - I guess stronger.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you know why?

Alexandra: Um - not really ’cau - oh well just ’cause I've been growing up and realising that I'm moving off from high school to TAFE an’ uni an’ all that.

Interviewer: Hmm mm.

Alexandra: And actually developing a n- I guess, you know, ah - your own identity. It has influenced me to go closer to my faith.

Interviewer: What has been the impact of the school on your faith.

Alexandra: Aw - a lot ’cause ah - um – jis’ be- it being a Catholic school like the people are different, some people like , you meet like really incredible people that - that really are nice and try to help you out. So that has helped me like grow my own faith. Yep.

Interviewer: Can you talk about someone who has had that impact on you? Someone your own age? Is there anyone?
Alexandra: Ah - yes. Should I say their name?

Interviewer: You could make up a name.

Alexandra: There’s this girl called Dillon. Um – she’s really nice. An’ she’s - um – she’s been through some tough times as well, so - um - yeah, I guess I can relate to her more. An’ like, she’s really nice. She wouldn’t like try to hurt anyone, although like - yeah. Everyone mi - someone might be mean to her she still like tries to help them out or sayi- she doesn’t say bad things about them.

Interviewer: So she’s had that way of behaving has helped you.

Alexandra: Yeah, general behaviour.

Interviewer: What about significant moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about or relate with God?

Alexandra: Um – prob’ly like little sp- the talks, like the guest speakers in religion have influenced me because they’ve given me their own poi- point of view of how they see life and religion.

Interviewer: So which guest speakers are you talking about?

Alexandra: I think it was the man that I picked up - um - the - I forgot his name - he was blind. He - I - I can’t remember his name - but I remember that I picked him up. It was raining an’ all that. Yeah. He really influenced me ’cause he - he made me see through another point of view, like his own point of view like, “Aw I was blind an”’ - like you have to pick out - not to worry about the bad things, but focus on the good things in life. So that was one ....

Interviewer: So was he a guest speaker you had this year?

Alexandra: Yeah. He was a guest speaker in RE. A couple ...

Interviewer: Alright. Has there been anything said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?

Alexandra: Um - I guess what I just said.

Interviewer: What about in RE lessons?

Alexandra: I can’t think of anything.

Interviewer: That’s alright.

Alexandra: All I can remember is assignments.

Interviewer: So, is your mind sort of filled with what’s happening to you in Year 12 and you can’t see beyond that?

Alexandra: Yeah, pretty much, ’cause everything’s like right now and you can’t hold it off.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?

Alexandra: Um - I guess they’ve given me another perspective on - on God and how they view it and how they feel about it and they’ve - how they think we should act towards - behave -
Interviewer: Is there an RE teacher, one in particular, who’s had a big influence on you?

Alexandra: I guess Mr Thomas ’cause he’s not all that serious and he does like take it light-heartedly and he doesn’t force us to think his views.

Interviewer: Okay. Is that important for you to be able to have your own views?

Alexandra: Yeah, I guess that’s important for everyone to have their own views to – it’s also helps us structure our own beliefs an’ the - about God.

Interviewer: What about for you?

Alexandra: It has helped me - um - form my own like other points of views and opinions about religion.

Interviewer: Okay. What have your parents said or done that has prompted you to move closer to God or away from God?

Alexandra: They haven’t said anything, or not much anyway. Um - just that whatever - whatever happens it’s supposed to happen and that it is God’s will no matter how horrible or how good it is it’s supposed to happen.

Interviewer: So is that your Mum speaking or your Dad? Or -?

Alexandra: Both, I guess.

Interviewer: How does the influence of your Mother differ from that of your Father?

Alexandra: Um - not much. Um - I look at them both quite equally, so they both try to say their own points of view. Yeah.

Interviewer: So are you a family that goes to Church regularly?

Alexandra: No, not really, though - though I like to go to Church as - I like - not every Sunday but like when - as much as we could ’cause my Dad always works.

Interviewer: So do you ever go by yourself?

Alexandra: I used to but - um - lately I haven’t been able to ’cause all of work and tests and assignments.

Interviewer: Okay. What stories from your life describe how each of your parents has influenced you and your relationship with God? Do you have any stories?

Alexandra: No, I don’t think so. No. (pause) No. Any stories? I can’t think of any at the moment.

Interviewer: Is there any question that I could have asked you and I didn’t that you would like to have had asked?

Alexandra: Not really.
Interviewer: Okay, well we’ll close the interview at this point. Alexandra, thank you very much. It was great talking to you.

Alexandra: Thank you.
Alexandra’s second interview

Interviewer: Alexandra, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed again. In your journal – remember there were four parts and you wrote three parts. The fourth part was about your future and as you would like it to be. If you’re feeling particularly creative at the moment, and if you projected into the future, what would you see yourself doing?

Alexandra: I would see myself buying my dream car. (laughs) Um – what else? Um – getting my degree and (short pause) maybe even going further into – um – something like honours, or something like that. That would be really good. Um – an’ then, I guess, finding a job that I enjoy.

Interviewer: Okay. What sort of degree?

Alexandra: Um – I wanna do something on law an’ business. That’ll be good. But – um – since we do need units to get our degree, I’ll like to do something in psychology as well, so that’ll be good. An’, I don’ know, it depends on how that goes where it will end up taking me.

Interviewer: Would you like to be a lawyer?

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So if this was a chapter in your memoirs, what would be the theme of it?

Alexandra: Of – like now?

Interviewer: Yes. If you’re looking forward into the future, and you are able to write the chapter, what would it’s theme?

Alexandra: Um – I guess “Realisation of my dreams” or hopes, I guess, as well.

Interviewer: And if you gave it a title?

Alexandra: (short laugh) I guess (pause) Um – maybe Beyond the Horizon, or something like that.

Interviewer: Can you remember when you wrote in the journal, you said you’d divide your life into six chapters. So was that the sixth chapter?

Alexandra: No, that was – um – I’m not too sure what was the last chapter, but it was, I think, – um – something about dreams I would think it was.

Interviewer: Okay. How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future?

Alexandra: Um – strong, positive, definitely.

Interviewer: What is there in your life at present, or your present relationship with God, that tells you that such a future is possible?
Alexandra: I guess everyday things, like – um – he’s helping me get through – um – I guess – studies. He’s really helping ’cause I can just say, “Can you help me?” an’ try to do that.

Interviewer: And does that happen?

Alexandra: Yeah. It makes you feel – um – like you can fall back as well, or you have something there to support you.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you explain that a bit more?

Alexandra: Um – yeah, like – um – I see God as “support”. Yeah.

Interviewer: So if you fall back, God won’t let you fall?

Alexandra: No.

Interviewer: So has that been your experience up to now?

Alexandra: Yeah, pretty much.

Interviewer: Good. Let’s leave that for the moment and let’s revisit the first interview. In the first interview, you reflected on how your faith has changed as you grew up. Can you recall the sorts of things you said?

Alexandra: Um – was it – I think I said – um – that it became stronger as I got older.

Interviewer: Yes, you did. Would you like to talk a bit more about that?

Alexandra: Um – yes, ‘cause – um – I guess, as a little kid – um – I’ve been growin’ up with Christian – Christ – Cath- Catholicism an’ all that, so as I grew up, I – my parents com- – um – guess grew up with the knowledge that all the – getting told that God is there an’ all that.

Interviewer: And you went to a Catholic primary school?

Alexandra: Yep. I went to – um – St Paul’s.

Interviewer: Okay. So you spent all your schooling in Catholic schools?

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: You can recall your Mum and your Dad telling you about God when you were little?

Alexandra: Not too much, (laughs a little) but the school did that mostly.

Interviewer: So how did your parents help that?

Alexandra: I think my Mum helped it more – yeah – when – um – I dunno, jus’ like with little things in life she will play.

Interviewer: Can you recall any of those little things?

Alexandra: Not really – um – no – she would just say like little things like – or “If you need help ….“ an’ all that.

Interviewer: If you need help?

Alexandra: Yeah. On a spiritual level to – ah – I guess I could depend on God an’ the faith.
Interviewer: Did your Mum ever teach you prayers?
Alexandra: No.

Interviewer: Did she ever listen to you say prayers when you were little?
Alexandra: Yeah. When I was little, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Like when you were going to sleep at night?
Alexandra: Yep.

Interviewer: So can you picture any of that?
Alexandra: Not now. (laughs) It feels so long ago. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything further you’d want to say about that faith growing stronger as you got older?
Alexandra: Not really. I’ve said most of it.

Interviewer: In the interview, you connected God with your parents and your friends. And so your relationship with your parents and your relationship with your friends reflected your relationship with God. Do you still see it that way?
Alexandra: Yeah, definitely. Coz like my friends are really supportive and so are my parents. So I still link that – those things together.

Interviewer: So is that an image of God for you? You know, the supporting parents, supporting friends?
Alexandra: Yep.

Interviewer: Now, what about your image of God? In the first interview, when I asked you about that, you said that you didn’t have a full image, that he’s like in everything alive, like in plants and animals, in creation and then you talked about the relationship with God as being a friendly one.
Alexandra: Mmm, (pause) I guess – mmm – like when I say “creation” I look at like plants an’ all that an’ see how they live coz they – I see them as living – um – breathing things. An’ I guess I still see God in creation coz everything around us is created like that an’ is alive an’ I see it in – in that manner.

Interviewer: Okay. What about friends?
Alexandra: Friends as – um – like I said, a support system would – they really – um – help for me whenever I need it.

Interviewer: Do you have any stories about how that support is made real for you, like for instance, take university, you’re doing a bridging course now. How did you get into the bridging course?
Alexandra: Um – Coz my friend told me about it. (laughs) An’ she did it herself, so – an’ – an’ she said it was really good an’ she passed
it, so she’s doing well. An’ she told me great stories about the
people that – um – taught her. So it really influenced me ‘coz I
wanted to go to uni an’ – but – um – it really helped me coz I
know her well. An’ she goes, “Aw, Alex, if you can do it, I – um –
I mean if I can pass it, then you can definitely pass it, so – an’
she still continues to like – we maintain contact an’ she’s like
“How’s y’ course going? An’ if y’ need any help, tell me an’ — “
She’s definitely help.

Interviewer: Okay. So how is your relationship with God like that? What are
some of the things that tell you that your relationship with God is
like that relationship with your friend?

Alexandra: Um, I guess coz I know that God is always there when I call for
him there.

Interviewer: So when you call God, how do you do that?

Alexandra: Um, basically by prayer, or going to Church.

Interviewer: In the first interview, you spoke about praying in your room.
What sort of prayers do you say when you pray in your room?

Alexandra: They’re mostly like Hail Mary’s an’ Our Father an’ prayers like
that.

Interviewer: Set prayers?

Alexandra: Set prayers.

Interviewer: As you have grown older, has that changed, or has it stayed the
same?

Alexandra: It’s stayed kind of the same, but sometimes I do – um – ask –
um – to like protect my family, stuff –

Interviewer: Get you into uni?

Alexandra: (laughs) Yeah.

Interviewer: What about when you have assignments due?

Alexandra: I – I do the assignments an’ I do pray that I pass them, or that
I’ve understood everything (pause) yeah, but they’re pretty – um
– they’re the set prayers, like Our Father.

Interviewer: So, to get God’s help for passing it or doing well in an essay,
you’d say an Our Father.

Alexandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: So for you, there’s been no real change in the way you imagine
God to be.

Alexandra: Not too much.

Interviewer: And in this year, having left school, there’s nothing that’s
happened to change that at all for you?

Alexandra: Not re – my sister got ma- – got engaged, so I was happy about
that (laughs) but nothing much. I was pretty – like little things,
like getting into the univers- – university bridging course, an’ in
doing the TAFE – um – certificate, but I was pretty excited about
that as well.

**Interviewer:** When you get excited about things like that, when does God
enter into the picture? Or does he?

**Alexandra:** Yeah, he does – um – just like I work really hard in the courses
to do well an’ I guess that would be like a “Thank you, God”

**Interviewer:** When would that be? At night?

**Alexandra:** Yeah, at night normally. That’s when I have time.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything further that you would like to say about the
people, such as your parents, brothers and sisters, friends,
others – and events – that have influenced your relationship with
God?

**Alexandra:** Um – I guess (short pause) my (short pause) best friend coz –
um – she’s really gone through – over – bad times an’ – um –
yeah, it’s – I see it as God tryin’ to help her but nothing else –

**Interviewer:** Have you ever had that sort of experience yourself?

**Alexandra:** No.

**Interviewer:** All right. What about the relationship between God and Jesus. I
asked you about that in the first interview and whether you saw
any difference between God and Jesus.

**Alexandra:** Yeah, I still continue that – um – I see Jesus as – um – a
messenger – a messenger and God as an independent – um – I
guess – being. Um – yeah – apart from – so I do separate Jesus
and God.

**Interviewer:** Do you find that now that you’ve left school that you would think
less about Jesus, or more about Jesus?

**Alexandra:** Less coz there’s more things to do outside of school an’ you do
tend to get really – focused on work an’ study an’ if you don’t
belong to a Catholic or religious school you do tend to stray from
the praying or –

**Interviewer:** So God still remains important, but Jesus has become less
important?

**Alexandra:** No, they’re both are very important. I don’t – um – I remain the
same – um – importance, I guess, but it’s just a little bit more
hard to foc- I – focus on religion when there’s so much going
around, you know, work an’ all that.

**Interviewer:** So when it comes to prayer, your prayer would be more to God
than to Jesus?

**Alexandra:** I tend to do it more to Jesus, I guess, coz I guess I see him as
another link to God. But I do like to think I’m praying directly to
God.
Interviewer: How does that work for you? So if you see Jesus as a link, but praying directly to God?

Alexandra: It’s – yeah – hard kind of coz (short pause) I try to pray to Jesus coz I do see him as an important figure when linked to God and I guess God – um – I see as he can – he sees everything anyway, so he – um – will listen, I guess, even if I am praying to Jesus.

Interviewer: Did your time at school ever support you in thinking this way?

Alexandra: Um – not like that. Not – not like in – um – thinking Jesus and God as a – as the same or different people. It didn’t really –

Interviewer: So the school really had no effect?

Alexandra: Mightn’t in that way.

Interviewer: So if you had gone to a state school?

Alexandra: I would not have believed in God or Jesus, in the first place.

Interviewer: Suppose you had gone to primary school and your parents said, “We’ll put you into Kwinana High.” What would have been different for you?

Alexandra: I guess I would have been less religious an’ like I would’ve strayed away completely.

Interviewer: So what did the school do for you?

Alexandra: It maintained my faith – um – in both Jesus an’ God.

Interviewer: How did it do that?


Interviewer: And you think that wouldn’t be taught in a state school?

Alexandra: Not really.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit?

Alexandra: (laughs) No.

Interviewer: In the first interview, you said “it’s being like Jesus at the same time. It’s all Jesus, God rolled into one.” Can you remember that?

Alexandra: Yeah, kinda.

Interviewer: And then you said, “It’s like a more simpler form.” Do you have anything further to add to that?

Alexandra: Not really coz it is hard to think of what to say.

Interviewer: All right. Is there anything else you would like to add about prayer?

Alexandra: Um – not really.

Interviewer: Let’s come back to the school thing just to finish that off: your experience of school, RE classes and your teachers and your
peers. Is there anything that comes to mind that you would like
to add now that you’ve moved away from school?

Alexandra: Um, I guess it’s hard to s- – like – um – (pause) believe when
you see so many disasters in the world. I think that’s it, pretty
much.

Interviewer: So, in relation to that, did the school provide you with support
when you had to deal with those sorts of things yourself?

Alexandra: Yeah, I guess so.

Interviewer: Okay. I think we have covered everything. Is there anything that
you would like to add that I haven’t asked?

Alexandra: Not really.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you, Alexandra for agreeing to be interviewed
again.
Alexandra’s journal

Week One

A Journey to the Unknown: Chasing Destiny

I would name the story “A Journey to the Unknown because life is an
unknown journey that nobody can predict. Nobody knows what surprises,
challenges, changes and/or news life will bring around the corner. “Chasing
Destiny” is also in the title because in the “Big Picture” we are all searching for
something better in life and we’re all trying to find out where in society and life
we belong. Personally I believe that everyone has a destiny in the world, has
a set destiny which God wants us to fulfil in the world. Although at times it’s
hard to see the reason why we are here, although it’s obvious that we are all
chasing after the same thing: Destiny.

In my book I think I would divide my life into 6 chapters.

Chapter One: - Sweet Beginnings

– would be called this because these were the first years when I’ve started
living and taking all and any information around me.

Chapter Two: - Innocence

This chapter would be based on when I was 4 to 6 years old. These years
were the learning years when I was important life lessons that have helped
shape decisions and even personal morals and values that I will use for years
to come.

Chapter Three: - On the Move and New Demons

I would call it because when I was 6-9 years old, my family would constantly
move every 1-2 years to a new house. Moving away from my friends and
having to make new friends in a new environment began affecting me
emotionally. Also in the title “New Demons” because that year my step-
brother became violent and an alcoholic. After uncountable years of sleepless
nights I lost my childhood spirit and view. My childhood was cut short and
adult more mature problems then became mine. Since viewing my mother in
trouble and scenes no child should see I’ve developed more faster mentally in
the area of behaviour and thinking “beyond the box” when friends, even
family, ask for help and support.

Chapter Four (10-12 years old): - The Golden Days

I’ve decided to name this chapter because I have good memories about
friends and family. also the title also describes my primary school days when
the number of classmates were small so we were all friends. Those years
have only good memories.

Chapter Five: - The Old Days

This chapter is based on when I was 13-14 years old. Starting out in high
school when I was a Year 8 and was meeting new people in a different
environment that I didn’t know. I decided to call this chapter “The Old Days”
because throughout Yr 10 & 9 we’ve made our friends and have been through
hardships and good times.
Week Two

I haven't really had such an experience where I've been convinced that God either does or doesn't exist. Although there have been moments where I've believed briefly that God left us alone. The situation that changed my faith were when my brother died. His family were already facing problems, and he was finally straightening his life. I was recovering over a minor operation. Then only a little less than a month later my mother had a heart problem. After that year I believed God had abandoned my family. I thought that God wouldn't have all these events in less than three months to my family.

Due to these events, I believe that God lets us have our own thoughts about life, and I believe that these events happen to teach us lessons in life such as to spend time with the people you care about. Life is too short to hold grudges, etc.
A religion lesson which changed my view of my faith was when we had a guest speaker who was blind. My faith changed because he made me realize that life will always bring hard times and problems but you need to learn from those problems and see how you can get through the problem stronger. The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end.

Whenever there’s a problem, I try to see how I can behave and act to get through the problem stronger and help others to become strong when faced with difficult problems.
Alyssa’s first interview

Interviewer: Alyssa Paige, thankyou for agreeing to be interviewed.

Alyssa: Thankyou.

Interviewer: What do you believe about God?

Alyssa: Um - I believe there’s a God. Um - I believe that - um - there is something bigger in the world than us and that - um - he (pause) - he helps - he helps form us - um - (pause) Yeah, I - I do - I do believe in - in God an’ what he’s about an’ stuff (pause) jus’ parts of religion I’m just a bit wary about. But I do believe in the whole God thing. Yeah.

Interviewer: Have you always thought about God in this way?

Alyssa: Um – I’ve always believed and just lately- as you get older an’ stuff you just ask more questions about it. Um - but I - I have always believed just like - so - Yeah, just lately I’ve just started wondering about - some - some aspect of it.

Interviewer: Good. We’ll come to that later. Okay?

Alyssa: Yeah.

Interviewer: What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Alyssa: Um - (long pause) I’d say probably friendly.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alyssa: I’m not as close to him like as I probably should be ’cause I - I don’t pray at night and go to Church all the time, an’ stuff. Um - I do - I do talk to him sometimes, ask him like for help an’ stuff an’ ..... Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have any image of God?

Alyssa: Aw that really old weird image, y’know, the whole - like long white hair an’ beard an’ ...

Interviewer: Have you always had that image?

Alyssa: I think so. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. You started to talk about how your faith is sort of changing lately. Can you think about how it might be different from what it was years ago, like when you were in primary school?

Alyssa: Just - My- my - my faith in primary school was stronger. It’s still very strong today. Um - I guess I just believe that whatever was said was fact but I just started to think that maybe not everything that was said was right and not like it’s not what - like it’s not gospel like it’s not set in - just, yeah, just querying some parts that ....

Interviewer: Good. You’re handling this well.
Alyssa: Thankyou.

Interviewer: Is Jesus different from God?

Alyssa: Yes. I believe - um - I believe Jesus came down on earth two thousand years ago to - um - show us our wrongs and to try fi-
an' help fix up us people. I believe that Jesus is God's son. I believe that they're two different people. There's Jesus and there's God and they're not one person, if that makes sense. Um - yeah. So I do believe that he sent his son to help us become better people and to become - (pause) to try an' help fix our wrongs so that we won't make the same mistakes we made two thousand years ago today, like so we don't go backwards instead of forwards.

Interviewer: Okay. These differences between God and Jesus, are they important to you?

Alyssa: (long pause) I've never really thought about it.

Interviewer: That's alright.

Alyssa: Um - (long pause) I guess it gives you something to believe. That there's the almighty great God who controls everything and then there was Jesus his son who couldn't always control everything and when he couldn't he asked his father for help. Um ...

Interviewer: That's pretty deep.

Alyssa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Good on yer.

Alyssa: Thankyou.

Interviewer: Do you think there might have been a time when you didn't see any difference between God and Jesus?

Alyssa: (long pause) I don't think so. I think I always believed they were two people.

Interviewer: Okay. Now what about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who does not believe in God?

Alyssa: I believe the Holy Spirit is God. Just in another form. Um - just (long pause)

Interviewer: Okay. How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn't believe in God?

Alyssa: I guess I'd explain him as being the (pause) one God is like the being like the physical form and the Holy Spirit is like the not physical form. It's the Spirit of God actually being on earth, I think. (pause) Um - (long pause) Yeah. I've never - I've never - I've never really thought about this before. This is making me think more.

Interviewer: And you're thinking really well.
Alyssa: Thankyou.

Interviewer: Now, do you pray?

Alyssa: (pause) Sometimes.

Interviewer: To whom do you pray?

Alyssa: Oh - yeah - I pray to God. Um - (long pause) just - asking him to
- to help other people who aren’t as well off and .... who need a
bit of guidance an’ stuff.

Interviewer: How often do you pray?

Alyssa: Not as often as I should. Um - I actually sit down and pray once
a week at Luke 18. Um (pause) depending on what’s happening
in my life, I guess, like if I’ve got something (pause) I need help
with, or - (pause) y’know, I jus’ need to ask him to try and help
me with I guess I will pray. But I’m not one of these - not - I don’t
sit down and pray every night an’ stuff an’ -.

Interviewer: Good. How do you pray.

Alyssa: Sometimes I jus’ - I might jus’ stand or sit an’ jus’ say, y’know,
"Please God, help me." Y’know. Um - at Luke 18 I actually like
sit down, y’know, this is - this is praying time, y’know, an’ just -
you sit down an’ think you jus’ absorb what everyone is saying.
Um - yeah, probably how I pray.

Interviewer: Yeah. Good. To whom do you pray most often: God? Jesus? the
Holy Spirit?

Alyssa: God, I’d say. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you talk a bit more about that, for instance, why
you think you pray more to God than to Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Alyssa: Um - I guess I pray more to God because I know he’s up there
listening to me. He’ll take everything I say on board (pause)

Interviewer: How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live
your life?

Alyssa: I try - I - I try to live my life not necessarily the way he said to but
the way I think is right because of - because of how I’ve been
brought up. I’ve been brought up like not to steal, murder, or
anything, and I think it always comes from - I try to live a good
life so that (pause) the way he like - not necessarily the way he
wanted to but - because like I said that’s what I’ve been brought
up to believe: you know, you don’t steal, you don’t murder, you
don’t do anything like that because, you know, it’s – it’s – it’s just
not right, the way he said an’ stuff. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you see any difference between the way you’ve been
brought up to live your life and what you think Jesus would want
you to live, or God would want you to live?

Alyssa: (long pause) Um - no - um - I did - I try to live a good life - um -
so that (long pause).
Interviewer: Is it a tough question to answer?

Alyssa: Kind of.

Interviewer: Could you talk more about - you said “the way he would want me to live my life”?

Alyssa: Um - I - when you - when I say you shouldn’t like steal or anything that’s (pause) um - I can’t think of the words - um – that’s a value of God that’s not what you do you’re wrong if you do it and it not necessarily comes from like the Ten Commandments or anything but it is shaped around it, I think because like you just know not like not to do it you’ll be – you’ll be wrong. It’s not what he wants you to do. He - he wants – he’d like you to try and live a good life so that you’re happy with your life an’ you don’t think: Aw, y’know, I shouldn’t have done this because, you know, whatever. (short pause) Yeah. (pause) This is all I can say.

Interviewer: You’re doing very well. So what impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Alyssa: Um - I don’t like to see people suffering. Um - when I - when I think about suffering, or war, or anything, I think this is not the way we’re supposed to be living. You know, you know, this could be one of the things that God came - Jesus came down two thousand years jus’ to try and stop. Now it’s gone back to, y’know, war an’ people dying an’ (pause) you know, unnecessarily, I think - um - in some cases. Um - (pause) Yeah. I don’t - I don’t like to see people suffering because I just think it’s – it’s horrible an’ wrong an’ it’s not the way the world should be. The world should be good an’ happy an’ not having that.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death.

Alyssa: Um - I believe if you’ve had a good life, then you will go to heaven. Um - I think if you’ve had a bad life, like you haven’t - like you’ve led a bad life - like you’ve done the wrong things an’ stuff, um - you won’t get in as easy. Um - I think if you’ve had a good life he’ll think “Yes you know, this person deserves to be here. This person - depending on how they are after they’ve done whatever they’ve done, if they’re remorseful or whatever, but if they’re just like Aw yeah, you know, it's all right, you know, de-de-de, then they shouldn’t necessarily - um - be just allowed in with y’know, open arms sort of - Um - yeah but if you have had a good and decent life and you’ve made up for the sins - for your sins like you’re actually remorseful about them then you should be allowed in with open arms because y’know, you’re sorry and you’re trying to make your life better. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. So in what ways does your faith help you to live your life, or to give your life a sense of purpose or fulfilment?

Does your life have meaning because of your faith?
Alyssa: Um - I think so because I think with your faith it gives you boundaries, y’know, what you can do. So I think like going back to the whole stealing thing that’s a boundary that you know you shouldn’t cross unless like - unless you know if you have like a good faith and you believe and all that, then that’s a boundary you know you have to choose to cross it. That’s another thing. But if you - if you choose not to cross it, then (pause) yeah, that’s – that’s - that can be a good thing because it - ah - you know that (pause) you won’t - you won’t have anything to feel bad about or - ye – y’know, you won’t feel guilty about something that is preventable um - I just think yeah just try to live a good life and you’ll be happy with yourself.

Interviewer: The next thing we talk about are the events in your life, the events in your life that have led to changes in your relationship with God. What have people said or done that has contributed to or not contributed to your relationship with God?

Alyssa: I think - I think when you hear someone get up and say - say something that - like they’ve done, something good in their life and they’re willing – they’re like they’re able to get up and talk about it and actually grab a person and make them feel – y’know, just touch them, I think that’s – that’s - you think "Yes", y’know, this person has, y’know, they’re able to get up and talk about business. It shows you that there’s - there are good people out in the world and that there are people who are willing, y’know, to stand up and make a difference to maybe one person’s life an’ I think that can make you feel -um - closer to God. Um -

Interviewer: So has there been anyone like that in your life?

Alyssa: Um - (long pause) I think when I was in - oh, ’cause I did InStep with World Vision last year. Um, I think - That really opened - like - showed you that hey, 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. I think that just made me feel, y’know, it was really good to, like it was good to see because, y’know, sometimes you meet people who aren’t - very good – don’t like really care about other people an’ stuff an’ it’s really good to see that there’s - a lot of people- like an organisation of people who are willing to say “Hey, this is wrong. We need to - we need to fix it.” Um - yeah, I guess that’d be - yeah, like that’d be them. There’s not anyone specific that has made me feel, y’know, made me like done something good to make me feel ’cause it’s God, but it’d just be a group of people that would do it for me, I guess. Yeah.

Interviewer: Good. What about events in your life? Are there any events that’d be important for you that either have led you closer to God or made you move away from God?
Alyssa: (Pause) Um (pause) Events? (long pause)
Interviewer: Can’t think of any?
Alyssa: Not any specific events.
Interviewer: That’s okay.
Alyssa: Maybe – I’m just thinking now maybe joining Luke 18 was a way for me to get closer to God, learn more about him an’ be more appreciative of him. Maybe that was –
Interviewer: Good. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?
Alyssa: (long pause) My – my faith in God is still strong, but like I said before certain aspects of religion an’ faith have grown weaker maybe because of certain – like certain things you hear an’ stuff. You jus’ think an’ think ’cause I think like – when y’ like be- starting to go into adulthood, you do jus’ start to – you – you start to question a lot of things. An’ I think maybe religion’s one of them ’cause you are growing up an’ you’re just starting to – um – yeah. Not everything’s the hear or say, y’know. So (pause) what – I – I guess like that that’s jus’ why it has possibly gotten a bit weaker. Bu’ (short pause) yeah.
Interviewer: Okay. What has been the impact of your school on your faith?
Alyssa: Um – (pause) School – (pause) I think school has always like (long pause) it’s (sigh) it has like helped my faith in God to grow and to – to develop because I think if I hadn’t have had the last five years at St Clot’s – um – where it was – um – (pause) where – where we did religion an’ stuff – um – I guess, yeah, it helped to keep me grounded on that there is a God an’ we should believe in him an’ we should try to live our life good – um – yeah – So – um – yeah. so I’d say it’s made my – my faith still be strong. Yeah.
Interviewer: Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led you to change the way you think about and relate to God?
Alyssa: Um – not really. No, not really. Not that I can think of anyway.
Interviewer: Have there been any moments in your school life that jump out at you now that I’ve said that?
Alyssa: Um – not really. Aw, probably moments – um – I think Year 12 Retreat was good because it was – um – it wasn’t focused – this can sound really bad – but it wasn’t focused entirely on God. It was, y’know, your – your pas- like – your past life like your life – life like when you were younger an’ it jus’ – it made you see what other people’s lives were like an’ that, y’know, if you thought you had a really bad life whatever it just – it just made you see that, hey, what your – your life has been pretty good. Um – jus’ like – um – I guess that was – that was, I think that was a really good experience in my life, especially in my Year 12
life because, y’know, you were away from everyone – like you
were away from your family an’ – you were – y’know, you were
with your friends an’ you were jus’ sitting around jus’ talking an’
learning about y’self an’ about other people an’, y’know, y’r – y’r
– y’r faith to – um – sorta – um – yeah. I think that was – I think
that was an – an important time in my – um – my Year 12 year
at St Clot’s, I’d say. It was – it was definitely a highlight for me.

**Interviewer:** Good. Has anything happened, or been said in RE that has
influenced you in your faith?

**Alyssa:** Um – (pause) – um – (pause) Maybe when y’ (sigh) ’cause we
were – w – w – w – we like recently been talking about – it hasn’t
necessarily influenced my faith, but it’s that – like we been
talking about groups that help people, like Amnesty International
an’ United Nations an’ stuff. An’ it’s – it’s – I think it’s really good
to see that there are such positive groups out there helping
people an’, y’know, to saying, y’know, “If you need help with
stuff, y’know you can come to us and’ talk an’ – (pause) Maybe
in a way it’s God coming true in them groups because it’s – it’s
something good and it’s what he (pause) It’s – it’s the sort of
groups that he would want to have in a group – groups – in – um
– in the world jus’ focusing on people an’ good people like,
y’know, Gandhi an’ stuff, who were – who didn’t jus’ say – didn’t
jus’ sit down an’ say, y’know, “This is our situation. We’re jus’
goin’ t’ have t’ deal with it.” Y’know, they – they say, y’know,
“Hey, this is the situation, but we can do something better to –
we can do something more to make this situation better an’,
y’know, we don’t have to put up with this. We can – we can free
ourselves. We can make ourselves good, y’know. We can – we
can change this. We can make this positive, y’know.” I think
that’s – that’s really good.

**Interviewer:** Good.

**Alyssa:** Have I gone off the track?

**Interviewer:** No, that’s excellent.

**Alyssa:** I think I’m just rambling along.

**Interviewer:** You might feel that way, but in actual fact – um – you’re saying a
lot of things that make sense that fit in well with what other
students have said. What impact have your RE teachers had on
your relationship with God?

**Alyssa:** I think they’ve been positive influences because they – um –
they – they – they teach – they teach you about God an’ – um –
(pause) what he wants an’ (pause) what, y’know, you can do
perhaps to try an’ make the world a better place through certain
things you’ve learned – um – from RE. An’ – sometimes –
sometimes y’ jus’ think, y’know, if I could be like such a person,
or not necessarily like them, but do something good, like what
they’ve done, then you can make a positive contribution to the
world to – to help – um – people an’ stuff. An’ I think – I think
the teachers (pause) have shaped me in a way to think like
them.

Interviewer: Can you think of any teacher in particular, in primary or
secondary?

Alyssa: Um – No, no, not really. No, not specifically.

Interviewer: Okay. What have your parents said or done that has prompted
you to grow closer to God, or to move away from God?

Alyssa: Um – my Mum was actually – my Mum actually told me about
Luke – Luke 18 an’ about – She’s like “Oh, you should go, you
know. Be good for you.” An’ I think, “Nuh! I’m not goin’ to that,
y’know.” Um – but I think if she hadn’ta pushed me I don’t think
my faith in God possibly would be as strong as it is because
when you got write – ‘cause we do talks an’ stuff – an’ when you
goto down an’ listen to a talk, you think, y’ know, “Wow!” Y’ know,
this is, y’ know, good, this is, y’ know, another person’s
perspective on our God an’ faith, an’ whatever it is they’re talking
about. Um – um – yeah, I think she’s – Mum, my Mum has been
pretty good with my faith. So’s my Dad. Um – he – he – he
recently – um – at Easter, he went down – he was one of the
disciples to get their feet washed. An’ – um – yeah – an’ – oh –
if – possibly if he hadn’t have done that I wouldn’t have gotten to
see that ‘cause I’ve never – I’ve never seen that before an’ I
thought, “Oh, my God!”, y’know, it’s like during Easter because
I’m not – I’m not a big churchgoer like I don’t go to Church every
week. Um – because it was our way of, you know, of giving our
time to him in a special time like Easter when it is leading up to,
y’know, the big – whole Easter thing. Um – I guess it’s al– it’s
always been the two of them, like my Mum an’ my Dad an’ my
Gran even, um – that have – um – helped me grow with my faith
an’ what I believe. Um – I won’t say – say there’s been anything
specific, but – um –

Interviewer: So you can’t recall any stories of things that might have
happened in your past that you link to your faith?

Alyssa: Um – this doesn’t ac– – act– actually link to my faith but I
remember – it’s actually quite funny – um – when I was four –
um – in Ireland in some Church, whenever, ah – I – Christmas, I
think it was. They actually used to – um – like christen a baby.
It’s really funny. And – um – um – yeah – and – this one year
they didn’t have a baby to christen and I was already being
christened. And – um – Mum an’ Dad walked in with me an’ the
priest goes, “You have a baby!” An’ I was christened again! Um
– yeah, that was quite funny.

Interviewer: So apart from being funny, does that story have any special
meaning for you?

Alyssa: Yeah. Um – it kinda does because I – (pause) I guess in a way I
could be an individual in the fact that I was christened twice
instead of once. Um – (pause) mmm.
Interviewer: So, blessed twice?

Alyssa: Yeah, blessed twice, y'know. Maybe it could mean an extra bit of – something. I don’t know. Um – it doesn’t really have a massive impact on my faith, but it – um – yeah, I guess it jus’ – um – y’know, that one time I was an individual and important in a Church, I think. Yeah, a really funny story. So, yeah, I guess that would be it. I can’t think – yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Now are there any questions that you would have liked me to have asked you and I haven’t asked you?

Alyssa: No, not really.

Interviewer: No?

Alyssa: No.

Interviewer: Alright, Alyssa Paige. We’ll close the interview. I’d like to thank you very much. It’s been great listening to you.
Alyssa’s second interview

Interviewer: Alyssa Paige, just for a moment imagine that you have in front of you on the table a copy of your autobiography.

Alyssa: Okay.

Interviewer: What title have you given it?

Alyssa: (long pause) Daring to Dream and Achieve.

Interviewer: That’s excellent! Good. Would you like to reflect for a moment on why you have given it this title?

Alyssa: Because (pause) a – a lot of my life, say for the last eight odd years probably – um – I’ve known what I wanted – I’ve wanted to do: be a journalist. So I think I’ve dared to dream, ‘This will be me in ten odd years.’ Um – I haven’t totally achieved my best, but I hope to achieve eventually what I want – what I want to do in the future, so I think it’s just the whole thing of daring to dream, y’ know, knowing – knowing what you want, tryin’ to work to get what you want, achieving it, I think. Yeah.

Interviewer: Excellent! So, you open it up and you flip through it. And it tells the story of your life. Obviously, there are chapters. So could you imagine what some of those chapters could be?

Alyssa: (pause) Ah, the first few chapters would be my childhood obviously, an’ what I’ve done in my childhood an’ stuff like that. And’ then, probably (pause) a whole chapter on moving from Ireland to Australia, an’ how I felt an’ how my life was changed an’ stuff like that. An’ then my high school years an’ when I went through them. An’ then just whatever I’ve done afterwards.

Interviewer: Good. Okay. That chapter about moving from Ireland to Australia: looking at the start of the chapter, what’s the title of the chapter?

Alyssa: (Sigh) (long pause) Um – (pause) Creating a new life (pause) for everyone?

Interviewer: Why did you choose that title?

Alyssa: Because it was – it was changing our lives dramatically because of – like, y’ know, moving across the world to something you don’t know, so – um – (pause) just (pause) the whole thing of changing an’ creating a new life for ourselves in this new country that, y’ know, me an’ my brother an’ sister knew, like we didn’t know. We hadn’t seen, y’ know. We’d only seen pictures, we’d only seen pictures of – of a lot of our relatives, so we didn’t quite know what to expect. It did change our lives because I think we’re better for it and we’ve done a lot – we done a lot more and we’ve grown as people because of it. Mmm.

Interviewer: What was the biggest difference?
Alyssa: One day, right? – y’ have y’ family, y’ friends, what, y’ know, an’ then the next day you don’t. You have new family that you have to try and – like y’ meet – you meet an’ y’ get – y’ have t’ get t’ know and y’ have to (pause) – um – y’ know, share your life with them, they share their life with you. They (pause) y’ know, you haven’t grown up with these people all your life, so, y’ know, you don’t know funny stories about them, or whatever. You just – yeah, you have to learn to meet new people and be able to accept new people an’ vice versa for them.

Interviewer: Very good. You’re going to make a good journalist.

Alyssa: Thank you.

Interviewer: Where do God and religion fit into this story of yours? Is there a chapter in this story where God seems to figure most?

Alyssa: Um – (long pause) God’s probably fits into this whole story because (pause) some things are just meant to happen. You know, you (long pause) y’ know, incidents – um – happy times, bad times, trouble times, whatever, they’re meant to happen, I think, because like we do create your own life. But there’s parts of it, I think, that have been made for you, so perhaps moving out from Ireland to here was a sign from him to say, y’ know, this is where you’re meant to be, this’ll help you. This, y’ know, this’ll change you, you know. You’ll explore, you’ll achieve, you’ll do – what – what you wanna do and be a – a better life for some of your family members – um – and yeah, just – (pause) keep saying: dare to change, dare to move on, don’t just stay in this – y’ know, this way just – stay where you been for the last ten odd years, you know. Move on, see something different, I think.

Interviewer: So, your image of God is of someone who encourages you to explore. Yes?

Alyssa: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, just him being there an’ helping us do things in our lives. Just – yep.

Interviewer: Good. Okay. In one of the chapters, you’ve written about the experience that confirmed for you that God exists.

Alyssa: Okay.

Interviewer: Can you think of anything in your life that – that sort of does that?

Alyssa: (long pause) I think I’ve always known he exists. I’ve never really questioned whether he exists or not. Um – yeah, just, I think, when you grow up with something, you don’t – I think you – you need to have s– you need to believe some things just are not - some things you are meant to believe, y’ know, it doesn’t have to be factual evidence to prove that there is a God up there. If you believe in him, that should be enough for you and’ for people an’ – you know, as long as you can – you know in your heart that you believe, I think that’s good. So I’ve never really had an experience where I know – I say yes, God exists,
you know, he – he’s up there watching over us. It’s just
something I know.

Interviewer: Some people report having an awareness of God’s presence in
their lives. Have you ever had that sort of experience?

Alyssa: (long pause) Um – I don’t – I don’t – I don’t think so.

Interviewer: Okay. That’s alright.

Alyssa: (long pause) No. I can’t – I can’t say I’ve ever had this
overwhelming feeling that God is there. I just know he’s there.

Interviewer: Yes. That’s okay. Imagine that you’re thumbing through your
book and you stop at a page in which you describe something
that happened in an RE class that you found challenging. It
could have been something the teacher said, or something that
someone did, or something you watched, or heard; it could be
anything.

Alyssa: Um – (long pause) Good questions. (long pause) I can’t think of
anything.

Interviewer: So in this chapter what would you be saying about RE?

Alyssa: I think – I think RE has been a positive experience in my life
because it opened me up to other people’s views of God and
what they believe an’ what they see God as. An’ it might not
necessarily be my view, or someone else’s view of God. It’s
their own.

Interviewer: Can you remember any occasion when someone expressed
something different from what you believed?

Alyssa: (long pause) I can’t really remember anything.

Interviewer: But what you remember is that people did express things?

Alyssa: Yeah, but they – they – they (pause) Yeah, they just – they
might have different views to certain things that I necessarily
didn’t believe but what they saw other people believed. Yeah. It
wasn’t anything specific. It was just something that was there.

Interviewer: What about belief and non-belief?

Alyssa: Um – I think that people are entitled to their own views and what
they believe. If they don’t believe what I believe, I’m not gonna
hold it against them. I’m not gonna say, “Oh, y’ know, that
person’s a non-believer, y’ know. Don’t go near him!” You
know. But I think everyone’s just entitled to their belief an’ their
view. You shouldn’t hold it – you shouldn’t hold stuff against
people because they have different beliefs or values, or
whatever. Um – you should just accept them for who they are
an’ what they believe. And if they don’t believe in God, well,
that’s them. It’s what they believe they – you can’t stop people
from believing a certain thing. Or try to push your – your view on
them, or something. Yeah.

Interviewer: Where do teachers fit into all this?
Alyssa: Um – RE teachers have – um – they’ve opened my mind up to –
I think they’ve made my faith grow because they’ve – they
maybe challenged me to, you know, think about something, or
they’ve made me – um – they’ve said stuff that opens – they just
changes something or, y’ know, they – they’ve – I dunno, they –
they told a story about something, or they seen something – just
different things that opened my mind up to how, you know, there
are other views outside – there – there are other opinions out
there, there are other things out there that you can’t control.
You just have to say, you know, this is a person’s, you know, um
– I think it’s just you have (pause) just – yeah, just growing and
embracing an’ – yeah.

Interviewer: so, if I said your RE class, what’s the first thing that would come
into your mind? What class are you thinking about?

Alyssa: Ah, probably my Year 12 RE class because it was my final year
and you were experiencing different things an’ stuff.

Interviewer: That RE class, how would you describe it?

Alyssa: It’s – yeah – there are s– – ah – it was fun, it was enjoyable, um
– it w- – it – there was a lot of – you have to do work an’ stuff
an’ it was, you know, we – we – we talked a lot about certain
things like we got an assignment, or whatever, we – we’d talk
about it, an’ we – we’d do brainstorms an’, y’ know, we’ get other
people’s opinions an’ views on stuff. It wasn’t just, y’ know, sit
down, write this down, you know, do this. You know, you were
allowed to talk and express yourself an’ how you felt an’ stuff an’
– yeah, it was – it was enjoyable.

Interviewer: Good. What’s one thing you can remember talking about?

Alyssa: Um – we talked about Mahatma Gandhi because we were
studying him – um – his life an’ what he did an’ how he – how he
fought for his beliefs, how he fought for freedom. He wasn’t
going to say, you know: this person’s blocking us so we’re
gonna give up. You know, that’s it. Just forget about the whole
thing. I’ll go back to being a lawyer. You’ll go back to doing
whatever you do. You know, that’s it. You know, he said: No,
we are going to do this. We’re gonna get freedom. We are
gonna be happy. We’re not gonna be under their rule anymore.
Y’ know, we are going to be our own nation. We gonna stand up
for what we believe in. We are gonna be free. That’s what it –
um – he – he was great. He just – he – I think he taught me a
lot about not giving in and, y’ know, just barrelling on an’ keeping
going an’ never giving up. Yeah.

Interviewer: So you remember something!

Alyssa: Yeah. It just – it comes back whe y’ thinking about stuff.

Interviewer: In other words, studying Gandhi’s life has had an impact on
you?

Alyssa: For sure.
Interviewer: Okay. What about Gandhi’s faith?

Alyssa: That was—he—he—he had a very strong faith. You know, he—he gave up everything for his—not necessarily for his faith, but for his—for what he believed and for his—the people he was trying to free. You know, he was going around, you know, white dress or, not dress, it is like—whatever it is they wear—their long things—and he—if his people were, you know, fighting or, y’know, rising up against the people, he’d starve himself until they—they stopped—um—er—fighting or rising up against some in—in—a violent way ’cause he didn’t—he didn’t believe in violence. He just believed in rising up with your voice instead o’ your fist. So he—his—his—his—his—his faith, I think, helped him to do it because he had such a strong faith, you know, he kept saying—perhaps his faith kept saying: No, y’know, this is—it isn’t right. We’re gonna—we’re gonna stop all this. Y’know, we’re gonna have, y’know, people be allowed to walk through the street with whoever they want, you know, an’ an’ not get bashed up, or whatever. Just stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you see a link between what you’ve just described about Gandhi and your family coming from Ireland to Australia?

Alyssa: Yeah—um—(pause)—it took us about two years to get out here and we could’ve said, an’ you know, stuff this, we’re gonna forget about it, or whatever, but we didn’t because we thought it was best for us. And, you know, we just said no, you know, we are gonna do this. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t. But we are gonna soldier on an’ we’re gonna do our best an’ we’re not gonna give up an’ we’re gonna do this, you know, and—yeah. I think it was kinda the same with what Gandhi though in a way, yeah. I think—yeah, I think that’s it—just—

Interviewer: So are there any conclusions you would draw from think about how you came to Australia and how it’s Gandhi’s life and his faith that you recall?

Alyssa: Um—(long pause) Gandhi came from India, no not India. Yeah, somewhere like that.

Interviewer: Yeah, India.

Alyssa: He came from there to—can’t remember where he came to.

Interviewer: South Africa.

Alyssa: That’s the one—to South Africa—um—to do legal work for someone and then he saw—um—the hardship that the Africans were going through. (pause) He—he—he—he—he stood up and said: No, this is not going to happen. Um—and I think—we—I think my family—’cause we—we came over here—we kind said (pause) that, you know, we’re gonna—we’re gonna do this, we’re not—we’re not gonna like back down an’, you know, we’re
gonna – gonna come out an’ we’re gonna see my uncle an’ my aunty an’ see my cousins an’, yeah, we’re just gonna soldier on an’ do it.

Interviewer: Good. So do you think your view of God and religion has been affected by what you’ve learned about Gandhi, or by what you’ve studied in Year 12?

Alyssa: Um – I think my faith has definitely grown because of what we’ve learned – um – It’s – Gandhi’s life show – what Gandhi did showed me that there are people who stand up and take a stand against – bad things that are happening an’, y’ know, people who are suffering, you know, who are – who are suffering and don’t have anything an’, y’ know, the government’s against them an’ y’ know, an’ it just kinda showed me that hey, you know, anyone can stand up and make a difference to people’s lives. You don’t have to be world leaders, you don’t have to be presidents, or – or heads of government, or whatever. It can be, you know, be just your average Joe who does it. You know, you don’t have to be something special. You just have to have the guts and the determination to be able to stand up an’ – I to be able to do this thing an’ just (pause) fight for what you believe in. Just never give up. Yeah.

Interviewer: Is that a theme that’s important to you?

Alyssa: Yeah. Um – standing up and taking a stand is something that’s important to me ‘cause I don’t think that you should just, you know, back down, say nothing ‘cause like that’s how wars an’ stuff were started just, you know, people going: Aw, you know, well this person’s gonna help us, so we shouldn’t say anything, you know, than just standing up an’ saying, y’ know: No, this is wrong. We need to – we need to fix this, we need to be free. We need to – you know – do the right thing, not just for our own personal gain. You know, we need to think about everybody as a whole instead of just us an’ what we’re trying to get outa this. Yeah. I think (pause) yeah – I think that’s important. You know, that’s how poverty an’ stuff has come around, y’ know, with people just being too scared and too afraid to say anything because, you know, in some places if we say anything, you’ll be shot. Y’ know, th – th – th – they’re too scared to stand up an’, y’ know, make a voice for themselves. Yeah, I think that’s – that would just be how all them things are important to me. I definitely believe in St Augustine, y’ know, being your own person and’ – yeah. Not being afraid to stand up to people who are just not doing the right thing by you.

Interviewer: Good. In talking about the importance of standing up and taking a stand in your life, in your memory, do you – can you remember a time when that became important for you?

Alyssa: Um – (long pause) – I think it’s quite probably important to me. When I became very aware of like poverty an’ stuff like that – um
– maybe it became a bit more important because I thought, y’
know, this is what’s going on in the world, an’ y’ know, there are
– there are people doing stuff to try an’ stop it, or to try an’ help
people just like – I mean, obviously there are organizations that
do, but –

**Interviewer:** What’s one organization? One that your remember?

**Alyssa:** Aw – the – the United Nations. They try to help people an’
World Vision an’, y’ know, companies, or companies,
organizations that go to try and feed people, like ACTID. Yeah,
so – um – just – yeah, just –

**Interviewer:** Was there any experience you’ve had that has brought this
home to you?

**Alyssa:** Aw (long pause)

**Interviewer:** What about work experience?

**Alyssa:** Um – I think working in World Vision last year as part of my
INSTEP that showed me that hey, there was people out there
who were – who – who do help people. They try to get people
sponsored. They – they try to raise money. They – they do
what they can to help – help the people and to try an’ get them a
better life. An’ I – it just showed me that – there’s an
organization out there who do help people an’ they’re not –
they’re not afraid to or – it – it, y’ know, they – they – they’ll
stand up for these people’s rights an’ stuff. So, yeah, I think
that’s –

**Interviewer:** How important was that experience for you, that INSTEP
experience?

**Alyssa:** Really good. It was really good because it showed me how
many people there are in, y’ know, how many different countries
that are poor and places that I’ve never thought were poor or
poverty-stricken, I found out were. An’ it – it just – yeah, it just
showed me that, you know, there are so many people out there
who need – who need our help an’ you know, there’s a lot o’
good people can do, for sure.

**Interviewer:** Do you think your faith in God is involved in any of that
realisation?

**Alyssa:** Perhaps, because these – I think – these people they had
perhaps a calling to, y’ know, go and be missionaries, or go an’
help – help people an’ raise awareness, stuff like that. You
know, (pause) God (pause) God helped these – helped people
help people to realise that this is what they were meant to do
with their lives. He just – yeah – he just – he was there and he
guided them to it an’. Yeah, that – that – that – that’s how he
helped them. You just – me think, y’ know, he’s – he’s good an’
he’s – y’ know, he – he does send people down here to do the
right thing by people, by other people.
Interviewer: Alright, let's move on. Now you turn to the last chapter in your book. It's about the future. What title did you give that chapter?

Alyssa: (long pause) Um – Living Life to the Max – and –

Interviewer: Good. Why did you use that title?

Alyssa: It's something like I believe an' I – I wrote it in my Year 12 booklet an' stuff because I think you have to live life to whatever you can make it. You can't just say: Aw, you know, that's a bit hard, not gonna go there. Y' know, you have to live your life to the full an' you have to be happy with your life an' what you have accomplished an' what you've done. So, yeah, y' just have t' live life to the max an' be happy, for sure.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. So, what's that chapter tell to the reader what you have achieved in your lifetime?

Alyssa: Um – hopefully, I've become a – a respected journalist, not necessarily a rich or famous journalist, 'cause that doesn't interest me. Um – but a respected journalist who – who – who people, y' know, they don't think: Aw, y' know, that – y' know that journalist, aw, y' know, she – she writes stupid stories about people an' tells lies an' stuff. I want to be someone who is known for her honesty an' her truthfulness, an' is respected by people an', y' know, has – has people, y' know, coming to her for interviews, or whatever and, yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: Good. Okay, how would you like your relationship with God to be in the future?

Alyssa: Um – I think – I think my relationship with him is now it's pretty good. Perhaps it could be a little stronger like – um – going to Church an stuff like that an' – Not necessarily going to Church but being able to talk to him an' tell him stuff an' just – yeah, just –

Interviewer: So that's what you would like it to be in the future.

Alyssa: Yeah. To be able to talk to him more.

Interviewer: Okay. So what changes to make that possible?

Alyssa: (pause) Um – (pause) being perhaps stronger in myself an' – y' know, just – y' know, just to be able to sit down and say: Hey, God, how y' going? – Y' know, um – y' know, this is happening and that's happening, y' know.

Interviewer: So in the future, you've found time to sit?

Alyssa: Oh, like I've got time now, but I just – I don't have the – possibly the capability to just sit down and' say: What's happening, God, y' know, how y' going? Um – I don't – what's the word? – I don't have a lot of concentration. Like I wouldn't have enough concentration to just know, sit down for a half an' hour an' talk to God an' y' know, an' tell him all my, you know, what's happening in my life an' stuff like that because, you know, I just
- I don’t have that extreme concentration. I just – I don’t – I just
- I – like Gran’s always saying: Aw yeah, y’ know, say a prayer
at night an’ stuff, but I just can’t because I just concentrate like I
read before I go – before I go to sleep an’ I just wanna blank
everything out. You know, just – just so it’s all gone and’ I can
just go to sleep.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Obviously something’s changed in your life, hasn’t it?
**Alyssa:** Yeah, I think – with a bit more guidance an’ stuff, it’d be – be
possible definitely because I want to be able to just talk to him, not just talk to him occasionally or when I feel like it, or
whatever.

**Interviewer:** So if we come back to the RE that you experienced when you
were at school, were there things that you would have liked to
have happen for you in RE, that never happened?

**Alyssa:** Um (long pause) – a bigger concentration because I just –
y’know, I – I – I can’t study or nothing, ‘cause I just sit there an’
I’ll look at the words an’ it just goes totally over my head an’ then
I go to write in an exam. I go, “Oh, my God, what – what am I
doing?” Yeah, I just – I can’t sit down and just write. You know, I just –

**Interviewer:** And yet that’s what y’ going to have to do as a journalist.
**Alyssa:** Weird, hey.

**Interviewer:** No, it’s not weird. I think often the things we find hard to do in
these lie the seeds of our future. Okay, I think I will stop at this
point and continue the interview next year. Thankyou, Alyssa.
Alyssa’s third interview

Interviewer: Has anything changed for you about the way you see your faith?
Alyssa: Um – I’m not – I never was like - a Churchy-type person. No offence to anyone who is. But – um – I’m just starting to wonder about certain things that are taught to you. Um – different ways of receiving the – um – (pause) – Yeah, jus’ –

Interviewer: Okay. Can you think of anything that you have been thinking about? Anything specific?
Alyssa: Aah – (pause) – just – just the way religion is shown to us in – like the way – y’ know the way when you go to Church, you hear this, that an’ the other, um – you know, you – (sighs). You just start to think about it an’ you start to think, you know, ‘Hang on, y’ know, certain things just don’t sorta add up. Um – yeah, it’s just like – you’re taught like, you know, it’s one thing or another thing it’s more – um – just broad kinds of thinking about – thinking, I guess (laughs nervously). Yeah.

Interviewer: So do you know if anything has prompted you to think like that now?
Alyssa: Um, I think it makes you think that hey – um – not everything’s black and white. Um – you know, i – it – you have other things to think about an’ you have different – Y- – you know, you just learn that – that what you’ve been taught necessarily isn’t (long pause) the whole idea, the whole thing.

Interviewer: And that was happening last year, wasn’t it?
Alyssa: Yeah. I think i- – probably not as much as what it is now, but – um – yeah, jus’ – yeah, it was happening last year but it wasn’t like me thinking hugely about it an’ it’s just, you know, just wondering.

Interviewer: Would going to university have introduced anything into the way in which you think?
Alyssa: Yeah. I think i- – probably not as much as what it is now, but – um – yeah, jus’ – yeah, it was happening last year but it wasn’t like me thinking hugely about it an’ it’s just, you know, just wondering.

Interviewer: So, you’re beginning to see that there’s more to truth than what you’ve been given?
Alyssa: Yep. Yeah, more to the whole thing of – yeah, jus’ more – more to life, more to – what you think, more – yeah, jus’ more after –

Interviewer: How does that affect your involvement in Church?
Alyssa: Um – I go to Church occasionally. I – I – when I was younger I used to go every week, but something’s changed now a bit. Um – but – but when I go to Church I try to pay attention, but I kinda
lose it after a while. Um – and um – I mean I do a youth group
and that’s kind of – yeah, it’s learning more about religion an’
your faith an’ – it doesn’t really like hugely affect – but that, it’s
just, you know, thinking about things, yeah.

Interviewer: Can you identify in terms of going to Church what leads you to
end up not paying attention?

Alyssa: The homily. Okay, the priest stands up on the pew-thing. I don’t
know the proper word.

Interviewer: Pulpit.

Alyssa: Yeah, that’s the one. And he just – I don’t – aw, it’s just me. I
have really bad attention, like, you know, you start talking about
stuff or I’m gone. It’s jus’ – goes over – goes over my head. An’
that – he’s just talking about sorta the Bible an’ how it exis- – he
doesn’t talk about life. Like there – I went to see this one priest
one – one time. Um, he was Irish an’ he was brilliant. First time
in years I’ve listened to the homily. Um, he stood on a level with
everyone. He stood on the ground an’ he talked about – um – a
certain incident that happened in his life an’ it was something I
could relate to because if it – yeah it’s just – I don’t know – after
some bombing in London or something, you know, everyone
was bagging at the Irish over the incident. I could relate to that
because, you know, I was Irish an’ – I have that behind me.
Yeah. Jus’ something to laugh about, you know, jist –
you know, this is – you know, they just – it’s all extremes, you know, but he
was brilliant. An’ he – I think it was because he was on a level
with us. He wasn’t higher than us. You know, he was the same. I
really liked that. Yeah.

Interviewer: Would you like to reflect on what all this is telling you about your
image of God? Has that changed?

Alyssa: I’ve still got the image of the white beard an’ the big man an’ all
of that.

Interviewer: So all that’s still there?

Alyssa: Yeah. That’s still there. Like I still believe that there’s a God up
there and I still believe he did something wonderful. Um – y’
know – bringing us all down here an’ bringing us all to be. Yeah,
but it’s just the sorta teaching of that I’m just kinda thinking
about.

Interviewer: Can you name one teaching that’s been bugging you?

Alyssa: Awh! (like a deep sigh) This is going to sound really stupid. I was
talking to Gran about it last night. If (pause) Jesus was the king
of the Jews, right? – this might be totally backless argument –
but if he was the king of the Jews, jus’ why, why was he – why is
he the symbol for Catholicism? An’ she says, ‘Aw, y’ know,
because he died for all of us.’ Yeah, but I says, Why – I says – if
he’s the king of the Jews, like a – it says it in the Bible he was
the king of the Jews, and if that – why isn’t he the symbol for
Jewish faith? Why is he the symbol for – or why isn’t he – if he died for all of us – why isn’t he the symbol for the world for us to model ourselves off him, or something?

Interviewer: So can you recall when that question was first prompted in your mind?

Alyssa: Ah, I was jus’ thinking about it last night.

Interviewer: So it was out of the blue?

Alyssa: Yeah. I ha- I ha- I ha- I have them – kind of thing. An’ I’ve just done a debate with someone over it, you know, but poor Gran had to be the one I spoke to last night, but – um – yeah, I don’t – I don’t know where it came from – um – aw, it was – oh I just said something an’ – aw she, y’ know, she was saying that Jesus was a Jew ‘cause we were looking at the people on the TV singing with the band on – they’re on The Australian Story, I think it was, an’ they were singing along with this Cath- ah, this Christian band. An’ I was jus’ saying ‘They get into it.’ and – um – I don’t know how we got onto it that Jesus is a Jew but we did an’ I just started – um – just askin’ her, you know. I don’t know how we got onto it, but we did. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, is this the way it generally happens with you: that things just suddenly pop out and you go through a questioning phase for a while?

Alyssa: Yeah. I usually just – I think I usually question it with someone.

Interviewer: And then?

Alyssa: It goes away.

Interviewer: Okay.

Alyssa: ‘Cause I’ve – I – I’ve voiced my – what I’m thinking so –

Interviewer: Does it bother you that these things pop up?

Alyssa: Not really. No, it doesn’t. Thinking about different stuff, different things.

Interviewer: Are your friends like that? Do they think about these religious things?

Alyssa: Not really. No. Or if they did they don’t voice it with me. Um – you know, ah, no.

Interviewer: I was just wondering about that.

Alyssa: It wasn’t like over a fringe thing. I was just thinking. Yeah.

Interviewer: And this one was prompted by television, wasn’t it? Seeing something on TV? And that was the starting point?

Alyssa: Possibly. I read The De Vinci Code and that started to make me think as well. And I thought, ‘Far out! What’s real and what’s not?’ Yeah, an’ I was jus’ like, ‘Oh God’, y’ know, ‘cause it really brings some radical views of what – um – of the whole Christian
faith and what we’ve been taught. Some things are totally
different to what we’ve been taught. Far out! You know, what if it
– it’s right? Semi-facts based on a – put into a – not true story
like a fiction story. But you just don’t think like, you know, where
did he get these ideas and where did he get – all of this? Far
out, man! I couldn’t get over it. You know, I’d be thinkin’ about it.
I’d be thinkin’, “Where the hell, y’ know, it’s weird stuff.” Yeah.

Interviewer: In the interview, I asked you about who had influenced you in
your faith, and we spent a bit of time looking at Mum and Dad
and, I think, your Grandma. So, is there anything you’d like to
add about that just as your reflect on it at this stage? For
instance, how do you think your parents have influenced you?

Alyssa: Um – my folks – my folks used to take me to Church when I was
just a nipper. Um, we go every week, y’ know, no questions
asked type o’ thing. It was just we went. It was good ‘cause – if –
y’ know, it’s different over here Church. Over there, you know,
you get all dolled up in y’ Sunday best, y’ know, you go to
Church an’ ev – like nearly everyone goes to Church ‘cause
that’s jist how they are – and – um – I was more like – I was
bored entirely one time, wanted to go to Confession – like don’t
know why, but I just decided, “Hey, guess what, I’m goin’ to
Confession.” Don’t think I ended up going, but – um – I jist said
to my friend, y’ know, “I’m goin’ Confession here.” And – um –
yeah, like – I dunno, jus’ more (pause) sort of (pause) yeah, just
my – my parents did influence me because they taught me, you
know, about God an’ – all – an’ Jesus an’, you know, the Holy –
an’ the – the Holy – the Father, the Holy –

Interviewer: Holy Spirit.

Alyssa: Yeah, that’s the one. An’ they – they taught me that it was one,
you have one. How do you have three, y’ know? What’s this all
about? And they said, you know, It’s one, let it be one person:
God. And – um – you know, they – they taught me a lot of that
that there thing really. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Alyssa: An’ like, after school or whatever, on my way home I used t’ go
into the Church ‘cause the Church is right beside our school An’
I used to go in an’ say my prayers an’ – an’ then I’d go – Every
day I’d do this. Every day after school, go into the Church, say
my prayers and then go home. Yeah. It’s just habit. An’ a lot of
people did do that.

Interviewer: How old were you when you did do that?

Alyssa: Oh, far out! Probably – um – (pause) eight or nine.

Interviewer: Okay. About Year 3?

Alyssa: Aah (pause, then to herself quietly) That’d be what? Junior,
senior, second class, third class (pause) – Yeah. So I just had to
do it like it is back then or I get really confused.
Interviewer: When you came to Australia, what grade did you go into, or what year did you go into? Can you remember?

Alyssa: Aw, I went into Year Five and it was the end of – um – nearly the end of the school year. They were going to put me into Six but they thought it would be too much, y’ know. Last year of primary school and you’d go to Un- – high school. So they decided to put me into Sixth Class – oh, (quietly) Sixth – Year Five.

Interviewer: Do you think that move changed the way you viewed your faith and the practice of it? (Pause – no response from Alyssa) Like the difference. You’ve already made a comment about how it was different back there.

Alyssa: Even in primary school we still went to – um – we didn’t go to Church every week with my – with my parents, but we still – you know, we went to Church during school. Um – we’d have, you know, we went to Church every Tuesday to – afternoon to practice our songs, you know, that we’d sing. Um – yeah, we did like – um – you know, an a– an assembly. We’d have, you know, prayer – um – don’t know if school back in Ireland was as sort of – like they did – can’t – like I can’t hugely remember, but I don’t think they went into RE as much as they would – they did over here. I jist – you know, you jist – y’ parents, uh – taught you about that. I just don’t remember them, you know, the – you know, you wouldn’t have like a room with – I dunno – a cross or like a table with, you know, like a sort of a miniature table or whatever. Ah, they jist – they jist didn’t do that as much. You know, they focused more – they just focused more on like academic stuff, like, you know, your RE, your English, your Maths, all that sort of stuff. All the fun stuff. Y’ know, it’s just a – yeah. But over here they just talk more about – y’ know, they teach you more about RE, an’ religion, an – yeah.

Interviewer: Would you like to say a bit more about RE, like, for instance, when I raise that with you now, does anything pop into your mind about your experience at school? Any images?

Alyssa: Um – We had to learn in Year 12 RE about – tell me if I’m going way off the track – um – about certain influential people in – um – you know, that had been around, you know, Fiona Woods – ah – Stanley – whatever her name was – and – um – you know, um – I forget the name now – the bloke in India – um – Gandhi and that sort of stuff – to research them And you really learned a lot about different people and what they do.

Interviewer: That’s the second time you have mentioned that so that had a big influence on you?

Alyssa: Yeah. Um – you know, I just – I did learn a lot about – um – the way other people perhaps viewed their – their chosen religion an’ – yeah. Mmm. Good. An’ learning about the different religions. An’ like I still talk about the day the – um – monk – the Buddhist monk came. An’ I jist – I still talk about how calm he
was an’, you know, how he just laughed – had a brill – yeah, brilliant – an’, you know, just – yeah, jist learning about how other people viewed their religion, an’ their – their particular faith, an’, you know, just – yeah, jist stuff like that. It was wonderful learning about that. Yeah.

Interviewer: So that is what you recall?

Alyssa: Mmm. An’, you know, learning about (pause) – you know, stories an’ – um – y’ know, particular – um – theories an’ – um (pause) – different views to certain issues – um – y’ know, when a society – y’know, jist learning, y’ know, learning about that sort of stuff. Um – really – it’s really – I like learning about stuff like that so I found that interesting an’ it pulled me in.

Interviewer: So what you’re talking about is more likely Years 11 and 12, isn’t it?

Alyssa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you recall anything from lower down? Anything sort of stick in your mind?

Alyssa: Year 8 learning is about Edmund Rice because he was my House Patron. Um – we’re learning about he – the way he was able to come from being, you know, a rich guy who had a wife who died and then giving everything away to – um – you know, various groups of people, becoming poor himself, becoming, you know, really part of it all an’, yeah. Yeah, just stuff like that.

Interviewer: Being in Rice House for five years, did that have an influence on you?

Alyssa: Yeah – um – I loved Edmund Rice because he – um – he was Irish and – um – the way he could just give up his, you know, his riches. A lot of people wouldn’t do that today. You know, if you were a millionaire, you wouldn’t give your riches away to someone else. Some people would, but (pause) I don’t think I could name a lot of people who would – um – and – um – just to be able to do that because you have a certain – you have a sudden – um – you know, idea or feeling, then jist givin’ it all away, yeah, everything you’ve built up in your life, becoming poor an’ like everybody else, it’s just like really good an’ you – you’re someone you could look up to for that because he – he done all that, he kinda, you know, did what he had to do to become – to feel like he could belong.

Interviewer: So do you think it is important to have people like that?

Alyssa: Aw, definitely. I think if you don’t have people like that – um – everybody becomes – y’ know, y’ – if you don’t have people like that there’s no hope for people to become better, for people to be able to climb higher up in the hierarchy, if you like, of social standing. Um – you know, just – yeah, you need it because if you don’t – if you can’t give – if you can’t say, “Right, I’m gonna give this away today.” Y’ know, y’ jist – y’ know, y’ full o’ y’self. If
Interviewer: Okay.

Alyssa: Yeah, I've grown up doin' weird things. I used to dress up and go 'round the houses an' get money off them, like — y'know — from no one in particular, but, y'know, sayin' we were gonna send it to, you know, whoever, for whatever country, y'know. We used to do weird — weird stuff like that. And — um — yeah, it's jist — think it kinda taught me that hey, people need to be able to give stuff away, they need to be — y'know, there are people out there who are hell of a lot less fortunate than what we are. You know, we need to be able to — um — bring hope back to them, we need to be able to them something to live for. Um —

Interviewer: Did your teachers do that for you, that they taught you stuff that helped you?

Alyssa: Um — see I wasn't a normal kid, like — um — you know, I didn't go around drawing pictures or colouring in. Mum says this all the time. You know, I didn't go around drawing, being a normal kid. You know, I watched, you know, the news an' all o' that. Y'know, So I think I kinda been aware o' that since I was, y'know, younger an' — um — you know — Don't know if my parents instilled it in me or — Can't really remember where the hell it came from, but — um — you know, m— jus’ yeah, jus’ something inside o’ me. It's something I've always — you know — taught that people should be (pause) There's no need for people to be, you know, really, really poor. They have nothing an', you know, there's no need for that. There's just, you know (pause)

Interviewer: So you're not sure where that idea has come from?

Alyssa: No.

Interviewer: It's not something that's originated at school?

Alyssa: I don't think so. It could of, but I honestly can't remember, but it came from something I've had my whole life.

Interviewer: Did teachers reinforce it for you?

Alyssa: (pause) Aaah, (pause)

Interviewer: What about with the Rice House thing? Was that reinforced inside the House by teachers? Or is that you?

Alyssa: Um (pause) I don't know. I think that was me. Um — in a — we learned it from our teacher and, you know, our House was always like a really happy and friendly House. You know, people helped out other people if they were going through, you know, diffi— difficult times in their life. You know, we jist — I — I found out with our particular House group — I had like the — my Year in our House group. You know, we jist, y'know, we're there for each other, especially when we were like in Year 8 an' stuff. We (pause) you know, we — it jist — yeah, we jist helped each other
an’, y’ know, helped each other along, an’ encouragement, an’
(pause) Yeah, it was really good.

Interviewer: So obviously, more of this is supported by your peers rather than
by your teachers?

Alyssa: Yeah. Um – yeah. Well, like because the school does like
Project Compassion, all of that, i- i- it kind of instilled from the
school as well because, you know, you do Project Compassion,
like helping people an’ you know, bringing hope to them. Um –
you know, I think generosity of people as well perhaps has, you
know, made me think that there’s a chance for, you know,
people to have a shot in – in their lives. Yeah. I dunno. It’s just –
yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. I’ll bring you back to your parents for a moment and your
involvement in the youth group in your parish. Your parents
seem to be involved as well.


Interviewer: Is that an influence on you to be involved because your parents
are? Or is that a coincidence?

Alyssa: No. They were asked because I was a leader there. And – um –
um – you know, people like my parents. Dunno why, but – um –
they’re – they’re – they’re good people. They – y’ know – they
help in (pause) like my Mum does – Mum does a lot. My Mum’s
like a super woman. She does Luke 18, she does Parish
Council, she does – ah – the thing down here, You know, she –
y’ know (sighs). Yeah, it’s – it’s good to see that. She’s a good
role model to have, you know, because she does go out there
and do things. She just doesn’t sit around an’ wait for things to
happen to her. An’ my Dad’s the same. Um – you know, they
(pause) they make me get off my bum sometimes (laughs) and
do things, you know, because of employ- – you know, you have
to do this, y’ gonna get a good job, y’ gonna do something. Um
– but li- – yeah, saying that like they haven’t – um – put a lot of
pressure on me. It’s always “what you wanna do, we’ll support
you.” Yeah, if you wanna be a bum, we’ll support you doing that.
You know, um – just they’re a bit – yeah, they are – they do go
out there an’ help an’ – yeah, they’re good – they’re good role
models to have for – my brother an’ my sister an’ myself. And –
um – yeah, we’re jist – I’ve got my Gran as well, a good role
model as well for me. Um – and, y’ know, yeah, (pause) yeah,
the – (pause) yeah, they help me like with things if I’m having
issues with certain things, with difficulties, you know. And, y’
know, they’re there to support me. Yeah. An’ yeah, it’s good
having them around at the youth group because they do add
something to it. You know, they add their – their thoughts, their
feelings, an’ (pause) y’know, they are – they do do things like
they – they – they don’t like – like, take, for example, last night’s
meeting, you know, Dad came an’ got involved an’, you know,
he – um – that’s what – yeah, that’s what they do. They do things to try and help us an’ sup- – support us an’, you know, give us something back for our lives.

Interviewer: Okay, is there anything you’d like to add about prayer and your relationship with God?

Alyssa: Um -

Interviewer: We explored this in the first interview and the second.

Alyssa: Yes, I know. I don’t really like pray type of thing. You know, I believe that if you’re a good person an’, you know, an’ you live your life in the – in the right way an’ y’ know, you try to do the right thing. God knows y’ love him, you know, um, (pause) Yeah, jist um – pray I don’t, y’know. I should, but I jist – but I jist don’t pray, I don’t – um –don’t need to do all that. I don’t know if it’s somethin’ I don’t need to do – um – like my Gran’s always sayin’ to me, y’ know, “What do yo you pray?” an’ “Why don’tcha pray?” an’ all o’ this an’ – ’cause she prays ev’ry night before she goes to sleep, which I just couldn’t do ’cause I’m usually up an’ jist don’t have the whole thing of sitting by the bed an’ – or kneeling by the bed an’ praying, y’ know, I don’t have that in me. Um – yeah. Um – but – like I pray when I go to Luke 18. Um – I pray when I go to Church, but – um – yeah, sometimes I ask God to help me.

Interviewer: So your prayer is more formal sort of prayer, rather than spontaneous prayer?

Alyssa: Yeah. More or –

Interviewer: More the Our Father and Hail Mary sort of thing?

Alyssa: No. Um – Luke – when we go to Luke 18, we kind of jist pray for what we – um – are feeling, what we want to do to reach out and help, you know, say what we need to say basically. An’ then, y’ know, I pray formally at Church when – um – after the Communion – um – an’ then, y’ know, jist whenever I need something. I jist say, “God, please help me.” type o’ thing. But I don’t really pray formally that much.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything you’d like to say that expands on anything you’ve said, or anything you recall from the previous interviews?

Alyssa: Mmmm (pause) Don’t think so. Don’t really – can’t really think of anything to expand on. No.

Interviewer: Is there anything we haven’t covered that you wanted to say something about?

Alyssa: Not that I can think of, no.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you, Alyssa, for allowing me to interview you.
Cameron’s interview

Interviewer: Cameron, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. I have five major questions to ask you and each question has sub-questions to it. My first question is this: what do you believe about God?

Cameron: Um – I believe that he’s a greater force, that he’s above humans as we couldn’t actually be the greatest things on earth, an’ I think it’s sort of an idea that’s there that he’s there an’ he can comfort us an’ if we do need help that’s there’s always someone there listening.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. Have you always thought about God in this way?

Cameron: Um – I think being brought up in a Catholic family, a Christian family that – um – attend Church rather regularly – that it was sort of not my decision until I’d come to high school an’ sort of started to grow up an’ then it’s sort of become more of my own prerogative to think of it like this way an’ things like that.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Cameron: Um (long pause) I guess – um – that it’s – he’s a support structure for me – um – that’s someone who can sort of listen an’ just be there, so, maybe a comforting – comforting spirit. Yeah, sort of l- that, along those lines.

Interviewer: Thank you. You’ve spoken about how once you came to secondary school and you took charge of your own growth and your own faith, so in what ways is your faith today different from what it was when you were in primary school?

Cameron: Um – it’s not a chore any more. It’s not a chore to go to Church every Sunday an’ sit there for an hour. It’s more of a choice between if I got homework, then Mum says, “Well, you don’t have to come”, but it’s more of a – if when I do go then it’s my own choice an’ it’s my own prerogative sort of thing. An’ like being active in even in school things with when it comes to churches an’ stuff, you don’t have to be all the time an’ it’s just – I think it’s good to get in there an’ be part of it.

Interviewer: Is Jesus different from God?

Cameron: Um (pause) um – yes because Jesus was a man an’ God – an’ God – God is not – he’s not man, he’s not woman. Um – I think Jesus being God’s son – um – an’ going up to heaven whole, he wasn’t just an ordinary man. He was someone who (pause) is one of us but a role model and I think that has to be taken into consideration that they’re exactly the same at all. They’re two different entities, two different beings sort of thing.

Interviewer: Is that difference between Jesus and God important to you?
Cameron: Um – not important. Um – I don’t think it’s completely relevant as everybody’s different an’ everything’s different, so I don’t think it affects in any way how I see both them or how they affect me in my life. I think it’s just – um – something that you’ve just come to accept – accept, just another piece of information.

Interviewer: Was there a time when you didn’t see a difference?

Cameron: Um – maybe when I was very young, around five an’ six, an’ just starting to learn all these sort of things. It was just an easier concept to see them all as one person, but as you grow up, you mature an’ you sort of – logic takes hold an’ it’s – you can’t just have questions that are unanswered an’ that you just believe and you have to ask those sort of questions an’ work it out for yourself.

Interviewer: Could you talk a bit more about the logic aspect.

Cameron: Um – sort of when you’re little, it’s – it’s too complicated to see – um – too complicated to even comprehend what God is. Um – and Jesus performing miracles is that something I can’t do myself. It’s just easy to say that he’s also – he was also God because he could do things I couldn’t do that have been written down and God is there and he’s nothing like me, whereas now it’s – you’ve been – we’ve been taught in RE that Jesus was a man an’ he – he lived an’ he died an’ he did all these other things that I might not be able to do, but it was through his intense faith in God an’ being the son of God that did that, so I think with more knowledge you can build a better an’ more – more like strong image of what is really going on an’ what you see.

Interviewer: Good. We might come back to that later on. What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Cameron: Um – I’d explain that as rather than an entity or figure of the passion that is within all of us sort of – um – that – that drive to – to want to know the meaning of life an’ that sort of thing that asks all those questions an’ that drives you to – to go to Church every week and – or feel guilty if you don’t go to Church, that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Okay. That’s very good. A set of questions: Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?

Cameron: Um – I wouldn’t describe myself as a very prayerful person. Um – I guess I get caught up in along the lines of thinking sometimes before I’m asleep I’ll be looking up at my roof an’ tryin’ to work things out in my head, tryin’ to clear up stuff, an’ – um – for me I think that – that is my equivalent of praying rather than sitting down or kneeling down and praying to a figure or something, just tryin’ – 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
Interviewer: Very good. And to whom do you pray most often? God? Jesus? or the Holy Spirit?

Cameron: Um – probably God.

Interviewer: Why would that be?

Cameron: Um – I think as God is creator of everything – um – he created me, obviously an’ – um – from that he knows – he knows me best sort of thing, so if I – ’cause I’m there trying to solve – solve things for me normally, an’ work out things to do with me, I think that he probably has the best understanding out of those three to help me out, to listen an’ that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Okay. How does your faith in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Cameron: Um – I think – um – having faith as part of your life is important as it gives you a whole new dimension to life, like some people play sport, some people – um – play music an’ run an’ do all sorts of different things – um – and religion, having God as part of your life just adds another aspect, another way that you can grow, as you are grow up and while you’re growing up and I – even after you’ve grown up. It adds another aspect to life an’ how you live.

Interviewer: What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Cameron: Um – I believe everything happens for a reason and – um – from suffering – um – you gain strength. So through painful experiences that are inevitable, you have to sort of – um – look back and work out what you gained from it and view everything as positive rather than as a negative.

Interviewer: Have you arrived at that from your own personal experience, or is that an idea that you’ve developed?

Cameron: Um – I’d say a little bit of both. Um – definitely it’s a – way of deal – that I find dealing with bad things, but also – um – it’s something that I’ve probably picked up from my parents, or from people that I know as well on the way.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?

Cameron: Um (pause) ah, I sort of see death as another stage of life. I’m worried because I don’t know what’s gonna happen next an’ you can’t plan for it an’ I sort of like to have that control, but – um – I think it’s one thing especially that you just have to sort of – it’s out of your hands an’ you’ve just gotta trust that it’s gonna be all right an’ that it all works out when it happens.
Interviewer: So in what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and fulfillment?

Cameron: Um – I think as I’ve said previously, that religion is a sort of support, a support structure for humans an’ it gives them something to believe in, an’ something to help them an’ listen an’ be there for them when they need that extra bit of help and it does add that extra dimension to life. It – it gives you someone who’s always there, a sense of ideas and stories that have been passed down that you can turn to for guidance. It gives you set rules an’ set things that you should do an’ shouldn’t do and I think that sort of – um – like guidance is important in your living and it makes it a little bit easier, like even though we’d all like to think that we’re independent. If you have guidelines an’ things we are set to follow it makes it easier and we can have that sense of fulfillment.

Interviewer: So the relationship between faith and religion: could you comment on that?

Cameron: Faith is believing in religion to me. Um – you have faith in a religion you believe an’ you follow that because you can relate to or you’ve been taught to relate to the ideas in the religion.

Interviewer: Okay. What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Cameron: Um – I think growing up – like turning thirteen an’ coming to high school an’ having a higher workload an’ then me having to personally make the choice rather than Mum or Dad dragging me out to down to Church or whatever. Um – I think that has sort of strengthened and made me realize that if that’s something I want to have in my life that it’s something that I’ve got to put there and it’s up to me rather than up to everyone else, which I think is a sort of a positive thing because it happens a lot with life now even. You have to – you’re not being driven any more. You have to do your own thing an’ take your own path.

Interviewer: Could you comment on what people have said or done that has contributed to your relationship with God or maybe not even contributed to it? Maybe even harmed it?

Cameron: Um – um (pause) I think parents being like the main thing in my life, up to now my main support structure, sort of taking me to Church an’ talking to me afterwards about it an’ if I understood it all an’ commenting an’ listening to my comments an’ making sure I understood it all when I was little helped me to have that sense that – um – it’s – it’s part of your life and you should have it as part of your life because it can help you. I think the whole idea that religion’s out to help you is what – is one of the key reasons is why I choose to follow now an’ choose to believe now an’ practise now because it – it does help an’ without that sort of – um – reinforcement at the start, doing something new, sort of being pushed into it, I don’t think, or I doubt that I’d have the
courage to actually be able to go and do that myself. So I think, yeah, that’s probably the main contributing factor.

Interviewer: Is there a difference between your Mum and your Dad in terms of influence on you and developing a relationship with God?

Cameron: Ah, I think Mum – Mum cares a lot more about it than Dad does only because Dad was – um – in one of those families from what I’ve heard that went to Church two times a week an’ all that and it sort of fell out with him. He doesn’t really worry about it too much any more an’ just as there – um – if you need to talk about it or if you need some clarifications or something, rather – um – and he sort of just makes sure that I have the opportunity and every opportunity that I have like he’s given me every opportunity that is possible for me. Whereas, I think, for Mum it’s – um – sort of the same with her an’ me that she sees it as a support system as well and that she uses the support system, whereas Dad finds it in other sources now because I don’t – it mustn’t be as big for him as it is for me, or something. I don’t – yeah.

Interviewer: So, is that something you don’t talk about at home with your Dad?

Cameron: Um – yeah. It’s sort of – yeah, we don’t. Yeah, it hasn’t been brought up too much. We’re normally doing other stuff around the house, or –

Interviewer: And with your Mum?

Cameron: Um – mmm – Sometimes. I wouldn’t say it’s huge, but every now and then, we sit down. You can’t – ’cause with me an’ Dad, we are always outside doing something and – an’ it usually takes concentration, whether it be retic work and you don’t have that sort of type of conversation, whereas with Mum it’d just be inside. Perhaps she’ll be ironing, or something an’ I’ll be folding up my clothes, or whatever, an’ then – an’ then we’ll talk about things an’ – an’ yeah, have that sort of conversation, whereas with Dad, there’s not that much time, no time for thinking, that sort of idea.

Interviewer: Good. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Cameron: Um – stronger in the sense that I needed more support and needed that extra sort of comfort in my life, but weaker in the fact that – um – with Mum breaking her tibia an’ things it’s been much harder an’ me having a lot of homework, it’s been much harder to get to Church an’ actually be active. But – um – yeah, overall I think it’d be a – a strength – more growing.

Interviewer: Could you talk about how you’ve managed to have it stronger even if you don’t go to Church as often?
Cameron: Um – I think while the Ten Commandments say that you should keep the holy Sabbath an’ go to Church on Sunday, that religion is more about your frame of mind and more about how you feel about it an’ how much you need it an’ how much you’re getting out of it. So, even though I’m not going to Church ev’ry – ev’ry Sunday, um – I still – I’m using religion, I’m using God, I’m using prayer, the whole – in my own sense – a whole lot more to get through life an’ I’m – it’s becoming a bigger part of my life ’cause I need it and it’s supporting me through the times when I do need it.

Interviewer: What has been the impact of your school on your faith?

Cameron: Um – I think school being probably my biggest challenge in life – well, one of the biggest challenges in my life – um – it adds that sense that I need the support and it also – um – you learn more things about yourself, like on the retreats an’ in RE class. You learn what religion means to you an’ you learn to put that sort of idea into words an’ make so it is useful for you, so it does help you rather than just being an idea that you have to follow or you just choose to follow for the heck of it.

Interviewer: And have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to these sorts of changes in the way you think about and relate to God?

Cameron: I think both the retreats – um – very big, like you go onto the retreat as one person and you definitely come out as someone else, someone that – um – you know better yourself an’ that you like more – um – yeah, you definitely undergo changes and you work out who your real friends are an’ you work out what you want out of life an’ how you’re gonna achieve that. Um – yeah, so all the teachers on the retreat, all the people that are on the retreat – um – yeah, countless memories, countless sort of things that have been said that have really sort of impacted you on those retreats an’ things. Probably be biggest.

Interviewer: Okay. Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?

Cameron: Um (pause) ah, in RE sometimes I feel it’s more about actually writing what they want you to write rather than what you actually feel sometimes. I think in some ways you have really great class discussions an’ you really get to sort of voice your opinion and listen to other people’s opinions in a forum that you wouldn’t normally have outside of RE class- um – which is very good, but other times – um – it seems like you’re just writing whatever to get the grade that you want, to get whatever you want to achieve out of the class at the end of the day and not really growing as a person. So – um – I sort of – in some ways it adds to your religious experience, but in other ways it sort of detracts from growth because you’re not really growing, just saying what other people want you to say, so yeah.
Interviewer: Has there ever been an RE teacher who has impacted on your relationship with God?

Cameron: Um – I think all of them in their own way bringing their own experience an’ their own style of religion that every – every RE teacher I’ve had has definitely sort of broadened my outlook in a different way – um – yeah, just it – in a different group of people each year, you’re gonna draw different experiences from it each time, that sort of idea.

Interviewer: Before we finish the interview, would you like to comment on the place of prayer and liturgy in the development of your relationship with God?

Cameron: Um – I think – ah – being forced into prayer and liturgy probably isn’t as beneficial as actually – um – not being forced and not doing it an’ then doing it when you really need it and then finding out how much it really does help ’cause you can continuously tell people that it’s good an’ that it’s gonna help them an’ force them even to do it, but then they’re never – if they don’t want to they’re never gonna do it, so I think it’s better to leave people to – if they want that sort of relationship, if they want to do that, an’ if they find that it helps them to let them do it rather than to force people that don’t want to do it to do it ’cause normally what I find happens is people that don’t want to do it ruin it for the people that are actually in the mood an’ actually wanna participate an’ do that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Okay, Cameron. Is there anything that you would want to say and I haven’t asked you a question about it?

Cameron: No. I’m fairly happy, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you very much for the interview.
Cecil’s interview

Interviewer: Cecil, what do you believe about God?
Cecil: What do I believe about God? Well, (long pause) I think he sits up there and watches over us an’ helps us out and – um – we can talk to him whenever we want and he does answer our prayers even if not directly. Um – (long pause) That’s all I can think of.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you always thought about God in this way?
Cecil: No. No. Ever since – um – probably since the retreat that I actually noticed that I could pray to him and he’d answer me.

Interviewer: Your Year 12 retreat?
Cecil: Yep. Jus’ towards the start of the year.

Interviewer: Was there anything about the retreat that you would attribute that to?
Cecil: Um – I think it was – well, the whole retreat put the idea in my head but there was one session when – um – people would get up and say – like in front of everyone – how they – where they see God in their lives. An’ they go through everything for some – . One girl who was saying she lost seven close people – um – to cancer in one year – an’ she wouldn’t have been able to get through it without praying. And then it kind of clicked after the retreat that I could do that too.

Interviewer: Okay. I think we’ll come back to that. There’s a second interview, so it might come up there. If it doesn’t then I’ll bring you back to it in the third interview. Okay, is Jesus different from God?
Cecil: (long pause) I’ve already thought about this a bit and I thought Jesus was just God but in human form. But I haven’t really thought about it that much.

Interviewer: Do you think there was a time when you saw no difference?
Cecil: Between the two?

Interviewer: Mmm.
Cecil: Yeah. I think so.

Interviewer: Can you think back to when that might have been?
Cecil: I think it was discussion in RE. We were just talking about – um – I think it just came up in discussion.

Interviewer: Was that in Year 12?
Cecil: Yeah, it would have been Year 12.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit?
Cecil: I’ve never really thought about the Holy Spirit.
Interviewer: Okay. If I asked the question: How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Cecil: I don’t think I could do that.

Interviewer: That’s fine. That’s not a problem. Now, a set of questions: Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?

Cecil: I do pray. And I have often – um – I pray every single – after Mass, during Communion – I pray then. And also I try to every night. And I decided that around exam time because that’s – I knew that I could ask for help. Then I had a feeling that someone could help me but I wasn’t too sure. And how do I pray? Um – first, I thank God just for various things and then I ask him to watch over my friends and after that and then myself and family and anyone whose – um – going through a tough time, sick, and pray for friends as well.

Interviewer: Okay. You mention there that you ask God. So is it God you pray to?

Cecil: Yes.

Interviewer: What about Jesus?

Cecil: No. I – I think – I believe I pray – prayed to Mary for a bit – ’cause I remember my Year 10 RE teacher told me that (stops to put the cat outside) My – um – Year 10 RE teacher – we did like a little prayer session towards the end of class and he said that anytime you pray to Mary it’s almost like you’re talking to your parents because sometimes you ask something to your Dad and he won’t listen so you go to your Mum, so that kinda clicks. I’ve done that once or twice And also usually I start off my prayers (the cat distracts him again) usually I start off my prayers by asking how – um – how God’s going. And usually the first thing that pops into my head’s okay most of the time.

Interviewer: Good. Is there anything else you wanted to add about the areas: about how you see God? Jesus? Holy Spirit? and prayer? Anything popped into your mind?

Cecil: Well, I been thinking about how I see – see God an’ I th– got one little thing I kinda – I believe I’m startin’ to see in everyone. For me personally, I see him just how – um – that that they – that everyone does good. That’s how I believe I do anyway at the moment.

Interviewer: Let’s move on. How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Cecil: (long pause) I guess, I’m just taking a guess, but – um – because I have asked him for quite a few things like in the last past few years ’cause I’ve gone though 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 and (long pause)

**Interviewer:** I'll use some sub-questions; that might help. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

**Cecil:** Towards suffering – not that much because nothing's really happened to me like last year, but at the moment this year, Mum's got a friend who's got – um – a brain tumour. She's not doing very well. It's getting worse. And we've got a few friends – another friend's got cancer. And we also found out last night – do you remember Sarah Mullins from the Conference?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Cecil:** She might have cancer.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Cecil:** She's hav– she's going – she's like a few tests so like in the past, maybe like the end of last year so this year there's happened to nobody I've thought about that much.

**Interviewer:** What about your attitude towards death?

**Cecil:** Towards death – well I have noticed before that I always – I'm believing now that you go up there – you go up with God when you die 'cause – um – again when I pray, especially at Church, I'll say “Hi” to my Nan 'cause she passed away quite a while ago. Stuff like that. So I reck– – yeah, but – um – I haven't really thought about that as well. That's about it.

**Interviewer:** In what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and meaning?

**Cecil:** (long pause) Is there any other questions?

**Interviewer:** (both laugh) We can come back to it. And sometimes with these questions, they are things that you really haven't thought about before – and that's not uncommon. Everyone I have interviewed has found the question challenging because a lot of the time they don't stop and think about it. But they go away and think about it and we usually come back to it in the second or third interview. So let's move on. What we do in this part is look at events in your life that you think have led to changes in your relationship with God. You have already mentioned the retreat. You mentioned a Year 10 class and something about prayer. Just stop and think for a moment about what people have said or done that has contributed to your relationship with God or not contributed to it.

**Cecil:** (long pause) Oh, I do – I do remember one incident. There's a few, but there's one. It was at school, Teresa Day and we were – um – at lunchtime – after lunch, Teresa Day, you go down the oval and there's a teachers versus students soccer match. And we were watching and just mucking around playing kicking the ball and then I was – this is last year, it was Year 12, an' we
were kicking the ball and it went – someone kicked it too far and it went away a bit and then some Year 11s picked it up and started chucking it around and wouldn’t give it to us an’ I thought that was – just stupid. So I can’t believe they actually did that. It was the sort of thing you see in the movies, or something. And that kinda – even though – yeah, basically what they did kinda – they challenged my faith ‘cause I didn’t think anyone was that stupid. That was a few days and then it went away. That was one thing. Was there anything else? Again the retreat I think, especially that session when everyone got up and said an’ how they see God. That was pretty strong.

Interviewer: Was that session during the day or at night?

Cecil: Um – well, it was in the afternoon, I think. An’ everyone just sat in a room an’ – there was a chair in the middle at the front. They jus’ got up and said what they wanted to. (long pause) Um. (long pause) And I also think – um – well, Talitha’s made me start going back – going back into Church and she’s – um – even though she’s – I don’t think she knows she’s such a – y’ know a light of my faith. She’s good. (pause) That’s why I like the stories an’ stuff she tells me an’ (pause) stuff like that. That helps a lot. (pause) Um – Y’ know, she go’ – she started me going – started me – um – going back to Church an’ then I was having trouble concentrating in Church an’ she told me to try and leave all my thoughts and worries at the door an’ so I did an’ that helped out quite a bit. And it’s getting better.

Interviewer: Good. Shall we move on?

Cecil: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Cecil: In the last twelve months? It’s grown stronger.

Interviewer: Okay. I think everything you’ve been saying indicates in some ways why: the influence of Talitha helping you, obviously a powerful retreat experience, and some good experiences at school, too, and then also the impact of other people’s suffering on you. So I suppose the sort of question I would want to ask has already been answered. I’d like, if you can, to broaden it out and to think of the broader context: the impact of your school on your faith and not just the retreat, but the school as a whole.

Cecil: (long pause) I don’t know. I don’t think it’s actually done that much. Like RE was good but because in Year 11, 12 the main emphasis – emphasis is supposed to be focused on discussion, but with the classes I was in they weren’t really the discussion type, so we really didn’t do much about that. But (pause) with the assignments, I can’t remember what they were about, like vocation and the beatitude, I think, they kinda helped out a bit, but (long pause) I don’t think that much.
Interviewer: Okay. When you said assignments on vocation and beatitude helped out a bit, are you able to identify just in what way they helped?

Cecil: Just by understanding like what vocation means an’ stuff like that – an’ that – an’ what the beatitudes mean an’ why they do it an’ what happens if you follow them, an’ stuff like that.

Interviewer: Apart from the retreat experience and the other experiences you’ve named, have there been any other experiences in your school life, or have there been any significant people in your school life who’ve led to changes in the way you think about and relate to God?

Cecil: (long pause) Maybe my Year 10 RE teacher. Al– even though it wasn’t that much. He used to help out with that stuff (pause) and I guess – ’cause I can’t really think about the years, but – um – I guess probably all my RE teachers helped out with that stuff.

Interviewer: You mentioned your Year 10 RE teacher. Can you identify specifically what it was?

Cecil: Oh yeah, that’s the one – the one – the one thing I can remember is him saying that sometimes your faith pray to Mary or pray to God. That’s the one thing I remember. And he was a good RE teacher.

Interviewer: What made him a good RE teacher?

Cecil: Um – um – he was, he was – um – he was funny without trying to be funny, but wasn’t too m– wasn’t too funny. And – um – he would just discuss the stuff really well. I used to enjoy being in his class.

Interviewer: Why would being funny be important?

Cecil: Um – so that you’re not just looking at the Bible every day an’ doing work, doing worksheets. Instead, you’re actually enjoying.

Interviewer: Is it any different in any other subject?

Cecil: (pause) They – they’re pretty similar actually.

Interviewer: So, did he teach anything else?

Cecil: Oh, he taught – um – I had him for Maths as well.

Interviewer: So was he the same in Maths as he was in RE?

Cecil: Yeah, pretty much when I think about it.

Interviewer: So, a good teacher?

Cecil: Yeah. And I also had him last year for Calculus as well.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the place of prayer and liturgy in your relationship with God? You mentioned how you go to Mass in the parish and Talitha’s helped you there. Is there anything specific about prayer and liturgy at school?
Cecil: \((long\ pause)\) The only thing I can really think of is how different
the Masses were 'cause the school – the school Mass – oh, not
– not all of the school Masses, but the important ones, they were
engaging.

Interviewer: In what way were they engaging?

Cecil: Well, just the – the only thing I can think of is the music. The
music and songs were really good, but \((pause)\) that's hard to
answer that question.

Interviewer: Let's move on. What people have played a significant part in
your faith development?

Cecil: People? Um – I'd have to say my Mum and \((long\ pause)\) Mum
and Talitha. \((long\ pause)\)

Interviewer: Is there anything your Mum has said or done that's helped you
grow in faith?

Cecil: Um, I think – I know she did – I can't remember exactly what she
said. I know she did say stuff when Nan passed away and that's
probably stuck with me and just – how she raised me as well for
an – um – being a Catholic, but now that you mention that, but –
um – Joan as well has also done a lot, especially reviews an'
stuff like that.

Interviewer: What about the difference in the influence between your Mum
and your Dad?

Cecil: Oh, 'cause my parents are divorced, or separated, when I was
eighteen months old, and Dad – I see Dad maybe – I saw Dad
so – between then and now – I saw Dad probably once or twice
a year. And then a while back we had a holiday at his – at his
house. And now last year an' this year, he's in Perth,
somewhere down Claremont, and' we go over there on various
weekends, have dinner an' stuff. But he hasn't really had a big –
and also he doesn't – I think he is Catholic, but he doesn't
practise it.

Interviewer: So your Mum is by far the major influence?

Cecil: Yeah. An' I can remember one time – um – Terri had her
\((pause)\) Conf–, not Confirm– Is there a Confirmation or
Graduation Mass from primary school?

Interviewer: Yes.

Cecil: An' we were at – and when at the Mass and Dad came, I can
remember Dad saying he didn't like it and it was boring an' he
won't – that kind of stuff – 'cause he shouldn't have been saying
that, but that's just – because he wasn't a Catholic, but I'm a
Catholic.

Interviewer: Okay, any other stories that identify how your Mum's influenced
you?
Cecil: (very long pause) I can’t remember any more stories, but I can remember – um – like when we go to Mass and there was – there was – if there was something wrong with Nan, or she was sick, or if I was doing my exams, or someone we knew was going through a hard time and we’d light a candle at Mass, that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: Was that important to you?

Cecil: Oh, before – I must admit when I was younger I didn’t really see the point in doing it, but then after I kinda realised that he does – God does do stuff that kinda – yeah.

Interviewer: So what do you link the light of the candle with?

Cecil: Um – I don’t really know how long they stay on for. (pause)

Interviewer: Most Churches let them burn down, so they stay alight for as long as they can.

Cecil: I’ve never thought about it before. (long pause) I guess when I walk past the candles, I kinda notice that there’s been a lot of people gone ‘cause usually there’s quite a few there. I’ve never thought about that before.

Interviewer: Okay. Thanks, Cecil.
Elizabeth’s first interview

Interviewer: I’d like to start by asking you what you believe about God.

Elizabeth: Um – He’s like – it’s a question that could – um – that you could say a lot, but I guess the main things are, number one, that it’s a – um – a loving God, that, the caring, loving God that, y’know, it’s a – he’s there to – not to, y’know, to help – um – y’know, not to – not to be this force in the sky that dictates, y’know, what you have to do and that you have to appease. Um, so, got that, but also – um – so there’s the help aspect and – um – also, there kind of as a guide – um – of the – how you should live your life to – how you should live your life – um – and also the thing of forgiveness. Um – of course, y’not gonna, y’not gonna be able to do everything right an’ everything, so – um – basically I’m trying to say is – um – it’s a force that’s like far greater than any of us so, y’know, so different that you can’t even understand – um – that – um – that is there to – not – to help, or to , or to guide and help and, yeah, he’s pretty cool.

Interviewer: That’s a very good answer. Have you always thought of God in that way?

Elizabeth: Um – well, being like brought up in – in the Church – um – I s’pose it has always been this. When you’re younger you kind of just – y’know – you listen to the stories and you say, you say your prayers at night with your parents, but it’s not that much of a big thing. But for as far back as I can remember, I’ve always kind of prayed when I felt upset, or in trouble, or like I needed help, but I think it – that got more meaning, or I felt that it actually worked more as I got a bit older, like was so that – um – like the image, the image of God is for me like a father, a father-type figure which has always been like that. But – um – but now it’s starting to – but I’m starting to make myself kind of look at the other aspects.

Interviewer: Such as?

Elizabeth: Um – like it’s not just, it’s not just a thing of – you have to put effort into it, too, to be like – try and do the best that you can do, not just getting everything – It’s not – it’s not an easy thing.

Interviewer: Could you say more about this “father” image?

Elizabeth: Um – when I, when I did journalling in RE, the same image of always came out of – like a hand, holding in a massive hand, or, um, or just like a – or even a mother or father holding a little baby, or on the shoulder – um, y’know, carrying, warm and safe. Um – well, y’know, the thing of guiding, with holding the hand, guiding and helping. That’s the biggest image -

Interviewer: Has that image been with you all the time?
Elizabeth: Yep!

Interviewer: Even when you were little?

Elizabeth: As far back as I can remember.

Interviewer: Do you know why that image has stayed with you?

Elizabeth: Ah, it could be – it could be a parent thing. I don’t know if that’s – I – I don’t – I wouldn’t know where it came from. Yeah.

Interviewer: That’s okay. I think for most of us, we’re not sure where our images come from when it comes to God. But the important thing is that image has been with you for as long as you can remember.

Elizabeth: Yep.

Interviewer: So, is there one word you would use to describe God?

Elizabeth: Yeah, “father.”

Interviewer: Does that mean for you God has gender?

Elizabeth: Yes. Not as a – not as a – um – a big issue, but it’s accepted as a – you can’t understand him. It’s not – you can’t put words to it, like we can put words to – like – can’t distinguish it, so just use the “he” as in – yeah.

Interviewer: So if we passed a rule at Teresa College so that from now on we’re going to call God “she”?

Elizabeth: I’d probably – I don’t know – I don’t know if I’d be upset. I’d probably feel kind of unnervened, or something –

Interviewer: So if the image has stayed the same for you, how has your faith changed, if at all?

Elizabeth: Ooh, it’s – it’s gone from, um, from a thing of always, y’know, just having God there as a father to rely on, to – like I’m realizing now that you have to – um - that there’s other aspects that you’ve gotta work towards, or – like you’ve gotta try to be the best you can, not just keep saying “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” So, like, and trying to understand, whereas before I’d just dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a – y’know – revengeful thing, trying to understand it more, or, you know, or explore something –

Interviewer: So what do you do with those images now?

Elizabeth: Ah, sometimes I just dismiss them. But, but, um, I don’t know, but maybe go discuss it with someone, or just – I know it’s hard, like, the Old Testament’s hard.

Interviewer: What about Jesus? Is Jesus different from God?

Elizabeth: That’s a hard one.

Interviewer: It is, isn’t it.
Elizabeth: It – it comes down to the thing of for me – um, it’s too – it’s a very hard thing to try to distinguish the three parts in the one, the one person. But, in the end, like, I just think you can’t, you can’t try to understand it. And, and, even if it were like – you wouldn’t want a God you could understand, ’cause he’d only be as great as us. So – um – I know it’s – I know he’s different. I think he’s kinda the same, like, yeah … I can’t see, like, I can’t distinguish any, any great difference, like “God is greater than Jesus” type thing, or, I don’t know …. 

Interviewer: So when you read a story about Jesus in the Gospels, are you thinking of Jesus as a man, or …? 

Elizabeth: Yeah, ’coz that’s, that’s when he was a man. Like, it’s hard to think of Jesus in heaven as a man. 

Interviewer: So when you go to heaven, what would you be? 

Elizabeth: I don’t know. See, that’s the thing. You don’t know. That’d be the difference – the, just that like on – on earth. The thing of ‘on earth’ in the Bible, it’s on earth – that’s easily distinguishable in the Bible. 

Interviewer: But heaven is a different matter for you? 

Elizabeth: Mm. 

Interviewer: What about the Holy Spirit? 

Elizabeth: That’s even harder. The Holy Spirit is like the – it’d be like the – um – bit of God in us, kind of – the thing that makes you …. I don’t know. I know what I’ve been told about it. Things like that it’s – it’s the – it’s not conscience type thing, but something like that. But – yeah – that’s even harder. 

Interviewer: If you just think of someone in your Year that you talk to a lot: if you had to explain about the Holy Spirit to that person, is there anything that you would want to add to what you’ve said? 

Elizabeth: Mm, I think I’d – yeah, I’d say the thing of – “y’kind of understand it; don’t stress over it” type thing, but, um, that it’s – it’s kind of like – just like – maybe “God or – a little bit in us that makes us good people” type thing. Yeah. Not – not – not really a bit of God in us, but basically the thing, the thing of – 

Interviewer: So, what do you believe about the Holy Spirit and yourself? 

Elizabeth: These are hard questions. You can’t describe it. Y’kinda know it. So basically a thing in me. It’s like faith … kind of. Yeah. 

Interviewer: Okay. And do you have an image that goes with that? 

Elizabeth: With the Holy Spirit? 

Interviewer: Yes. 

Elizabeth: Only the flame image from the Bible.
Interviewer: So, what do you think of that image?

Elizabeth: It's like a thing of burning that like if you have this – like emotions can be real strong and like kind of control like if you're really, really angry they'd be – you start shaking and stuff, type of like a burning kind of thing in you – yeah – so the burning of the fire in you to be doing the God stuff.

Interviewer: Do you have experiences that tell you what you're saying is true?

Elizabeth: Ah – as in, y'know, like a burning thing to do good type of thing? I s'pose you've got your conscience type thing. Um – when I get really, really guilty. I hate feeling guilty.

Interviewer: Can you talk a bit more about that?

Elizabeth: Feeling guilty?

Interviewer: Yeah, and hating feeling guilty.

Elizabeth: I feel guilty for the littlest, smallest things. When everyone's going “It's alright. I don't care” but just like letting someone else down – yeah. So – um – yeah, when you know like it's like a big power struggle inside you. When you know like you're trying to do these things and it's so hard to do 'em, like talk to your friends, or just say to your friends ….

Interviewer: Believing in God, does that help you with that struggle?

Elizabeth: Yeah, it does. Um – it's just the thing of like you keep all y' – it keeps being burned in you that you've got to try. You never – um, basically the thing of that it'll work out, it'll work out because like he's guiding everything.

Interviewer: So you're back to that image of the hand and being held and guided?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Interviewer: Have you always believed that?

Elizabeth: Believed what?

Interviewer: That God is always there for you, particularly when you've got to make decisions in your life.

Elizabeth: There was one moment in my life when I had a thing of panic. My whole life I've been “Y'know, it's alright. Pray.” But it was one moment and I remember exactly – I was driving. I wasn't driving. I was sitting in the car and like thinking about problems, or whatever and it was like panic because what if it's not true. What if it's not, y'know, what if it's all lies. But that didn't last long. It lasted only a few seconds, and then it came.

Interviewer: What came?
Elizabeth: The thing of guiding and being in – like – um, held in just safe, secure ... yeah.

Interviewer: What about prayer? Do you pray?

Elizabeth: Yep.

Interviewer: And is it to God? Or to Jesus? Or the Holy Spirit?

Elizabeth: Not to the Holy Spirit. I s'pose it would be to God, God-Jesus type together thing. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have regular times for prayer?

Elizabeth: When I go to bed and like before we eat dinner, and just like if I think of something any time during the day, or it anything happens. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, do you think you’re a religious person?

Elizabeth: I reckon.

Interviewer: How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Elizabeth: Like, it’s this with the good and right struggle again, the good – the good and bad struggle – um – like it’s so easy to just live to – um – even society’s rules like not breaking the law, “I’m not hurting anyone”, but you know that you are. Or you’re hurting yourself. So it does, like it does guide heaps – like everything you do. Yeah, yeah. You’ve got the conscience thing coming back. Or you know that it’s right or wrong.

Interviewer: So, what are you saying to me about some of society’s laws?

Elizabeth: Things like, y’know, it’s not, it’s not against the law to – um call someone – that’s stu-, that’s not really right – um – like you can, there’s no laws for – for, y’know, how you – how you treat people in small ways, like – yeah. – All the – all the examples I can think of aren’t quite right, like things like just helping a person with their groceries, or something. There’s no law. Or the thing of not – not helping is – or standing around and letting something bad happen is as bad as doing it. Like that’s not, that’s definitely not a – society says, “It’s not my fault, I just saw it happen.”

Interviewer: Have you always thought that way? Or can you think of a time when you started to think that way?

Elizabeth: Like there’d be lots of times and lots of examples, like around the school yard – it’s real easy – like just something or sometimes, or someone just saying, someone else talking behind you, y’know, some boys that you don’t usually associate with, you don’t want to turn around and say, “Excuse me, that’s not quite right.” Sometimes I see them, but it’s hard. Um – and – I don’t know, I suppose when I was younger I didn’t really think
about it that much from the perspective like “It's not my fault, he started it.”

**Interviewer:** So can you remember being like that?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, when I was younger.

**Interviewer:** You’re not like that now?

**Elizabeth:** I try not to be.

**Interviewer:** So do you know when you first became aware of these things? Or can you pinpoint a time in your life when you started to change?

**Elizabeth:** It’d have to be before Year 6 ’cause in Year 6 this boy used to get teased a lot and I used to play cars with him in the sand pit and I hated it ’cause it was boring. But no one would play with him and I – yeah – and I’d stick up for him, like, I don’t know, I can’t really think of a time before that.

**Interviewer:** So, would you have gone home and talked it over with your parents?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, I did.

**Interviewer:** Okay, you can recall that?

**Elizabeth:** Yep.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the things you recall from that time?

**Elizabeth:** Um – my parents were probably just – um – y’know, “Don’t – just don’t listen to the - ” the same thing that any family would say. Just don’t listen to the girls that were being mean ’cause they’d be mean to me. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So you lived through all that – being teased?

**Elizabeth:** And I gave him a Christmas card – and – and one of the girls snatched it off and read it and was laughing. Then I snatched it back!

**Interviewer:** What about your attitude towards suffering?

**Elizabeth:** Um – that was always a – a subject that you just – another – another one that you didn’t understand – that I didn’t understand, so I just didn’t think much, but – um one of Dad’s sermons cleared it up pretty well. And that was –um – for it – there was – there was – I can’t remember all the points, but the basic ones were like it wasn’t – it wasn’t God’s original plan. You had the Garden of Eden, but – um – the main thing was God didn’t just want puppets. He didn’t want these – y’know, these beings who are just praising God and being because they can’t do wrong, so, so you give them choice that, you know, gave them choice to do good or bad, so then with the choice that when – when the – um – the people do good it actually means something. It’s not just them – um – doing, just doing the only
thing they can do. It actually means something. And also, like 
Jesus knows, like Jesus went through it all. And like the thing of 
– um – life on earth isn’t very long compared to like eternity in 
heaven.

**Interviewer:** How old do you think you were when you heard that sermon 
from your Dad?

**Elizabeth:** That was – that was within a year ago. Yeah. Not very long.

**Interviewer:** So, up to that point, it was something you didn’t understand?

**Elizabeth:** I kind of did, but not – I didn’t have the right words to be able to 
say it easily.

**Interviewer:** And so what did you do? Just push it away?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. Just didn’t talk about it.

**Interviewer:** Alright. What about death?

**Elizabeth:** In – in – in what I think of it?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Elizabeth:** Like, I’m not scared of it or anything. It’s just, yeah, it’s just the 
thing of – um – I’m scared of it in that my friends and family 
might die, but I’m not scared of it for me. Um – yeah, like the 
thing of going to heaven that’s pretty …

**Interviewer:** So how long has that been with you?

**Elizabeth:** oh, that’s all my life.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So you could be a martyr?

**Elizabeth:** A martyr?

**Interviewer:** It wouldn’t bother you?

**Elizabeth:** That’d be hard.

**Interviewer:** Why? What’s the difference between being a martyr and talking 
about death like this?

**Elizabeth:** Because – um – ’cause the thing of like saying – standing up to 
people. Not just like – like just suddenly dying, or having an 
ilness, or something. I’d like to be a martyr.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Elizabeth:** ’Cause it’d be pretty cool.

**Interviewer:** What’s cool about being a martyr?

**Elizabeth:** I don’t know. RE students study your life?

**Interviewer:** So you’d like to be St Elizabeth? I’ve been listening to you talk 
about your faith and I get this sense of it giving your life a sense 
of purpose and fulfilment. Could you talk a bit about that?
Elizabeth: Well, the thing of like the – like not just meaningless, like people could spend their whole life searching for meaning or just waste it away thinking “Why should I bother doing that?” y’know, there’s no, no point, but, I think – um – I don’t know, you’re here to make the most of it, type thing. Like just be the best person you can be and have fun.

Interviewer: And with all the people you associate with at school, in Year 12, are there any there who wouldn’t have this sort of faith that you have?

Elizabeth: Wouldn’t have the faith?

Interviewer: Yeah, the sort of faith you have.

Elizabeth: Yeah, there’s heaps.

Interviewer: So if you think about people who are close to you, are there people who are struggling to find meaning and purpose?

Elizabeth: Um – amongst my friends?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Elizabeth: I reckon.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Like – or just – just – be – because its – because it’s a real thing of it’s too hard to understand or explore ... that Christianity’s just too hard or they just think “As, that’s just stupid” type thing.

Interviewer: But what do you think?

Elizabeth: I don’t think it’s stupid. Yeah.

Interviewer: Were there any events in your life that helped you to deepen your relationship with God?

Elizabeth: Um – there’s a couple recent ones that like – um – I’ll just say it first. One was when I was in bed. It was really – it was about – probably about two, three o’clock in the morning. And I was upset about something, I can’t remember what, but I was crying y’know and tossing and turning and I had the thing of like I thought, “Aw yeah, pray about it” or whatever, but that didn’t help. And so I was thinking like “This sucks” cause you know that God’s there ‘n’ everything but it’s not like a physical thing. Like I think – like “Why can’t he just come down and give me a hug.” And I thought, “This sucks! That’s crap!” But THEN my Mum came in and – and like ‘cause she – she used to kind of come check on us ev’ry night when we were little but she stopped. So my Mum came in – I don’t even know why – but she came in and lay down with me and like held me until I went to sleep. And that was a – that was a real like – you know – of
course, you know that God has the person in that to do that job. 
But that was – that was too much of a coincidence.

Interviewer: So your prayer was answered?

Elizabeth: Immediately. And the other one was that I was worried about 
something – um – for ages and it – and then I thought, “This is 
stupid. So I’m just gonna – like I’m just gonna give it to God 
’cause I can’t control it.” And, like actual physical like relief that I 
felt after I thought that was good. So that’s like two times.

Interviewer: In recent times?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. As a result of that, that whole notion of the hand of God 
that guides. the hand that takes your hand, is that an even 
stronger image?

Elizabeth: Yep.

Interviewer: When you were little when you tried to image God what did you 
image?

Elizabeth: I would’ve had the thing of a – um – a big – big guy with a big 
beard and a white dress.

Interviewer: Do you know why you would have had that?

Elizabeth: ’Cause that the – um – society’s image type thing? Or the – um 
– y’know, the pictures you see.

Interviewer: Is that you supposing it was like that or you remembering it was 
like that?

Elizabeth: Remembering it what?

Interviewer: Remembering it from your past; what you would have 
remembered of God.

Elizabeth: Don’t know.

Interviewer: You don’t know. Okay. Obviously your Mum – you spoke about 
your Mum coming in that night and lying down on the bed and 
cuddling you till you fell asleep – so, something your Mum did 
that helped to strengthen your relationship with God: it was an 
answer to a prayer. Are there other people in your life that have 
been important?

Elizabeth: Yeah. My Dad’s a – like a big one. Like being – obviously being 
a pastor. Um – with mostly just by example, I think. Yeah, 
’cause he – he seems to like go about everything in much the 
right way or he has the – he has his – he’s always told even in 
Sem – um – that he was the best preacher. He’s the best 
preacher anyone’s ever heard ever. And – um – he’s like – he 
was real bad at school but that was one thing he was real good 
at. And he just – he al- - he knows – he knows how to say 
things an’ – and what to say to fix things. And also if he – if he
stuffs up, he can always admit it and say so and fix it up. And so – so he – and he’s helped me understand lots of things. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Anyone else?

Elizabeth: Um – there – my sister like sh- - lots of – she’s got really strong morals that she sticks to no matter what. And she’s been a really good example to me, too. And a lot of – I find a lot of her words coming out of my mouth.

Interviewer: What about your faith? Has it grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Elizabeth: Um – I’d say stronger ’cause like – um – not in a marked difference like as in someone who just kind of just discovered, or whatever, but just because I’m generally always thinking like trying to think or looking for answers more. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Now I’ve used the word “stronger”. Is there another word that you would use?

Elizabeth: Probably more based like not just blind blindly following – it still is obviously but also you’ve got trying to find – um – like meanings for things more or reasons. Yeah. I try to read the Bible. I don’t always, but I try. I go to – um – youth camps. I lead – um – I’m a leader at youth camps and I run some. And – um – at – there – that’s the place mostly. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, when you read the Bible, do you tend to read the Old Testament or the New Testament?


Interviewer: Okay. Why not the Old Testament?

Elizabeth: It’s hard. It’s harder. My Bible’s got like footnotes type things that explain things. It takes ages to read a bit and then read all the footnotes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Elizabeth: Also Church.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about Church.

Elizabeth: I mainly go for sermons. I hate it when I have to do Sunday School ’cause then I miss out. Like – um – yeah, just whatever Dad’s talkin’ about I have a little think about.

Interviewer: So how long have you been doing Sunday School?

Elizabeth: Um – since I was in about Year 9. I don’t – I don’t do it so often now. But you just got – you got the book, the Sunday School book and – and you just like read the story and say the Bible mission prayer and you make a little thing type thing.

Interviewer: And Sunday School happens while … ?

Elizabeth: The second half of the Church service.
Interviewer: What happens in the first half?

Elizabeth: Um – you’ve got the – y’know, you’ve got singing and confession. Um – the children’s dress – um – all the – I don’t – all the first bit.

Interviewer: In the second bit you have what we call the liturgy of the word, the readings from scripture?

Elizabeth: The readings are in the first bit and then you’ve got – then the kids go and then you’ve got the sermon, the prayers, and communion – and that’s about it. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you know why you got involved with Sunday School?

Elizabeth: 'Cause no one else was gonna do it. No it’s not – but I was happy to do it. And there are – there are people. We kinda share it.

Interviewer: So right back in Year 9 you made the decision to get involved.

Elizabeth: I started – first I started helping and then I – you don’t do it very often. You got a roster.

Interviewer: So you’re rostered on. It’s part of your duties.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Interviewer: So the music doesn’t attract you?

Elizabeth: Um – sometimes I play the guitar. Um – with my sister-in-law and another lady. Um – but y’know, they got a music roster as well. Dad phased the organ out, but – um – sometimes it’s just not that good but like it’s not a very big congregation. Some people don’t like singing. Sometimes it’s good. And – and some of the songs you’ve heard so many times that you know them – like it’s all right. I like it and everything but I only go for the sermon.

Interviewer: All right. How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?

Elizabeth: Mum’s more of – my Mum’s more of like a feeling type person. My Dad’s more of a thinking type person. So my Mum’s – um – my Dad had the more – like you learn through – proper, like sitting down and teaching type thing. Um – and my Mum was more just a feeling, like her – her trust in God type thing. Like all – you – you know. So – so her – her influence was more like a just a trust in God. Yeah. Where Dad’s was an example of – setting an example and actual, proper teaching type thing.

Interviewer: So your Mum would teach you as you went along doing things?

Elizabeth: She – like – teach me in what way?

Interviewer: Ah, for instance, do you cook?

Elizabeth: Yeah.
Interviewer: So she would as she was preparing a meal show you how to do things and eventually you get to the point where you can do it by yourself.

Elizabeth: Yep.

Interviewer: Whereas your Dad would be the one who would say, “Well this is what the recipe says.”

Elizabeth: Yeah, probably.

Interviewer: Are there any other stories that you have that might describe that relationship that you have?

Elizabeth: When I came – when I sometimes come home from school real annoyed at something Catholic that some one of my teachers had told me, I’d go home and start saying it to Dad and he would defend the Catholics!

Interviewer: Why do you think your Dad would do that?

Elizabeth: I don’t know. Just – ah, I got real annoyed at him. Um – maybe it’s again it’s this thing of him being the type of person that’s, y’know, accepting or – or just – just trying like this thing of “Well, there’s no one here to defend them, so I’ll defend them.”

Interviewer: In what way then is your Dad like God? Do you think that’s the way God is?


Interviewer: And do you tend to do that?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Interviewer: So what conclusion can you draw from that?

Elizabeth: That my Dad has taught me some stuff.
Elizabeth's second interview

Interviewer: You've been reflecting on how your faith has changed as you've been growing up. Is there anything further that you would like to add to what you've stated?

Elizabeth: No. I think –

Interviewer: Okay. That's alright. That's generally been the response. But then we start to break the question down. What about your image of God? What would you like to add about how your image of God has changed over the years?

Elizabeth: Um – I read a book called The Five Love Languages, talking about the five love languages. And I know that my love language is touch and I think – I think that that might – well, it occurred to me that that might have a – be a part of, or influence the whole, you know – that’s every, every image – every image that I like the most, is – is – involved touch.

Interviewer: What about the images that you like the most?

Elizabeth: Like – like holding a baby, holding hands, or – yeah.

Interviewer: Can you recall anything that you would have said or written in relation to this?

Elizabeth: Like – yeah. Mother, the mother and father like holding the baby, or safe in – safe in arms, or – yeah, things like that, or even the images of God that are put in the Bible, like the mother hen. That’s the one that I immediately think of.

Interviewer: Good. Do you have anything further to say about the people, such as your parents and your sisters, friends, other people, and the events that have influenced your relationship with God?

Elizabeth: Me – I – I’ve come – I’ve talked about Katy and – but – um in the - it’s pretty amazing to me how close friends we’ve become in the few – in just a few months since the start of this year. Um – yeah, she – she keeps – she keeps influencing me more and more, not like a lot, not just with God things, but the kind of person I am. Um – yeah – she like – she teaches me a lot how to interact good with people, like – um – well, you know, say the word “respect”, but I don’t know, it doesn’t quite fit properly, but just how to – yeah, how to treat other people well, just by, just by like watching her and how she – how she’s and a – like it – it’s easy for someone like me whose had a really good life and had it easy – um – take – take things that happened and make them bigger than they are, or it’s easy to – to – I don’t know, become not happy with the things you have, or – um – but, but when – like she’s had like real bad things happen in her life and – um – yeah, that she told me about that she hasn’t, y’know, said to many people. And to people that she has said, she’s got real bad reactions. Um – and she – just the way she gets over it and
keeps going and the way that the relationship with God is really
good and the way he’s a part of every – like everything that
happens like just shows me – Like, I think, well, you know, it
makes me feel bad when I make little things into big things, or,
yeah, like – so she – yeah, she – she’s been really big lately.
And then, like the other people are still – like my parents or my
sister, still good and steady.

Interviewer: Is there any difference between God and Jesus and the Holy
Spirit in your life at the moment?

Elizabeth: The Holy Spirit seems like – when like when I was reading back
and I couldn’t like – couldn’t say really what the Holy Spirit is, but
I think it – it’s like – to me it’s like power, like – um – yeah – to be
able to God things, or good – good things and – yeah – but
whereas – it’s funny to think I don’t know, when we talk, like at
camps when we’re talking about – um – things. We have a
question box and at the end and if you – it’s anonymous. You
write down a question on a piece of paper, put it in and then we
talk about it, throwing around a little toy and you can only speak
when you have the little toy. And – um – it – that – that’s what
seems Jesus is. Basically everything seems to be when you talk
about God or whatever, but I dunno, like trying to think of the –
the differences between God and Jesus is – um – like you – you
can only think of the human when you – I dunno – like it’s the
same thing but it seems to be more when I think of God, I think
of Jesus type thing.

Interviewer: You said that with your image of God, the key word is “touch”.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Interviewer: When you think of Jesus, is it the same word?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Elizabeth: That connected whenever – when you think of God, you think of
Jesus.

Interviewer: But with the Holy Spirit?

Elizabeth: Yeah, it’s different, it’s different. That’s just my thinking on it.

Interviewer: That’s good. What about prayer and your relationship with God?
Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

Elizabeth: Um – well, that – that’s another thing that changed ’cause – um
– I could always like pray with myself to God by myself. I’ve
been doing that forever, but like I’d have trouble praying with
other people, you know, but I’d do it, like I’d do it at camps. Just
mainly to show, I dunno, to show – because I was the leader –
the younger people there and – and – some of the older youth or
the classes would have come with this big prayer and all these
words and I'll just like I just think like, so I'll say – like if there's
just silence, or anyone can pray, I'll say something like "Thank
you for the rain" or whatever, so maybe they'll – Yeah, you don't
need to say a lot. But – um – Katy, she'll just say it. Like if, you
know, you're talking about something, she'll say, "Please Jesus
– " and just say it in that it's such a part of everything and just
comes into mind with everything. In those situations when
you're just talking to someone, that like, y'know, if you're worried
about something, she'll just say, "Please Jesus, let blah, blah,
blah, blah, blah" or whatever. And like that's really like made a
difference to me that like I don't leave it 'til the night, or
whatever, to think about it. And also – um – yes, it gets easy
with practice 'cause at every LYWA meeting we'll go 'round the
circle, or go off with somebody – um – yeah. And we – at
Church, I had this thing that – I won't go into it – but – um – I just
basically thought like this is – I don't want to have any thing to
do with this God stuff anymore. But then I went to Katy and
Josie and talked to them and kinda sorted it out a little bit. At the
Maundy Thursday service – um – we have a reflective and stuff
like that and we have a section where you – um – there's like
Dad's up there giving Communion and you go up with your
family. And then there's like bowls 'n' stuff to wash feet. And
then there's people over here, like in corners, that you can go to
to pray for you before. And that like there's been a lot of times
since I've had things like that but I've never gone. But this time I
thought, "Nah, I'm gonna go." So I went up to this one lady – I
babysit her kids – and –um – she's nice, a real welcoming – and
I look up to her a lot. And I told her about it and asked her to
pray for me and so she prayed for me and it was really good and
I was really happy. And – yeah – that's another thing.

Interviewer: Good. Is there anything that occurs to you about your
experience of school, of RE classes, teachers, your peers that
you haven't said up to this point?

Elizabeth: I've already said the thing of – like 'cause of the Catholic thing, I
really didn't even give it a chance – um – which like I probably
should have and I could have like learnt something, or got
something out of it, I'm sure. Um – but that doesn't mean that
the teachers didn't influence me because some did.

Interviewer: Can you think of any teacher who influenced you in any way and
what it was about that teacher?

Elizabeth: I think of Miss Smith but I can't say what.

Interviewer: It hasn't occurred to you what it is about her that attracts you?

Elizabeth: No, not really. There's something though. Um – did you say
"peers"?

Interviewer: Yes, peers.
Elizabeth: Um – with my friends at school, once we left school – um – was when – It’s funny because who – who we used to hang around with at school changed and we knew each other but yeah, like our group – we had a – it was like we had a proper group, whereas we didn’t when we were at school. And we got to be better friends after school and stuff ’cause Dana left and so I was like forced to – maybe like – um – yeah. So their influence on me was bigger after school just ’cause I was better friends then.

Interviewer: Are you able to explain why that happened? Why didn’t it go the other way?

Elizabeth: Other way? What do you mean?

Interviewer: Other people have the experience of moving away from their friends. Their friends change, or they change.

Elizabeth: Um – well, I think we saw each other at school and sometimes we talk when we’re in classes, but – um when – and that was kind of you’re satisfied with that, but that when you don’t – It’s funny ’cause like me and Sue would talk about how like I’d say, “Well, I’m not really going to make the effort to call you.” And she’d say, “Well, I’m not really going to make the effort to call you.” So like we’d understand that that was it after school. But then after – after Year 12 Assembly, we went out to lunch. And then it just goes on from there. Like, you’ve made the effort to see them and to actually do things because like you don’t see them at school. so it was more quality when you had to – yeah, the time.

Interviewer: Good, good. Well, I think we covered the themes. Is there anything you’d like to add to what you’ve stated that we haven’t covered?

Elizabeth: Even more than when I wrote the journal, I’m doing even more stuff with LYWA now and – um – yeah, that’s pretty big in my life and keeps – Like the last camp was – um – the topic was “God, relationships and sex.” And so that was – it was a camp – we’d been wanting to do a “sex” camp for a while, but it’s a, you know, a hard topic, or just uneasy. Um – but – I didn’t run that one. Josie did, Josie and my brother Ivan. And – um – it’s funny ’cause that was a camp where I had to be a leader the most and I really didn’t expect it. I didn’t properly – probably didn’t properly think about it, but I had a lot of – a lot of kids come up and like ask – as well as in a group – Like you’d talk about it in the group and go through it, but – um – like in other times, come up and ask me questions and wanna talk to me, you know, about what’s love and, you know, “Is it okay?” “Will I be in love?” “Am I in love at this age? Is that possible?” and stuff like – So that was – yeah – different. I was forced to be a leader a lot more on that camp.
Interviewer: Did you enjoy the experience?

Elizabeth: Yeah. I like – I think I like being group leader more than being big camp leader ’cause you get like to talk with the kids more and, yeah, do more with them, whereas you’ve got so much to organise and do otherwise. You’re too busy otherwise. Um – yeah. Another thing is that we do the – on the LYWA meetings we always – after the LYWA meetings we always, maybe half the LYWA Committee – always we kick my sister and her husband out of their house – we always come to their house and stay in their home for the night. And then we usually go to Church in the morning, or there might be something on. But – um – that’s another good thing in that like we’re still together. It follows on and they always during those times – like we have a lot of fun and muck around and stuff. Like there’s usually – like if someone needs to talk about something, or – um – it’s good to be able to like do things with them. It’s good to be able to – yeah – do normal things, or fun things and then you always know that they’re there if you want to talk about something serious ’cause you have fun.

Interviewer: You’ve talked a lot about fun. Why is that important to the group?

Elizabeth: My biggest thing with like younger youth, or, you know, being a youth person is you’ve got to teach them that it’s normal, it’s fun and we have – we’re just like them, just like everybody else. We can muck around and we can do the normal things and the fun things, but all it is is that we’ve got this big wicked thing that, y’know, that they could have, too. And at the – at the last camp – um – there’s this guy and – I think he’s about 20 years old – and he’s gone through a lot in his life, and he – um – he’s gone through a lot and now he’s over the top. Yeah, he’s got to do this and the Bible says this and – During the question box, he’d get the thing and he’d say something and when – when you’re talking about topics like masturbation with all these 14 year-old boys who would be like really struggling with that, he’d get it and he’d say with a tone of voice and he’s day like “Masturbation is worse than murder.” And like you’d like just cringe. And one of the younger 15 year-olds had a beanie like with little horns on it and he went off at her about it and so I went and talked to him during lunch and I brought it up and it ended up being this big argument with me and him because like the girl, she brings all her friends to camps and to you and even to Church. She’s even got them coming to Church. And if they come to a camp and they’re wearing this they just don’t think any thing of, it’s just cute and he says one thing to them and that’s it, ruined it for everyone. So I get angry at that real easy. But it was really good ’cause he went and spoke to the pastors and he changed a little bit and he was happy.
Interviewer: Could you talk about why you allowed yourself to get involved in all of this?

Elizabeth: What do you mean “all of this”?

Interviewer: Getting involved in LYWA, getting involved in camps.

Elizabeth: Allowed myself?

Interviewer: You could have walked away from all that.

Elizabeth: Well, it was fun. That’s one thing with doing it with your friends. And – I don’t know why, I don’t know why –

Interviewer: You haven’t worked it out. You don’t know what you’re trying to achieve?

Elizabeth: Well, I know after. I don’t know why I started.

Interviewer: Why are you in it now?

Elizabeth: Yeah, because I want to show like younger kids, y’know, that it’s normal and fun. It’s good. It’s not, you know, it’s not what like they think. You think of what Church is. People who think of what Christianity is who aren’t involve with it – like they’ve got a totally wrong idea and that’s why they don’t get involved with it.

Interviewer: Okay. So the “it” that you keep talking about is Christianity?

Elizabeth: Yes.

Interviewer: Excellent, Elizabeth. That’s it. Thankyou for allowing me to interview you.
Elizabeth’s journal

Week One

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is where two opposite or contradictory ideas are combined. To me my life has been one big oxymoron with opposite or contradictory thoughts, feelings and actions being experienced in the same moments. Or at least it sure feels like it. My childhood was relaxed, safe, secure and sheltered, but my future is uncertain. I think of my past with happiness but when I think of my future, fear overwhelms me. One moment I am blissfully happy about where my life is going and the next I am so scared about taking the next step towards adulthood. There are parts of my life and myself I am very happy with and others I am not happy about. My interaction with others and God is also an oxymoron. Sometimes when I think I am doing something good I really make things worse. Sometimes I feel so comfortable around my friends and other times I feel insecure. When one moment I feel so secure and sure about my faith in God, the next moment things seem so unfair and I question God and I don’t feel so sure about my faith.

My Life In Chapters

Chapter One: Enter Stage Left To Receive Your Gift

This chapter is my birth, and the environment that I was born into. The stage is my life, entering my birth. “The gift” is the family that I was born into. I am so thankful to God for giving me my parents and brothers and sister. They have helped shape me into the person that I am and I believe that every good quality that I have is because of their great influence on my life. I am also very thankful for being born into a Christian family, who has taught me about our loving God all my life. It is the greatest birth gift I could imagine.

Chapter Two: Moulded Under Blue Skies and Sunshine

This chapter represents my early childhood, which was very happy and loving (the ‘blue skies and sunshine’). ‘Moulded’ represents my parents and older siblings who taught me about life and about being a good person. They guided and moulded me to be the best person I can be, and taught me without even knowing it with their great example. I am what my parents moulded me into.

Chapter Three: The White Fairy Visits Me

The white fairy (at least I think she is called the white fairy) is the fairy from Pinocchio who turns him from a lifeless puppet into a real boy. Chapter Three represents my later childhood and early teenage years when I began to think for myself and be more independent of my parents. I was turned from a ‘puppet’ who did all my parents said and did into a being who could think for myself and make my own decisions. Of course, Pinocchio made many mistakes and needed Gepetto to teach and guide him. I still needed (and still do) my parents’ guidance and support.
Chapter Four: Ginger Beer On the Kitchen Bench

The first sign of my sister's pregnancy was always terrible morning sickness. The first sign of this morning sickness was always bottles of ginger beer which were never seen in our house otherwise. My nieces and nephews (I have 5 now) were the first people whom I was a great example for, and they taught me to love something that often will not give that love back. They also represent a time in my life when I was given greater responsibility, even the responsibility for another person's life in my hands.

Chapter Five: Getting Them While They're Young

This chapter represents my involvement with the Lutheran Youth as a leader and older member rather than a camper or youth member. I learnt a great deal about myself and what I could do when I put my mind to something through leading camps and youth. It also represents me beginning to share my faith and teach others about God rather than being taught.

Chapter Six: I Think I Can I Think I Can

This chapter represents my TEE and the end of my schooling life. It shows what I can achieve when I try and it shows the rewards you can get out of hard work. It also represents my ability to survive huge pressure. It also represents my growth from a school girl to a young adult.

Chapter Seven: Butterfly

This chapter represents the growth and change that I have experienced since I left school. I have learnt so much from so many people and I feel like I have changed and grown into a better person. My friends from school have taught me to be so much more accepting of all people no matter who they are or what they do. My Christian friends have taught me so much about God and how to live my life. I have become so much more independent through earning my own money and being responsible for a lot more of my life. My involvement with LYWA has also increased, so much so that it takes up a lot of my time. I think it has brought out so many good qualities in me and I am always proud when I manage to pull something off successfully.

God and Religion play a huge part in all chapters of my story. 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. In my younger years, I had a rather childish faith, praying when I needed to or when I had time. As I have grown, I have learnt more and God has played a bigger role in my life. It became a more active faith as I tried to seek answers to questions I didn't know and as I tried to integrate God into my every day life to have a positive effect on my actions.

The chapter that God has played the biggest part in is the last chapter. Being in LYWA has placed me in many new situations in which I was forced to think about and enhance my faith. I have also been put into some bad situations where I made wrong choices. The healing process and growth I experienced from this has really brought God closer to me. (I even asked someone to pray with me about it, a really big step for me!) I have become a lot closer to some
people who have been a huge influence on me. My Christian friends have taught me by example how to make God a huge part of my life and have helped me through some difficult issues in relation to God. Right now I feel very sure in my faith and I know no matter what I do I can always come back to our loving God who loves me unconditionally.
There have been many moments in my life when I was convinced that God exists. One time that had quite a big impact on me was when I was, I think, about 13 or 14 years old. I was tossing and turning in my bed, crying and worrying over some teenage problem no doubt, that I can’t even remember now. I was being very quiet, I remember, because that’s how everybody cries when they are crying alone. I thought that I should just pray about it, and I did, but it didn’t change the way I felt, or take away that horrible upset feeling. I was angry and upset, and wished that God could come down and hold me in his arms. I wished that God was physical for me. Almost immediately after thinking this my door opened and my Mum came in. I don’t remember either of us saying a word – words weren’t what were needed in this instance. She just lay next to me and held me until I fell asleep. It hit me then that this was too much of a coincidence and I remembered that God sends others to do his work.

One of the major beliefs or things about God that I have now is that God is much greater than us that we can’t even begin to understand him. Bear with me a second. I will try to explain. Have you ever read the book *1984* by George Orwell? In it, the government controlled the lives of the citizens completely. They were slowly removing words from the English language so the citizens could no longer even understand the concepts. For example, if they removed the word ‘freedom’ and all words you could use to describe freedom, how could the citizens comprehend the concept of freedom? They couldn’t, so they would stay content with the restricted life they were allowed. Well, God is like this. God is not human, he is greater than human. In fact, he is so much greater and more awesome than us that we humans can’t even begin to understand his form, his ways, or him. That is why he uses human images or stories to explain certain aspects of himself. For example, the human image of a mother hen doesn’t mean he is a hen, but protects us just like a mother hen protects her chicks. This occurrence with my Mum kind of began this understanding in me. God sends other people (in this case, my Mum) to do his work. If I come across something about God that seems unanswerable and you often just have to forget about it, and trust that it’s just something you can’t understand. An example of this is the Trinity. It is impossible to be completely explained, because it’s a concept we don’t have the words to describe. Anyway, I don’t want a god that I can explain because that would mean I have a god that is only as great as me.

Sometimes I wonder how God could care for me when there are millions of people in the world and I sometimes do things that are so horrible. And I wonder how I could be such a mean person. But I don’t worry for very long, because I know that God cares for me. How could he love everyone as much as a human loves his/her favourite person? Because he has more love to give than you or I could ever begin to understand. And I know that he forgives me no matter what I do because he has more patience and kindness and grace than any human has or could understand, so much so in fact that he
died for me. So when God looks at me now he doesn’t see the horrible
person I know I am sometimes, but he sees Jesus.
Week Three

I tried so hard to think of an RE lesson in which I learnt something that changed my faith but I couldn’t. I can honestly say that I have never heard anything in RE that I didn’t already know. If I didn’t know it already I down right disagreed with it. I’m sure that there must have been times when I could have learnt something that would enrich my faith, but to tell you the truth, I went into almost every religion lesson with the attitude that it was a waste of time, and that any Catholic belief that differed from my own was wrong and outdated. Wrong, yes I know. I regret this, and wonder what I could have got out of religious education if I really tried. However, my faith has been challenged and changed and has grown due to many different people teaching me about my faith. Many of these lessons were taught through example, but some were taught in the traditional ‘lesson’ way. I have a very good friend called Katy. She is the president of the Lutheran Youth of Western Australia and she is a role model for me as well as a good friend and lots of fun. I have learnt from her attitude towards God and the way she lives with him in her life. I will give you an example of one lesson she taught me. At the last camp we ran together we were making popcorn for the youth who were watching a movie. We just threw heaps of oil in one massive pot, put a bag of popping corn in, put on the lid and hoped for the best. It turned out really good, and there was heaps for everyone. I was thinking “Wow, we are really good.” and then I heard Katy say, “Thankyou, Jesus!” That stuck in my mind and I wondered at how much God is an everyday part of her life. I used to live my ordinary life going from day to day. I would spend time with God when I was in trouble, or on days like Sunday, but he wasn’t a part of every minute of my day. I didn’t realise or associate God with all parts of my day, and realise that every good thing that happens no matter how small is because of him. I am slowly beginning to remember him more often, and make him more a part of my everyday life.
When you turn around what kind of shadow is cast by the light?

This is a line from a song by my favourite band The Tea Party. I think that it means when you turn around and look at your past and see yourself properly (take a good hard look at yourself) what do you see? Do you like the person that you have become? I have chosen this as the title of the next chapter in my story (my future) because I want it to be my growth into the best possible person that I can be. When I turn around I want to like the shadow that is cast by the light. So the main theme I would like the next chapter to be about is growth. I have these lines written on my bedroom wall to remind me of this. Sometimes I hate to turn around, because I know that I'm not going to like the shadow that is cast by the light. There are so many things that I do and so many things about me that I hate, but the important thing is that I try to address the problem and fix it. It is a very hard thing to do, but slowly my shadow turns from something I hate to see to something that I'm beginning to like.

A part of my growth or what I would like to become includes how I interact with others. I know that people you hardly know often upset you or you don’t like them for a small reason that could have been avoided. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I would like to make a difference to people’s lives in small ways. I want people to think of me with a smile because this one time I did something nice for them they didn’t expect. I see my future growth as also including continuing my involvement with LYWA, and improving my organisational and leadership skills (maybe even get the minutes out on time!!!). I also see the occupation I hope to have (midwifery) as playing a big part in my future. I want to help new mothers adjust and make it a smooth transition. I suppose I could say I want to change the world (who doesn’t) but I'm going to change it one person at a time.

I would like my relationship with God to be a part of my growth process. I think it is the most important part because it forms the base or foundation for all the other qualities or things I want to do or possess. I would like to continue learning more and seeking answers. I want to learn how to discuss my faith more with all people, but particularly with those who are not Christian. I want to strengthen the feelings and beliefs I have in God. I know that with him I can do anything. I want to find some way to ease the doubts I feel about my faith, to find a way to answer the questions that seem unanswerable. I think that with a lot of hard work this kind of relationship with God is possible. I know that I have the persistence and will to learn more about him.

Recently I experienced the first time in my life I was ready to give the whole Christian thing away because it seemed so unfair. I was very angry at God. But I didn’t leave it at that. After my own research didn’t help or get any answers, I went to talk to some of my Christian friends who are my age and understand the struggle. They helped me through this difficult time and my relationship with God was strengthened because I doubted but came back to him. My friend Serica said that that shows real faith. If I can stick with God
and he sticks with me after a “fight” like that, I know that we can do anything together.
I would like to try and express the huge debt I owe to God for all of the wonderful gifts he has given me so far in my life and for sticking with me when I stuffed up or didn’t want to have anything to do with him anymore. I would also like to try to explain how much it helps to know that he is always there and willing to help. When I have big decisions that I have to make coming up in my life, it helps to know that he is there to guide and help me no matter where I am.
Interviewer: Okay, Emily, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Here’s the first question. What do you believe about God?

Emily: It’s nice of you to start off with a question that I find hard to answer.

Interviewer: That’s right.

Emily: Um – doesn’t exist.

Interviewer: Okay.

Emily: A bit harsh – um -

Interviewer: No, if that’s what you believe that God doesn’t exist, then we can work with that. Okay?

Emily: I think there may have been at one point, but – like maybe – at one stage, but not anymore. Or there’s no interaction with us.

Interviewer: Okay. So is that based on personal experience for you?

Emily: Oh, yes. That’s what I believe.

Interviewer: So have you always thought about God in that way, that if God did exist, God doesn’t exist now?

Emily: Um – not really ‘cause when you’re little, you’re told something, so you believe what you’re told, so –

Interviewer: Can you remember what you were told when you were little?

Emily: Not like – We’re not a religious family. Like, we don’t go to Church, or anything, but jist that pretty much God existed an’ that if you pray to him he’ll answer you an’ stuff like that.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you recall where these ideas came up?

Emily: Okay – um – Christmas along with Or if there was like – er – maybe a death in the family, or something. Or – um – I remember at school having little people who come and tell us about God an’ we get to colour in sheets. (laughs)

Interviewer: You said little people.

Emily: (laughing) Well, they were big because we were little but they were just two people and they would come in every now and then like an’ tell us about God an’ do Scripture in school.

Interviewer: Okay. That would be a State primary school?

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you remember what you thought when those sorts of things happened?

Emily: Not really. (laughs) Just (short pause) I think I accepted them. I didn’t (indistinct word) not to. I didn’t really think about them. I jus’ like (short pause) yeah.
Interviewer: How is now different to then?

Emily: Um – just I’m older an’ I’ve got my own mind an’ stuff an’ like – yeah.

Interviewer: Could you talk about what you’ve heard at school, what people have tried to teach you.

Emily: What, this school?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Emily: Okay. Um (long pause, then laughs) We’ve jus’ been taught about Jesus an’ God an’ freedom – freedom lately, all about that. No, jus’ – um – (short pause) like we’ve learned about other religions as well – um – it’s – it’s not that we’ve like learnt – we haven’t really been told anything, jus’ – it’s sort of incorporated like into every day. So weird. I’m used to it now. I don’t see it as learning anything. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: It does. Could you explain what you mean about being “incorporated in everything”?

Emily: Like morning prayer an’ assemblies an’ RE every day an’ it’s just like another subject though like, it’s jus’ weird. Masses an’ everything.

Interviewer: Could you explain for me the word “weird”, what that means for you?

Emily: When did I say “weird”? Did I say “weird”?

Interviewer: Yeah. You said “That’s weird.”

Emily: (laughs) Did I? About what?

Interviewer: About being incorporated in everything and RE every day and Masses and things.

Emily: Did I? I don’t – (laughs)

Interviewer: Is that use of the word just a throwaway thing that you don’t think about?

Emily: Probably. (laughs) Can’t remember saying it. (laughs)

Interviewer: That’s okay. So in all of the things you’ve heard about God while you’ve been here in this school, do you see any difference between God and Jesus from what you’ve heard?

Emily: From what I’ve heard? Um – Yes.

Interviewer: Are you able to explain the differences as you understand them?

Emily: But it’s hard for me to think of difference because I don’t think either of them exists, or have existed, so it’s really hard for me to explain like the differences, but so (pause) Jesus like lived on earth, an’ stuff, and didn’t God send him here, or something? But I – it says in the Bible, or something, that they’re the same person, or something like that, like connected or something. I don’t understand that. Also that they’re different.
Interviewer: You've picked out this notion of Jesus living on earth. Is this something you learned at school?

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: That would make him different from God. Why would you come to that conclusion?

Emily: Um – because – oh – God would have sent him here, so God never lived on earth, so he did and he interacted with others and he taught us things and he preach – he was the preacher of God's word, like – example of God, like – (pause)

Interviewer: If I said God is everywhere, what would be your response?

Emily: (laughs – initial comment indecipherable) Um - I would probably jus’ not say anything because, y’ know (pause)

Interviewer: Because it’s basically meaningless?

Emily: Pretty much. Not like trying to deny people’s beliefs, or anything

Interviewer: No, you’re not.

Emily: I understand how people think that like ‘cause it’s in the nature, and the people that you see, like everywhere around us, like exhibits some sort of God essence.

Interviewer: Could you explain that a bit more?

Emily: Um – okay, well God created the earth an’ stuff an’ people in there, so – um – like when we look at nature, like the trees an’ stuff over there, it’s like seeing some part of God. When we look at someone else, it’s like seeing something like that’s accepted that God’s created like when people do acts of kindness an’ stuff like (laughs) What did you ask?

Interviewer: What people believe God to be?

Emily: Yeah, sorta thing.

Interviewer: Is that what you mean by it?

Emily: Kind of.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit? When you hear people talk about the Holy Spirit?

Emily: I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’ve never been taught about it.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever found yourself praying?

Emily: (long pause) Don’t think so. Not like – I hope for things but I don’t like apprec-so that praying but not to God, so it’s not really praying. Like, it depends on your interpretation of praying.

Interviewer: No, you’ve got a pretty good interpretation of it which means you’ve been taught well because you understand its connection to God. If God exists, has God left the world? God’s not here any more?
Emily: Yes. That's right. Or he just doesn't interact with us. He ceases to communicate with us sort of – sort of thing. He's like moved on to maybe like – If he does exist, which is pretty unlikely in my mind, he's probably gone to some other universe or whatever.

Interviewer: Do you have any understanding as to why God might have moved on?

Emily: ‘Coz why would you like – Wha- what's the point in, you know, like we're not that exciting, like we're not that great – um – there's probably like other things out there, or (long pause)

Interviewer: Okay. So what are you saying about human beings?

Emily: Maybe he's left us to our own devices, like he could've just – he could've just – yeah – like he created us and left us there like gave us opportunities to work things out for ourselves, like live for ourselves without watching over us, sort of thing. Or he doesn't – ‘coz we're not like – yeah – if you get what I mean.

Interviewer: I understand what you're saying. How does that make you feel if this is what a God – and a God that you think could possibly exist, if he exists, wouldn't be interested in us? So how do you react to that?

Emily: I dunno. He created us, so – Well, if he – if he did create us and we weren't like created from – like an amoeba – um – If he were alive, he'd be the same like watch over everyone like – (short pause)

Interviewer: Why would you do the same?

Emily: Because – I dunno, like he would've given us the rights to live, like – so, he'd given us the right of free, like freedom an' stuff like do our own way, like without – you know, he's (The words are indecipherable.) - you, know

Interviewer: Okay. We might come back to that one. So do you see yourself as a person who has faith?

Emily: What do you mean by that?

Interviewer: I'm getting you to interpret it.

Emily: Don't get me to interpret it! It's a confusing question.

Interviewer: Can you tell me why it's confusing?

Emily: Well, it depends what you're talking about faith in what? Are you taking about faith in God?

Interviewer: Okay.

Emily: I don't think that faith is just a completely religious thing. You can have faith in other things, like yourself an' other people an' kind of stuff like that.

Interviewer: Okay. Can we talk about faith at that level? Faith in yourself, faith in others?
Emily: Am I a faithful person? So do I have faith? I don’t think about it that much, to be honest like in everyday life you don’t go: “Hmm, I suppose I am like sometimes, depending – like there are always circumstances that affect your reasons an’ stuff like when I’m in a good mood like you’re more positive and have more faith in myself than if I’m in a like bad mood or whatever.

I’m a bit less (pause)

Interviewer: So is faith something that can rise above moods?

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you talk about that from personal experience?

Emily: (pause) Mmm, I don’t know, like let’s just say if I was to have a bad day, or whatever, um – the only way to get yourself out of it is to have like faith in improving an’ things are getting better. Otherwise, if you don’t have any faith, or whatever, you’re not gonna pull yourself out of it, like it’s nothing (The next word is indelible.)

Interviewer: Have you ever found yourself in that sort of situation?

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: How do you pull yourself out of it?

Emily: 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.

Interviewer: Do you think your faith, in the sense that you mean it, has grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Emily: (pause) Probably weaker.

Interviewer: Do you know why?

Emily: (pause) Mmm, not really. I jus’ (long pause) I’m tryin’ to think. It’s jus’ hard because school’s really stressful and stuff like that, like you don’t really have time to think about things anymore.

Interviewer: Okay. Are there people in your school life who actually help you to have more faith in yourself?

Emily: In school life, do you mean like anyone at school?

Interviewer: It could be anyone in the school.

Emily: Well, I have my friends. And that’s it. (She laughs.)

Interviewer: What about RE?

Emily: What about it? (She laughs.)
Interviewer: Does it have any influence on you in terms of your understanding of faith, like faith in yourself, or faith in others?

Emily: Ah, not really because my views are really strong like they’re very – mmm – 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.

Interviewer: Of all the subjects that you do, is there any subject that you think impacts on your life?

Emily: Um – English, maybe.

Interviewer: Why would that be?

Emily: Because I always – when I’m in English then I always analyse everything. It frustrates me. Like if I watch a movie – when I watch TV (The rest of the statement is indecipherable.) Oh, what am I doing? An’ it teaches you all about values an’ stuff. Even though RE does that as well because it’s RE I sort of like switch off sort of thing, so –

Interviewer: Okay.

Emily: Maths. When I have to do Maths – like when I’m at the shops an’ I’m tryin’ to add up how much like is twenty per cent off the shoes – that I want.

Interviewer: So that’s the extent of the influence?

Emily: (laughs)

Interviewer: What about teachers?

Emily: Teachers?

Interviewer: Yeah. Over the time that you’ve been here, has there been any teacher who you think has helped you understand yourself better, or have a better view of yourself, or a better view of others?

Emily: (pause) Maybe. Not r- Like teachers – for me teachers do that but there hasn’t like been a significant way like a lot of teachers do that in like just every day type of thing.

Interviewer: Are you able to say why they do that every day?

Emily: Um – because they tell me to focus more an’ stuff an’ I’ve more potential an’ stuff, just (pause) at retreats an’ stuff when you get close to teachers they’re – (pause)

Interviewer: Okay. What about your parents? What have they said or done that’s prompted you to have greater faith in yourself and greater faith in others? Can you think of anything that’s happened that would speak to you about that?
Emily: (pause) Ah, not really.

Interviewer: Okay. If we come back to the whole God thing and the position you have on God, do you think your Dad or your Mother has had influence on you in relation to that?

Emily: No. I don’t think so because – yeah, I dunno. We never discuss religion that much at home. Not really.

Interviewer: What about the influence of your parents? Where are the differences?

Emily: Differences? What do you mean?

Interviewer: The differences between your mother and your father in terms of your faith in yourself, faith in others.

Emily: I’m like my Dad, very stubborn.

Interviewer: Sorry?

Emily: I said I’m like my Dad. That’s the difference.

Interviewer: That’s the difference. Okay. Can you think of any stories about your life with your Dad where you think your Dad has influenced you to be a better person?

Emily: Um (pause) There has been things like – um – it happens all the time, I s’pose, like you don’t really think about it, like when they’re bringing you up an’ they sort of like, you know, like give you morals an’ they teach it to you like – well, he would teach it to me ev’ry day, like – there’s not really – like if I would get in trouble for doing something that sort of teaching me not to do it an’ stuff like that, like when he would tell – like tell me stuff like – there’s not really been like a certain significant things that happened all the time like because I’ve been raised correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you reflect for a moment on how your faith in yourself and others have an influence on you in your attitude towards suffering and death?

Emily: (pause) I don’t think they do, really, because everyone has different beliefs to me towards death. I think you die an’ that’s it. That’s just what I think. Like, in my family, beliefs that you like go somewhere else, or you go heaven, or maybe an after life like sorta that, so maybe it should say they’ve – they could’ve influenced me in a reverse way since that like that like since that their beliefs I’ve gradually gone outside of that an’ like explored other things.

Interviewer: Do you know how you came to that belief?

Emily: (long pause)

Interviewer: When you hear things being said at school that relate to faith, whether it’s religious faith or human faith, and it’s different from what you currently believe to be true, what do you do with those other ideas?
Emily: Um – I sort of (The next word is indecipherable.) in my head because I’ve already thought about it all an’ stuff and at the moment – um - I just haven’t seen anything in my life that makes me believe in a God or anything so I’ve given up.

Interviewer: Have you ever pulled yourself, have you ever been pulled up by an idea and, in a sense, you have started to change your own ideas as a result of what you’ve heard?

Emily: (pause) Probably, like a few times like – not about God though – but very strong belief about death an’ stuff – um – but I always come back to the same conclusions that – that’s all that like in the future it might change I think right now.

Interviewer: What about your attitudes towards people?

Emily: What do y’ mean?

Interviewer: Anything that’s ever happened that made you stop and reassess.

Emily: So – yeah, well, if I’m seeing this, or whatever an’ then maybe like (pause) other people have shown me that’s not right or whatever or maybe not just showing me but if I look at other people, then look at what they’re doing an’ stuff like – you know how we always do community service an’ we did that last year an’ stuff like that that sort of makes you stop an’ reassess the way that you are like how we become selfish and stuff like that –

Interviewer: So how did that affect you last year?

Emily: Um – pretty much come back to the same way this year (laughs) I don’t – unfortunately, but – I dunno – it makes you like sort of more aware that you’re a lot luckier than things an’ stuff like that and just like (pause) mmm that we take a lot of things for granted and that sometimes we become very selfish in our own worlds an’ stuff like an’ that there’s a lot like more out there than we think.

Interviewer: How do you relate that to your comment that you seem to have less faith or that your faith has grown weaker in the last twelve months?

Emily: It’s just that I can’t be bothered – bothered having faith, like it seems so much effort right now (pause) I’d like to have, but right – just right now, I dunno.

Interviewer: You name school as being a major influence in that happening to you.

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you use the word “stress”

Emily: I don’t have time to think about faith really. Like – yeah, because I’m just doing all my homework and doing work an’ getting everything done an’ sleeping an’ waking up an’ the same thing,
so I’m not really – I mean I might be without really realizing it,

but –

Interviewer: Consciously you’ve called a halt on all this?

Emily: Yeah. Because that takes a lot of like thought an’ the whole

confusion an’ a lot of like analyzing an’ stuff then I can’t be – I
don’t really have the time or the effort to be thinking about stuff
right now. I really am start realizing it like in little aspects of my
life it probably comes up but I’m not really seeing grow faith, you
know, like thinking about like stuff like where I would do like
more so last year.

Interviewer: So it seems to me that you sense that your faith is weaker now?

Emily: Yeah, because I’m too tired.

Interviewer: So what gives you a sense of purpose in your life?

Emily: Um – just having fun, like – I mean I have fun like with home in

my life an’ like I went to Italy an’ I saw heaps of stuff then, so

(pause) I think like you might as well just live like be alive an’

see as much as you can an’ do as much things as you can –

that type of thing like – (pause) (The next three words are

indecipherable.) in the world an’ stuff an’ like – (pause)

Interviewer: How did the trip to Italy change you?

Emily: Um – you hell forget that like there’s a whole other world out

there other than like where you are an’ that it’s so different an’

that there’s like so much to see an’ so much to do, so many

more people to meet, like it’ll get you out of your own world an’

stuff an’ it’s good – it was good to get away from here as well,

an’ like have a break from like here an’ –

Interviewer: So how has that influenced your understanding of what life is

meant to be about?

Emily: Just – um – it’s just (The next two words are indecipherable.) to

think that, you know, like it’s about having fun, about seeing

things, like I saw heaps of new things in Italy an’ I had heaps of

fun an’ I met heaps of new people like – an’ it was jus’ a whole

other – like it was so different over there like – an’ it was jus’

really good to go and experience that an’ be part of that an’ so it

shows you that like there’s – now I wanna do even more, like go
to more of Europe an’ more of those countries – an’ see heaps

more stuff.
Emily: Um – well, if you don’t have faith in yourself then you’re not gonna get the motivation to go out an’ do that type of stuff. Then – well, y’ not gonna –

Interviewer: What motivates you?

Emily: What motivates me? Um – mmm – well, (pause) so I want to have a successful job an’ stuff, and so that’s why I’m motivated before and I can be motivated with my school work an’ stuff. I like I like getting good grades – Oh, well I like getting good things like because I get satisfaction out of that so that sort of motivates me an’ I like praise an’ stuff like that an’ that motivates you, yeah, and – um – I like having fun like I like relaxing stuff so that will motivate me to go out an’ stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you have plans to travel when you get out of school?

Emily: Yeah, well, like not definite plans but yeah I’ve got – I want to – I don’t – no particular plans, but yeah I want to.

Interviewer: Well, we’ll end the interview at this point, Emily. Thank you for allowing me to ask you questions about yourself and your faith.
Frank's first interview

Interviewer: What do you believe about God?


Interviewer: That’s good. Have you always thought about God like that?

Frank: Yeah.

Interviewer: If you think right back into primary school, as far as you can go.

Frank: Yeah, there was always like … at the same time to be thankful.

Interviewer: You’ve used some words to describe God. What about images?

Frank: Images? Um – well – said we were made in God’s image, but the story of creation is only a story and so – um – I dunno, it just – it’s more of a feeling of him being there rather than actually seeing him.

Interviewer: And when you were little?

Frank: Aw, you always think just a person, another person.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you recall anything from your past where you – when I say this to you, you remember, or think you remember, “Aw I used to think of God as being like this”?

Frank: Aw, a light. Yeah.

Interviewer: A light?

Frank: A bright light.

Interviewer: Okay. So in what ways do you think your faith in God today differs from what it was some years ago?

Frank: Um – what you ask for. Yeah, when you’re little, you – um – just – the things that seem to matter at the time, like what you want the material items an’ things like that – um – you’d be asking God for that an’ you’d wonder why you wouldn’t get some of these bad things. But – um – yeah – didn’t really think of any deeper meaning or anything of real sense of help to get through life.

Interviewer: What about Jesus? Is Jesus different from God?

Frank: Um – (pause) not really. I mean he came to help us here. And the Trinity’s a very, yeah, confusing thing.

Interviewer: We’re going to get on to the Holy Spirit. At the moment, it’s just Jesus and God and whether you see a difference and I think you said, ‘Not really.’

Frank: No, I don’t see any difference.

Interviewer: Okay. Was there any time in the past when there was a difference?
Frank: Um – mm – don’t think so. I’m just trying to think if I did. (Pause) No, I don’t think so.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Frank: Um (long pause) – the physical thing’s the flame. The – um – sense that we’re given to be good to one another, I would see that more as the Holy Spirit. So, what God gives us as help be the Holy Spirit.

Interviewer: Okay, so if you had to explain Jesus to a friend who wasn’t a believer, what would you say about Jesus?

Frank: Ah, he took the human form, came down to earth – um – to correct things that were going wrong. Ah – to guide people the right way in life. Ah – yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, good. I want to move on to talking about prayer. I have these sorts of questions: Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray? What sort or form does your prayer take?

Frank: Well, yeah, I pray. Um – usually, when you have like a moment. We have – um – a sense for God, – um – so if something worked really well, well, or something you’ve been trying to achieve for a long time happens. Um – and then there’s every Sunday you pray. Ah, what were the other ones?

Interviewer: To whom do you pray?

Frank: Um – God, ah – Mary for intercession. Um – Callistus, my saint from my Confirmation. Um – St Anthony ’cause I lose things quite often. Um – and also I’m in St Anthony’s. Um – (pause) – yeah, I’d say that’d be it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Frank: Ah – and also St Philip and St Juliana.

Interviewer: So, what sort of prayers do you pray?

Frank: Ah – thanks. Um – asking to look after people in the family. Ah – for guidance – um – just help to be strong. And to be more like Jesus.

Interviewer: So these are prayers that you compose for yourself? So the words are your own words?

Frank: Yeah. An’ then there’s also, y’know – um – the Hail Mary, the prayer for intercession.

Interviewer: Okay, good. So, to whom do you pray most often? God?

Frank: Mm – um – to God.

Interviewer: Okay. Why the grin when I mentioned the Holy Spirit?
Frank: Y’know, it’s just the whole trilogy idea. It’s just so hard to grasp. I mean, yeah, it’s like eternity. There’s always a beginning and never an end. It’s so confusing.

Interviewer: How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Frank: Um – the try and be good to other people. Um – you jus’ try and live up to God’s expectations, what he asks us to be. Yeah. And also the – the way in which you tackle a problem in not going at it alone, feeling you have help.

Interviewer: So, when you’re saying not going it alone are you referring to God being with you?

Frank: Yep.

Interviewer: What about the impact of your faith on your attitude towards suffering?

Frank: Um – kind of confused. You know, it’s – it’s – there’s gotta be a reason for it to happen, I mean, – or else God wouldn’t let it happen. But just why – why did it have to happen? It’s – it’s confusing.

Interviewer: Okay. Does your faith help you with that confusion?

Frank: I just let it be. Forget it. It is what it is. There’s gotta be a reason for it.

Interviewer: What about your attitude towards death?

Frank: Um – not scared because I mean, everybody’s got to die sometime and, I mean, that’s the after life, so it’s not the end. Yeah. You still got something else to know after that.

Interviewer: Okay, so there’s no burning ambition that would want to keep you alive and so your death would prevent you from achieving that ambition?

Frank: Oh, I’m gonna stay here for as long as I can. I’m not just gonna give up. But – um – yeah – I’d like to stay here for quite a while.

Interviewer: But it’s that understanding that death is part of life?

Frank: Yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. So in what way do you think your faith helps you, or helps to give your life purpose and meaning?

Frank: Um – well, for a start, there is a meaning; we’re not just here for no reason at all an’ we live an’ die like animals. Um – that there’s a purpose, I mean, if you went through life thinking there wasn’t a purpose to being here an’ there wasn’t a meaning afterwards, or whatever, um – the way you’d live your life it may be different. You may not try to live it the best you can, be as good as you can.

Interviewer: So do some of your friends not see life like that?
Frank: Um – yeah – Most of my friends aren’t very practising Catholics, um. But – um (pause) – um – they’re – they’re not atheists or anything like that against – Atheists, that’s against God isn’t it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Frank: They’re not against God. They’re – um – they don’t knock me for – they just – um – they – they’re good blokes, just in a different – a different way.

Interviewer: Okay. So we move on from just your beliefs now to looking at events in your life that have led to changes in your relationship with God. What have people said or done that’s contributed to or not contributed to your relationship with God?

Frank: There’s got to be a lot that my Mum has said. Can’t remember any particulars, but – um – she has real strong faith. I guess that would encourage me to be the same. Um –

Interviewer: We’ll come to talk about your Mum later.

Frank: Ah – I’m sure there has been, but I just can’t think of any.

Interviewer: Okay. No events in your life?

Frank: My memory isn’t very good. Um (pause) I know there would be. 

Interviewer: You said Callistus was your Confirmation name. So why did you choose that name?

Frank: To be different (laughter) ’cause there was all the normal saints that everyone had already heard of an’ I saw Callistus and’ I hadn’t heard that name before. So I thought, “Here we go. I’ll choose this bloke.” But – um – I read up about him. He’s pretty good.

Interviewer: So what do you remember of him?

Frank: Um – he was Pope an’ I’m pretty sure that in those days if you were Pope you were – Is it “canonised?” You become a saint?

Interviewer: Yes. Most of them.

Frank: If he wasn’t Pope, it probably wouldn’t have happened. He was sent to the salt mines for a while. I can’t remember why. Did something which wasn’t really wrong. I think they wanted him out of the way. But someone rescued him, some woman. I’m a bit shaky on it. But – um – there was a lot of fighting in that time. It was around the same century as the Servite Brothers was formed. Um – it was in – it was in Italy. Yeah, and there was a lot of fighting – um – and he just tried to make peace. And there was some other guy – um – can’t remember his name. He was like a – like the bad guy. He – um – he wanted to be Pope but – yeah – for all the wrong reasons. Um – an’ Callistus got – I thought – shot but he died in a rally in the town square. Yeah – um – he wasn’t Pope for very long, but he tried to do his best an’ he did a fair bit o’ good.
Interviewer: Okay. Um – so you chose that name because it was different. And the things that you recall are all about conflict and staying firm in faith despite the conflict and despite the hardship. Is that how you see your faith?

Frank: That’d be a pretty big part of it, to try an’ stay with your faith during conflict. Um – I s’pose life’s full of lots of conflicts. So it would be a bigger part.

Interviewer: Has anyone reinforced that for you, or any event happen that’s reinforced that?

Frank: Um – Mum would a lot, I s’pose. She’s my foundation, the centre part of my faith. Um – I do remember one thing. We were at a neighbour’s place once. And had these people around. The kids were brats. And we were little ones as well. And these other kids were pickin’ on us. Um – the fact had been built into us to – to let things slide an’ not – yeah – turn around an’ beat the other kids up. An’ so we did let it slide. I mean, I wish I coulda (laughter) shown those kids because I could’ve.

Interviewer: I’m sure that story will come back later. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Frank: Um – my faith goes on an’ off a lot. I mean, I have moments where I’m – I’m really into it. Um – I mean, something might just hit me at Church. Um – y’know, I have times when I just don’t give it much time, I can’t be bothered. But – um – it’s been reasonably strong I’d say in the last twelve months ‘cause, I mean, tryin’ to get through the TEE – um – hasn’t been easy. I’ve had a lot of – there’s a lot of deci- decisions to be made around this time, like y’ future, what to do, um – so I been – I been askin’ God “What about that work? What – what am I supposed to do? What’s my – my calling?” Um – yeah – it would be growing – would be pretty strong at the moment.

Interviewer: What has been the impact of the school on your faith?

Frank: Ah, I’d say pretty big. Um – you notice when you having a trouble that things like that, that – um – that problem might crop up at Church and in RE. I – it happens quite often, it’s kinda scary. It’s not intentional, but – um – yeah –

Interviewer: So what happens at school supports the reflection that’s going on in your life?

Frank: Yeah. And we do a lot of reflecting in RE. We sit there and talk and – um – if anyone has any problems, or anything, it’s just talked about. What’s said in the class stays in the class.

Interviewer: Okay. I hope to come back to that. Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about or relate with God?

Frank: Mrs Thomas, my current RE teacher. She’s really good. She helps you to keep calm and – um – maintain that relationship
with God. Um – there was one, Mrs Callan, absolute reverse.

She was an RE teacher. She should not be an RE teacher.

She was shocking. Um – she abused me mentally, but nothing beyond that. But – um – yeah, jus’ – I mean it didn’t really affect my relationship with God too much. It was – um – I knew it wasn’t useful. But just thinking “What are y’ doing?” She – to punish me once she – she was gonna make me write out a page of the Bible – a couple of pages of the Bible. An’ – um – I wrote into the school, said – you know – questioned the use of the Bible in that manner as a punishment an’ I didn’t get the punishment. Yeah – it – um – very slight impact. I didn’t let it do anything.

Interviewer: What about the impact of Mrs Thomas? Could you say more about that?

Frank: Um – the way she lives her life. Um – when she has a problem she – ah – turn the other cheek. An’ she – um – she’s very good an’ she’s so strong, y’ know, it’s – it’s amazing watching her. It makes you feel good. Um – an’ she jus’ – she doesn’t think anything of it. Yeah. She – she doesn’t - think there’s any other way. She’s so strong in her faith. Yeah. Fantastic to see, though.

Interviewer: So she’s a good role model?

Frank: Oh, yeah. Yep.

Interviewer: What have your parents said or done that has prompted you to move closer to God, or maybe even away from God?

Frank: Um – Mum’s constant encouragement to – um – to maintain the relationship and to – to be strong with God. Um – (long pause) – um –

Interviewer: How does she encourage you to maintain the relationship?

Frank: Well, it’d mainly be in the younger years, I mean. Now it’s the fact that I could feel that if I wasn’t it would hurt her – um – like with Church – I – ah – mainly go for Mum. I mean – um – yeah – I know it’s a poor excuse to deter you from going, but we had a bad priest for a while. Um – we had a really good priest, Fr Pat, then we had another priest –um – who – his sermons were the same thing that twenty times – an’ it was – dragged on. And now we’ve got Fr Vince and he’s brilliant. He – um – he’s a top bloke. He’s fantastic. Um – yeah. So I’ve started to enjoy Church again. Yeah. If – if I didn’t go – my parents don’t put pressure on me to go. I mean, they believe it should be something of your own choice an’ the – unless there is no real purpose to it. But – um – I mainly stuck to it all that time because I knew it would disappoint my parents an’ – um – I’ve seen my brother an’ sis’ – or Damien for a while, but mainly because – um – because he worked late, didn’t go to Church. Um – but the others, yes, they’re not really going that much, but – and so they give me the option not to, but I choose to. Um –
yeah, it just – I mean, it – Mum’s a lot like Mrs Thomas in her faith, just so strong like, an’ she wants us to be as well. Um – so it’d be by example for Mum. For Dad – um – I know he doesn’t seem to have that much and it still – it’s part of his – it’s part of his life. But – um – (long pause)

**Interviewer:** Lived rather than spoken?

**Frank:** Yeah. Must more – more “I want to be a good person and to live it like – yeah, to live your life in that manner, not – not so much to be churchy.” Yeah – um – Damien – I’ve always looked up to Damien in everything. He’s my only brother. Um – an’ he’s done well, so he’s a good role model. But he was an altar boy. I became an altar boy. I always – always copied Damien. Um – an’ I s’pose Church is always – when I was little, it was a big family thing an’ we’ve got – all our family went to the same Church, so there was – the back pew was – yeah – us. Big family. Um – two – two sets of cousins it was. So it was three families an’ my granma. So it was – it was a big family thing an’ granma an’ – an – everyone else used to, but when we had that – the priest who wasn’t so good, they – um – stopped coming to Church. Now it’s Mum, Dad, me an’ granma. Oops! Sorry, granma an’ I. An’ – um – yeah, everybody used to come around after Church an’ say – sometimes they’d talk about the sermon an’ stuff, but – um – usually it’d just be catch up time for the family. An’ that – that still happens with the four of us. But – um – yeah, so it’s – it’s just been a – it’s always good feel Sundays, how it was, an’ how it is, I s’pose, but just not as much.

**Interviewer:** So your brother and your sisters are no longer at home?

**Frank:** Um – Damien’s not. He’s in London. Um – Paula’s in Holland. Amy an’ Marie are at home. Um – Marie had a real rough patch in her life. Um – an’ the whole feeling deserted by God kinda thing that some people have. An’ that’s – I s’pose that’s – that’s kinda strengthened me more than – um – that (long pause)

**Interviewer:** She had that when she was at school?

**Frank:** Mmm, yeah. Um – so her – her life without – without realising God’s there has been difficult for her an’ – um – I’ve – I’ve tried to help her out. I gave her the “Footprints” – yeah. An’ – um – an’ I just try – try an’ help her a bit. She won’t go to Church. She – she feels hard done by. I mean, she’s done well, she’s had it really hard. Um – an’ Amy, she’s just – she’s never really been that way. She’s – she can’t see the point in it. An’ she’s a good person, more like Dad, doesn’t really see the Church side of it, or the point, so she wouldn’t really influence me much. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything that you would want to say that’s occurred to you and that I haven’t asked you?

**Frank:** Um – (pause) – not really. Although retreats – yeah. They have worked. You have time to reflect and everyone’s really good on
retreats. They don’t – um – an’ they listen to what everyone else is saying. Retreats are always good an’ – an’ they – an’ they have a nice balance. It’s not completely immersed an’ that, an’ so you have time to get away from it an’ relax. Um – I’ve had two retreats, one in primary school – and that was an optional one, but, I mean, we kinda made it a fun camp as well. Mr Fry – he was a good teacher – he – um – he – s’pose he would be a good influence – he organised the retreat an’ the – like I was really good mates with Mr Fry so I got him to do a few other things. We did archery and a few other things like that. (laughter) Um – yeah, that was – that was pretty good. An’ the Year 12 retreat was really good. we didn’t get our Year 11 retreat. That was taken away, but – um – the other retreats were good.

Interviewer: Okay. Thanks, Frank. We’ll stop the interview here. Thankyou. I’ve enjoyed listening to you reflect on your life and your faith. I would like to interview you again later and invite you to reflect further on some of the things you have shared with me today.
Frank's second interview

Interviewer: In your journal and in the interview, Frank, you reflected on how your faith had changed as you were growing up. And one of the things that came through was God was for you someone who was friendly and someone who watched over you and guided you, and so on. Is there anything further that you'd like to add?

Frank: Ah, I still have the same – same view there to help out just to run the place, I s'pose.

Interviewer: Okay. So God runs the place?

Frank: Yeah.

Interviewer: What – what does that mean for you? Could you expand on that?

Frank: Well, obviously, he gave us free will, so we choose our own directions, but – um – to – to – to help people when they're struggling – um – in the "Footprints" – um – it's not really a poem, is it? But, yeah, jus' – ah – I keep that view – um – yeah – ah – even specifically when we – when we don't actually ask – um – just to – to be there to help out an' (pause) yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Does Frank the plumber see things differently from Frank the student?

Frank: Um – well, I s'pose that would have to do with maturing – ah – the – from when you leave high school and – ah – hence, quite a big difference. Um – y' know, when you're working full time that would make the biggest difference, I think, how you see life. Ah – in terms of faith – ah – not – not really a lot 'cause I feel that I've done most of my – um – spiritual maturing – um – in my school life through RE.

Interviewer: So what about the sort of role you play in the work you do? Does that show you different things about God?

Frank: Um – I haven't really thought about it before. Ah – I – I don't really think so. No, an' – ah – I always thought quite broadly about – um – about God in high school and we were given the places to think and discuss that, so – um – yeah. Ah – I don't think it really does.

Interviewer: Can you think of anything that you might want to say about – ah – the people, such as your Mum and Dad, your brother and your sisters, an' your friends and their influences on you in your relationship with God?

Frank: Um – my parents are the same really. They're always there for support – um – they're quite spiritual. Um – an' they – they're – ah – a lot of people that – yeah – aren't religious, it's difficult to speak about these kinds of things, especially at work, they are not particularly religious bunch of people in the construction industry. Um – the – the support's still there even if it's from a
different angle. Ah – my friends are – quite a few of them were
actually in my RE class, an’ we always have conversations like
that, not your ordinary eighteen year-olds talk about quite a
variety of things. Um – so the support is there an’ open to
discussion, but – um – yeah, I think you can feel pressure about
religious beliefs from people outside that, y’ know – um – aren’t
religious people. There – definitely the support’s still there for
me.

Interviewer: Okay. The sort of pressure from outside: would you like to
reflect on that a bit?

Frank: Um – yes. It’d be – ah – I haven’t, y’ know, personally been
ridiculed or anything, but you can sense that – um – people’s
views on these faith things – I don’t know whether they feel that
– um – they’ve been – ah – betrayed comes to mind, but I don’t
think that’s the best choice of word – ah – kinda left if they did
think about God before and believe in God. They’d feel left by
God and – ah – become disbelievers. Um – that may be where
they’re coming from, but – um – just don’t – don’t believe in it
and – um – I think sometimes – ah – the (pause) might show
kinda way of dealing with things can be to ridicule. Ah – so that
– that may be (pause) yeah.

Interviewer: So does that mean you have a different view of life from some of
the people you work with?

Frank: Yes, definitely, definitely. Yes, that’s not really a discussion
(laughs) that we have at work, anything like that.

Interviewer: So how does it come about that you discover that people you
work with have a different view of life?

Frank: Um – I s’pose talking at lunch things can come up – um – say –
oh, actually I remember one time – ah – we were talking about a
– um – a man they used to have there as a machine operator for
excavating. He passed away late last year an’ one of them
mentioned, y’ know, it’s a shame when people like that go
because that’s it, they’re dead. There’s no after world. An’ he
was quite blunt about it. An’ being new in the job, I didn’t think
I’d really say anything. But, yeah – um – I think that particular
man had – had – um – quite – ah – a tough time through life, so
that may be the cause of that.

Interviewer: How do you handle that yourself, being with people who don’t
have the same sort of belief?

Frank: Well, my upbringing has been to be open-minded – um – an’ to
not force what you believe or what you think upon others. Um –
in short to discuss things – um – to – ah – let people know of –
of your opinion but not to force it on them. Um – y’ know, it
stems from a number of things. There’s – ah – racism – um – to
be open about that. Just because someone’s a different colour
doesn’t mean they’re a better or worse person just because
someone may not believe in God doesn’t mean they – they’re a
worse person. Um – as long as they – um – y’ know, I s’pose, follow the ten commandments, but not specifically because they are the ten commandments. Just to be nice to other people an’ – um – general respect, I s’pose. So I find it quite easy to deal with – um – and – um – also quite a relaxed person. An’ so, yeah, I don’t find it difficult at all.

Interviewer: Good. Would you like to add anything else about prayer and your relationship with God?

Frank: Um – well, being eighteen, ah – going out at night is a new experience, so generally, on Saturday night is the night to go out, so sometimes getting up on Sunday – ah – if you’ve been out ’til one in the morning, it’s a bit difficult, so I’ve been missing Mass a bit – um but still – ah – not so much the formal prayer bit – um – just, y’ know, the appreciation for what we have and I had one of those moments today. Driving along, just thought how great life is. Um – even – even though I’m not doing the formal expression of it, it’s still there. Um – yeah.

Interviewer: Does your family life help you in that sense?

Frank: Yes – um – yeah, my – my parents don’t force me to go to Mass, or anything. Um – yeah, when – when I do go, Mum mentions that and how nice it is, though. Yeah, 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. Um – yeah – ah – I think my Dad probably has the same kind of view as myself about the – ah – importance being on how you treat others, how you live your life, rather than the – the formal side of it. It is important to go to Church – um – carry on with the traditions and the rituals, an’ – ah – to express things ’cause the community – ah – is a very big factor an’ – an’ um – it’s – yeah, the main emphasis – emphasis to be on – um – just general life.

Interviewer: Good. What about your experience of school and your RE classes and your teachers and even those in class with you? From all the things you said in the past and wrote about, does anything at this point pop into your mind about them?

Frank: Um – jus’ thankful for those RE classes, yeah. It’s a protected environment – um – where everybody’s openly – they just talk about issues of life an’ – it was – it’s fantastic! I’m – I’m really glad that I went to a Catholic school and had that opportunity. It definitely really helps with growing, an’ especially in – um – TEE years, Year 12 is a very hectic time. Um – you need to have that open time to express what you’re feeling.

Interviewer: Could we take a look at Mr Doyle’s class. If you can remember back to there, what are the qualities or characteristics of it that come to your mind straight away?

Frank: Of the class?
Interviewer: Yeah, of the class.

Frank: Um – it was still lower high school, so – um – not as much
debate, or – um – or discussion, but – um – we were – ample
opportunities were given to express yourself – um – also the
kind of assignments we were given – um – one of them was a
puppet show and it’s not just a written essay or a – um – a – I
dunno, a poster, or anything. It’s – it’s – it’s an opportunity to
express – um – whatever the topic may be in – in your own way.
You can add your own flavour to it. And you can put out what –
what you think to the whole class. It’s a – it’s a group thing. It’s
not just – um – someone sitting down writing something on the
teacher – um – writing something on the paper. Writing on the
teacher might be interesting. Writing something down on paper,
the teacher looking at it, marking it and returning it – that’s the
same as every other class. Yeah, that was – that was quite a
good class.

Interviewer: Did you get to do your puppet show?

Frank: Ah, yeas. Um – we did it – for the class and on camera so that
you could add – in his own time mark it, rather than – um – just
the once off in front of the class. If you haven’t recorded it, you
could miss things.

Interviewer: Can you remember what role you played in the puppet class?

Frank: No, I don’t. Ah – I remember making the puppets in the – It was
a lot of fun.

Interviewer: Can you remember what the classroom was like when you were
making the puppets?

Frank: Ah – yes, quite lively. Actually, I remember playing glitter on
one guy’s head. He wasn’t too happy about that. It was pink
glitter. We didn’t get on too well. But – um – yeah, our
particular group – um – Mr Doyle had couches up the back.
Come to think of it, we probably hogged those couches. I mean,
we probably should have shared them a bit more. But – um –
that’s where we did all our work. We sat up the back there an’ –
It was a relaxed, fun environment – um – and it’s another one of
the reasons why I got a D in that class. Um – for not enough of
the group aspect – um – sharing. But – um – yeah, it was – it
was definitely enjoyable.

Interviewer: How did that class help you in your own faith development?

Frank: Um – that woulda been – ah, I can’t remember whether it was
before or after when I had the RE teacher who shouldn’t be
teaching RE. Um – but it definitely woulda helped in being open
in RE – um – feeling a safe en- – environment and, I mean, if – if
it was before when I had the other teacher – um – I’d imagine it
would’ve been something for me to reflect on and think: It’s not
the subject, and it’s not the class, it’s the teacher. An’ I can
think back, y’ know, with Mr Doyle, it’s great. Um – or if it was
after that, it would've helped to get over it an' realise that it, y'know, again it was the teacher an' not the – not the class, or the subject. So even if – um – even if Mr Doyle’s class was the only good RE class that I had through high school, I'm sure that woulda been enough. Um – but, yeah, this – every – every little – the teacher can make such a huge difference.

Interviewer: So, what about Mr Doyle himself?

Frank: Lovely man. Um – some of the stories he told us an' the things he would come out with, it seemed odd that – refreshing. Um – it wasn’t the – the typical hard, blind kind of religion way – yeah, he’d throw questions at us like: If – if we were to walk through Northbridge and see him sitting at a table with – a – a bunch of women who look like prostitutes, what we would think? Don’t remember why (laughter) or where that went, but it – I know, I’m pretty sure it was about – um – assumptions an’ thinking about people from what you see. You know, if it was Mr Doyle, you’d probably think he was just either having a chat, because that’s Mr Doyle, or – um – trying to convert them, or leave the – the sinning ways, or what. Um – I did have something else come to mind. Ah, it was – it was probably just the puppet show again. I mean, it’s – it’s not the – the formal – um – strict way. It – it’s open, it’s fresh, it’s friendly. Mmmm.

Interviewer: And Year 12 RE? Was that like that as well?

Frank: Yes – um – pretty much Year 12 consisted of walking in the room, putting the chairs in a circle and having a discussion. Um – occasionally, the – the teacher would – um – throw a topic in – um – I mean, we had to do assignments along the way as well, but we – we tried to get them outa the way at the beginning of the year being TEE. It’s pretty hard pressed for time at the end of the year. So we pushed through them, got them done and then had 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 just great to have that there as a break during school. Really good. Very thankful for it.

Interviewer: So could you just talk a little about the break aspect of school?

Frank: Yep. Ah – there was a lot of stress an’ a lota pressure going on – um – and I mean, everyone in Year 12 go– – or everyone in TEE goes through that time when they think: I just can’t take it anymore. I need a break! Um – and if you’re having those regular breaks during the class days, or even – um – when it’s – er – a period at the end of the day, to have that wind down before you go home, ’cause you just gotta study more when you go home anyway. Um – it’s just – it takes a load off. You can discuss what you’re feeling. It’s very good.

Interviewer: Did she ever do meditations with you?
Frank: Yeah, we did. Um – I think we started to do it weekly – um – sometimes more often – ah – later on in the year. Um – there’s a chapel annexe – um – used to be the old weights room. Um – yeah, they purchased cushions – um – a prayer table, and we do meditation. Um – yeah, an’ light some candles, sit on the cushions. And then after the meditation, we’d do our reading an’ discussion.

Interviewer: Good. How do you think that helped your faith?

Frank: Ah – to keep it there. (pause) Um – yeah – ah.

Interviewer: So, if we consider the RE teacher, do you think your faith was important for her?

Frank: Definitely. Yep. I think – um – Mrs Thomas really cared – ah – and wanted us to take that aspect of St Theresa’s – um – with us into our adult lives. Yeah. Um – also to still mature the faith – um – having those open ritual discussions – um – yeah – an’ Mrs Thomas would always be there to offer – um – both the Church’s opinion and her own – um – if they ever varied. Um – yeah, we – just talking. It was good.

Interviewer: What about the Year 12 retreat?

Frank: Yes. I actually left the Year 12 retreat early. But – um – um – we – we did things reflecting on our families – um – and a lot of what you’re discussing about, the support structures – um – and it’s just a lead into leaving school, what things are going to be like afterwards. Um – also time to meet people that we’d gone to high school with for five years, but hadn’t really had a lot to do with an’ the transition from the beginning of Year 12 to the end of Year 12. You see people that were once quiet – um – just coming out of themselves. It’s fantastic. Ah – so that was an opportunity for – for growth within people and to – to meet them to speak to them, to find – ah, to find out, y’ know, who they are. It’s – it w- – it was very enjoyable.

Interviewer: Where did you go for your retreat?

Frank: We went to Pickering Brook. I actually went there for a Year 5 camp as well. It was quite a good venue. It had a nice, big, open hall in the middle for all our activities. Um – well, the – the Year was split into two, – ah – so it would’ve been – um – ooh – There was probably about 80 to 90 students in our year, so, yeah, about 40-45 people.

Interviewer: How many days did you go for?

Frank: Um – ah, I think it was a four-day thing. Ah, yeah, I was only there for three. Yeah, four days.

Interviewer: Did you have a priest on the retreat?

Frank: We did. Um – I think Fr Brian was our assigned priest. Fr Gordon went to the other one. I’m not too sure if Fr Gordon came to us for a while as well. I can’t really remember. I don’t
think Fr Brian was there for the whole time, though. He came up
to celebrate — um — Mass with us one day and — um — I think he
was there for — for most of the afternoon before the Mass as
well. Yeah.

Interviewer: If you had to define faith, how would you define it?

Frank: Um — belief in a being — ah — (pause) belief in a creator — ah —
an’ a (pause) major of the universe, I s’pose. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Frank: You could go further an’, y’ know, aspects of the creator: loving
caring....

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t covered?

Frank: Um — I think that — ah — staff, like teachers and — um — parents
need to constantly remember that — um — every — every little
thing that you do, you know, someone could be feeling really
down an’ if you’re always pleasant and’ you’re always nice, the
effect that you can have on someone, and — um — maybe even if
they’re not showing it at the time, or if their grades aren’t
showing or — um — like, with myself not going to Church for a
while, then they need not worry because they’ve done their part.
It’s — it’s up to them an’ — um — probably really haven’t been
showing it a lot recently, but not to worry, I mean, it’s there.
Mmm. Oh, what was it? (pause) Yeah — um — just to — it’s not
quite a religious aspect of it, but — um — one particular class, or
actually two, English and Economics — um — my grades weren’t
fantastic, but what I’ve taken from them is — is incredible. And
it’s the same with my Year 9 RE with Mr Doyle. I got a D, but
what I took from that was — was great.

Interviewer: Is that because of the teacher? Or because of your peers?

Frank: It’d be because of the teacher, yes — ah — partially because of
the peers, I mean, of course, if the environment — um — for the
discussion is — is there, otherwise it can just cripple the whole
thing. Um — and for — for the other subjects I was talking about
just before. Um — it’s — it’s understanding, it’s being educated —
um — I didn’t have the best grip on things and I found it hard to —
to remember thins under pressure to write about them, but for —
um — conversations afterwards and just with — ah — with people
in — when I’m working in the shop, or people at work, or
conversations amongst my friends — um — to be educated, and
to be able to have an opinion on these things ’cause you have a
background there is fantastic. You can listen to the news and
you can apply all that you’ve learnt and you can — you can form
your own opinion and not to be an ignorant shit just following to
be swept up in the media and not realise propaganda — and that
— that was just fantastic that we’d covered in high school. I’m so
glad. You look at what happens in politics, you’re not swept up
in it all.
Interviewer: Well, the last thing: will the plumber ever get to own the karaoke bar?

Frank: (laughs) Well, I took up plumbing so I could buy a karaoke bar. Whether it happens or not, I don’t know. I have – I went to karaoke once. It wasn’t my best experience. I didn’t know anyone there, other than one girl who’d asked me to come along – um – just for company, and I left about half an hour afterwards. Yeah.

Interviewer: Thanks, Frank.

Frank: (laughs) If I ever get one, I contact you and invite you to the opening night!

Interviewer: Thanks very much, Frank. That was great.
Week One

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story?
Reflect on why you would name it in that way.

How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings.

Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

Growing, my life so far has been my development into the person I am and the person I will become. I believe that my growing has not finished. Once I have a steady routine, a family, set job and little change, then I believe my ‘growing’ will slow down or be complete. I do believe however that the majority of my development of becoming the unique me has already been done.

5 chapters

1) The sponge years
2) Primary School
3) Lower highschool (8&9)
4) Years 10 & 11
5) Year 12, a year like no other.

The sponge years: It is said, and I agree, that until the age of five is the time in which most of our learning is completed. This rapid absorption of knowledge is likened to a sponge,

Primary School: Primary school wasn’t really a memorable time. I wasn’t yet very social and school was boring. The only influence on my life was three good friendships: Peter, Joel and Nathan.

Lower high school for me was daunting. I didn’t know any other students when I came. However in these years I established three great friendships, two of which still last.

I suppose all I am doing is describing what happened in my chapters not why I named them so. I believe I divided them using school years because I am mathematically minded and simple.

A year like no other. I gave this to the Year 12 title because it is true. I witnessed shy, quiet people blossom and show who they were as I myself did, too. Friendships strengthened and new ones developed. At the same time, high expectations were pinned on us to perform well academically and huge work loads were overbearing. It is said that Year 12 is the hardest working year of your life, therefore, it is a year like no other.

Having gone to church all of my life and attended catholic schools all of my school life, religion has always been there. The major chapters for me would be from the beginning of Year Nine onwards. My Year Nine religion teacher
was fantastic. He fed my thought on religion after it was stifled by a poor RE
teacher in Year 8. I actually got a D for RE in Year Nine but it was one of the
best, in terms of religious development, RE classes I ever had. My semester
one Yr 10 RE teacher was worse than a poor teacher. She was destructive
and shouldn’t be allowed to teach at all, especially RE. For me, however, this
gave an opportunity to defend and argue my developing religious thoughts
against an abusive teacher who believed you were wrong if you disagreed
with her. My semester 2 Year 10 RE teacher was the complete opposite. He,
a former Servite priest, was a friendly, nurturing man who was full of life,
despite being old and having a bad hip. This man encouraged individual
thought and, as did my Yr 11 & Yr 12 RE teacher, taught RE as a way of life,
revealing tolerance to people with beliefs which differ from our own and a God
who loves us who isn’t some angry ruler who wants people to all live to the
letter and be the same losing their uniqueness. As long as you follow the
commandments & live a good life it’s OK. We are only human and entitled to
make mistakes. We just need to learn from them.
Week Two

Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn’t exist and that God cares or doesn’t care for you.

Describe the situation.

Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognise God’s presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself.

Describe how your thinking about God changes because of your encounter with this person or event.

Exists – Recently, on my brother’s 30th birthday, my brother fell out of his second storey window, landed on his head and only suffered minor injuries and temporary memory loss. The fact that he could have died, broken his back, become a vegetable, or snapped his neck, but got away with a broken foot (His foot hit a ceramic flower box on the way down.) and a sore head is amazing. Every week I pray for God to take care of everyone in my family and that we he truly did.
Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson.

Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief?

How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

A religious education class concerning the death penalty. I used to feel that rapist should be killed but whether someone lives or dies is not up to any human beings.

The change was gradual and could probably be partly attributed to my own maturing. My RE teacher is the one who helped me come to my more practical understanding of faith in God and that he does or doesn’t do things for a reason, eg, make the rapist drop dead and go to hell now.

I believe I am a more placid and open person now and have a stronger connection with God. It was hard to be close to God when you would be willing to kill another man.
Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book?

Give the chapter a title and explain its significance.

How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

Karaoke Dance Party

I want to buy a Karaoke bar and restaurant in Subiaco. Singing is one of the best ways to express yourself. It feels great (and to drunken people you sound great!). The title was inspired from Shrek, the cartoon movie; but the ‘Dance Party’ section also represents that I want my life to be easy going and joy filled. I don’t see my life being easy and joyful without God being a major part of it.

Knowing that God is forgiving and friendly as well as knowing that I want God to be part of my life is what tells me that God will always be a part of my life.
Concluding Remarks

After looking back on what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?

Religious education classes with good teachers are a fantastic experience and help with the tough journey through TEE.
Interviewer: Thankyou, Glynna, for agreeing to be interviewed. I hope you find this as interesting as I do. I'd like to start by asking you what you believe about God.

Glynna: Well, like I believe that like God created the universe an’ stuff. But like I don’t really believe like the whole creation story an’ that ‘cause I’m really like sciencey based type thing. So like evolution and God’s role have sorta like combined, like God guided evolution type thing.

Interviewer: Have you always thought about God in that way?

Glynna: No. Like when I was little I believed like God created the universe in seven days and he knew everything and all that type of stuff, but then like I sorta started to get more into like science. And I kind of realised that it was a bit like ignorant of me to just ignore that. Yeah.

Interviewer: What sort of words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Glynna: Um – up and down.

Interviewer: Yes. Would you like to talk about that a bit more?

Glynna: Yeah, like, sometimes I feel as though like I’m just following mindlessly because like it’s just what I’ve been told. And so I question why I believe. And like when people die an’ stuff – because when we were in Year 10, one of the people from school, like a close friend of mine, like was in a car accident and he was on life support an’ stuff and he died. And I just, - I knew it just seemed so pointless. Of all the people in the car, he was the one that died and he had like the most potential. So during that time, like I really questioned why I believed in God. But like over the past couple of years, I’ve like grown more stronger. Like I’ve sort of gone back to how it was a bit when I was little and returned to praying and stuff. I’m a Special Minister now as well and so it’s like – yeah – and it feels cool when you’re giving it out. Like you just feel all like – wow! afterwards. Yes.

Interviewer: Good. What image do you have of God?

Glynna: (pause) I don’t think I have one. Like, do you mean like what sort of persona does he have? Or –

Interviewer: Yes, it could be that.

Glynna: God’s just there.

Interviewer: And when you were little? Did you have any image then?

Glynna: I thought he was – “it” was like a “he” and he was like big and in heaven and had really big shoes ’cause we could only undersee his feet.
Interviewer: Is God still a “he”?

Glynna: I don’t think so. Like I would refer to him as a “he”. Like I would say “him” and “he” but God’s just an entity now like not a person as such. Like Jesus is a “he” obviously, but God is different.

Interviewer: Okay, let’s come to this issue: Is Jesus different from God?

Glynna: Yes, because God is just like the one who knows everything and Jesus is just like a part of that, like the human side of it – and so he’s different.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you finding these questions difficult?

Glynna: Not difficult. Just like I’ve never thought about it before so like it’s like “Wow!” Yeah!

Interviewer: Good. Anything else you want to talk about about the differences between God and Jesus? You said Jesus is the human side of God.

Glynna: Yeah, because like God controls like everything, like that’s what I think, but Jesus is like the compassionate, like really caring, like emotional side, you know, the part that’s capable of rage and anger and disgust and all that kind of stuff. Whereas God’s like the more (short pause) administrative side.

Interviewer: That’s good. Okay. Are those differences important to you?

Glynna: No.

Interviewer: So, it’s just “up there”?

Glynna: Yeah. It doesn’t affect me. It’s just (pause) – yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think there was a time when you didn’t see any difference between God and Jesus?

Glynna: Um – probably when I was little but like I didn’t understand like a lot of stuff like – (pause)

Interviewer: Can you remember back to there what you would have believed?

Glynna: I’m pretty sure when I was really little I thought that God was really scary because my Mum used to get, y’know, those apocalypse pamphlet things, y’know, like “pray the rosary every day or you’ll go to hell” an’ stuff like that. And so she let me read them and that would scare me like so badly and so I thought that God was this really scary imposing person. And so I don’t think at that stage I like separated him and Jesus. So – yeah.

Interviewer: But God isn’t that big, scary, imposing figure anymore?

Glynna: No.

Interviewer: Do you know what led you to change?

Glynna: Probably school.
Interviewer: We’ll come back to that. What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Glynna: Hmmm. That – Okay. The Holy Spirit’s not like a physical being. It’s just like part of everyone, you know, everyone that has been confirmed, or baptised, or whatever, sort of has some remnant of God and Jesus as the Holy Spirit in them.

Interviewer: What about your friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Glynna: Hmmm. (long pause) I don’t know. I think that you kinda have to have somewhere to go from – maybe a bit like a conscience, but not really the same thing because it doesn’t really affect your decision-making or anything. It just guides you and like, y’know – yeah, I don’t really think if you didn’t believe in God, I don’t think you could understand the Holy Spirit properly.

Interviewer: What do you understand by the Holy Spirit?

Glynna: I don’t know – Um – but yeah, it’s sorta like your conscience but different because it’s more like – you have to have a lot of faith to believe that it exists because like – okay, Jesus there’s proof that Jesus existed, y’know, like other religions an’ stuff have that proof. And God is like, y’know, a given because most people do have something to believe in, but the Holy Spirit is like something that separates like Christianity and Catholicism from like other religions, so – yeah – um, I don’t know.

Interviewer: That’s okay.

Glynna: I kinda lost my train of thought.

Interviewer: We’re dealing with things that are really difficult to understand. Let’s move on and talk a bit about prayer. Here are some questions: Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?

Glynna: Um (pause) I usually pray to Mary or Jesus. But sometimes I like saints’n’stuff because my Mum’s like really – like my Dad’s not Catholic, but my Mum is and so she’s really into like Padre Pio and that – those people because like of family stuff and – um – so I sometimes pray to them as well. I pray like, y’know, at school because we have to – and – well, nor really have to, but you know.

Interviewer: You have prayer times at school?

Glynna: Like we have to say a prayer in the morning and I pray at night before I go to sleep. And that’s like my set prayer times – and in Church. But I don’t know, like usually when I’m thinking about stuff, like, I’ll think, “Aw, what’s the right thing to do?” and I kind of think about it as like sort of praying, but not really. Is that all of the questions?

Interviewer: To whom do you pray most often? God? Jesus? Holy Spirit? Mary?
Glynna: Probably Jesus.
Interviewer: Jesus.
Glynna: Yeah.
Interviewer: When you stop and think about the prayers you say ....
Glynna: But like I don't really say like set prayers, 'cause like – (pause)
Interviewer: You make them up.
Glynna: Yeah. Like, I'll just be like “Aw, can you help me through this test?” or like “Thankyou for not making it rain today.” That kind of like –
Interviewer: So when you pray those prayers ...?
Glynna: Probably God.
Interviewer: Yeah.
Glynna: But like if I'm doing set prayers, it's more Mary because I say the Hail Mary, or the Hail, Holy Queen, 'cause I like the words of Hail, Holy Queen prayer because it says “exile” and I like like big words.
Interviewer: Okay. When in the Hail, Holy Queen it talks about hope, what does that mean for you?
Glynna: I kind of think that that’s what like having a religion and faith offers you. Like, I think that they’re really really related like ‘cause sometimes we talk about it in school and like our teacher doesn’t really think that they’re so interrelated, but I think that like what religion offers you is hope. Yeah.
Interviewer: Do you have rosary beads?
Glynna: Yep, I have – I have these cool ones that are made out of pressed rose petals, like real swish and they smell real nice and they came from like the San Giovanni Rotundo. Yeah.
Interviewer: How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life? Just generally, how do you think it does that, if it does?
Glynna: I – I think it does. I think it kind of like (pause) it makes me have more confidence in people, like it makes me think, y'know, a person’s good until they’ve done something like that proves they’re otherwise, and I think it like in certain situations, it sorta stops me from like doing stuff that you know is wrong. Yeah.
Interviewer: You’re a good thinker. Alright. I want to ask you about suffering and death. How do you think your faith helps you to deal with suffering? Does it?
Glynna: (long pause) It didn’t help me like when my friend died because I kind of just got really angry and I could like see any way of like that – ’cause we had Masses at school and I was – like I really prayed like I’ve never been like that focused on praying and stuff
and he still died. And it just made me so angry that something like that could happen. And then my Mum tried to rationalise it by saying, “Well, you know, maybe he would have been like a vegetable if he had lived.” And I’m like, “But, you know, God is all powerful. He could have stopped that from happening.” And so he didn’t help me then, but (pause) I don’t know, kinda praying is sorta like meditating sometimes like it just clears y’mind and stuff, so it – that’s like good because like, y’know – when I’m like not thinking about stuff, too – like too focused an’ stuff, like in like see other alternatives ‘n’ that, and so – and it’s calming. So I s’pose that’s kind of a way.

**Interviewer**: Does that work for you?

**Glynna**: Yeah.

**Interviewer**: ‘Cos is the TEE a form of suffering?

**Glynna**: (sigh) No. Oh God that is. It’s terrible.

**Interviewer**: Is it?

**Glynna**: Yep. It – so stressful.

**Interviewer**: When does it stop being a challenge and become suffering?

**Glynna**: When – when my bum aches. It – no, now it’s challenging, but I think like (pause) just like (short pause) because I know that in the future like in the next few months, it’s just gonna make things so much harder because like I won’t have time to do all the things I need to do. And like – like friends that aren’t doing TEE like are gonna get angry ’cause I’m not there and my family isn’t gonna understand, but I can’t go to my grandmother’s house every Sunday because I need to study. And, I think I might get fired because I’m gonna have to take time off work, but (short pause) so when all of that combines it sorta just stops being a challenge and just starts getting like miserable.

**Interviewer**: Would you like to reflect further on how your faith can be helpful when that happens?

**Glynna**: I think but like if I just like use prayers the way to like meditate and stuff ’cause that’s kind of what I do ’cause like we have a prayer room at home. It looks so funny because like we have posters of Jesus on the walls an’ stuff that my Mum sticks up and that amuses me. I don’t know why but it does. An’ like we like have candles and stuff and so like it’s just like a really peaceful atmosphere and if I just sit in there for a while it kinda just like de-stressafies me which is like what I really need sometimes.

**Interviewer**: Okay. What about the impact your faith has had on your attitude towards death?

**Glynna**: (long pause) It’s less final, like death isn’t the end of everything. (pause) It’s (pause) it’s not something I can control because if I were – not like that I’m suicidal or anything, but if I had
committed suicide it wouldn’t – that’s like a sin, so I can’t have control over my li - my death. And yeah, like it – but more that it’s less final, like there’s still hope, you know, that stuff can happen after I’ve died.

Interviewer: Do you pray to your friend?

Glynna: I pray for the soul of my friend but not to my friend ‘cause like yeah (short pause) like with the whole Purgatory thing ‘cause I don’t know if I believe in Purgatory or not, but my Mum, my Mum has like had a big impact on my faith and like –

Interviewer: We’re going to get to talk about that later.

Glynna: Okay.

Interviewer: Do you think your faith has helped you get a sense of purpose and direction in your life?

Glynna: Not really. Like it helps me like make decisions ‘n’ stuff, but what I do isn’t based on what I believe.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you like to talk about what it’s based on?

Glynna: It’s more what I want. I’m more selfish. And – but it like does. It like (pause) because like I would never be able to do stuff – like you – like murder or – like, like I could never be so ambitious that I put like my friends and my family like out of place, like in Harry Potter. How – do you read Harry Potter?

Interviewer: Yes.

Glynna: Like how Percy, like you know – like segregated himself from his family. I could never do that ‘cause like because like religion and faith has taught me that family and friends are really important and – yeah.

Interviewer: So, obviously you had a dream, a dream, a vision of yourself in the future. True?

Glynna: Sort of. (pause) Kind of. Sort of vague and far away.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you get that sense of purpose? You know: “My life has meaning because ....”? 

Glynna: I don’t think I think my life has a meaning.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. But do you think your life is meaningless?

Glynna: No, not necessarily, but I think that like (pause) – I don’t carry out like I start thinking that I’m gonna achieve this and this and this. I kinda just do it – aimlessly.

Interviewer: Aimlessly?

Glynna: Sort of, well, not really aimlessly, but to do the best I can but with no real like goal to aim for. Like I want to do well but I don’t know why I want to do well.

Interviewer: So you don’t know why you want to bet involved in nanotechnology?
Glynna: Nup!

Interviewer: Okay.

Glynna: Aw like, yeah, because it's like interesting and stuff, but that's more of like a selfish reason than any greater purpose.

Interviewer: Why would you call that selfish?

Glynna: Because I'm not doing it for anyone else's benefit but my own.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you see that there's anything wrong with that?

Glynna: No, but, ah, I suppose like selfish is like – has like negative connotations type thing.

Interviewer: I see.

Glynna: It's not like, y'know, how some people like “Oh, I wanna be a missionary in Zimbabwe.” or something. That's like totally selfless. And I don't have, y'know, such noble goals.

Interviewer: Some people with noble goals do it for selfish reasons.

Glynna: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright. What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God? You’ve spoken about the death of your friend and it's obvious that it's a key story in your life. Are there any other events in your life that you see have had an impact?

Glynna: Well, one is like those booklets my Mum used to read, like they really like they scared the crap out of me. Like they really made me think that like 'cause it said in the year 2000 like the sun's gonna go black and all this stuff. And I was just so scared I used to like pray the rosary like twice a day an’ stuff and like that's like a lot of commitment from a seven-year-old type thing. And so that's something. Um – my aunty like had a brain tumour before I was born and like she had that removed like twenty years ago or something. And then like it came back when I think I was in Year 7 an’ like that's like when the Padre Pio like stuff comes from because like – I don't know, like they my family thinks that she went to the place where he lived or whatever, and like that cured her, but like I think it was the operation she had to remove it that cured her, but, you know, either way. And so that like indirectly has influenced me because like it's made my family’s faith stronger, so it affects me because –

Interviewer: Okay. Are there any words that you can recall from – You’ve told me two stories, actually three, that are really important so far. Are there any words that keep coming back to mind associated with those?

Glynna: Scared.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s your reaction, isn’t it?

Glynna: Yeah.
Interviewer: And that's the word you put to it?

Glynna: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are there any words that anyone would have said to you along the way?

Glynna: 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, you know, Phil is in a better place now. But like he would just say that to console me. He didn't really believe it. And – yeah. Dad would be “Be realistic. It's not the end of the world.”

Interviewer: Okay. Good. Do you think your faith's grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?


Interviewer: Why?

Glynna: When like Phil died I really thought like “Nuh, I'm gonna give up this religion stuff. I can’t handle it anymore. It's just a load of crap.” And like I know it's not probably like the greatest thing to say, but I really just couldn't stand it. I just stopped going to Church for like, y'know, a month. I know that that's not that long, but like I just thought (pause) And then like (pause) Um, I don't know, I think I went for Christmas because he like died a couple of months before Christmas and I went to Christmas Mass and I kind of realised that, you know, like there was this whole community of people that like would support me if I needed it. And so that sort of started me getting back into (pause) And then like I wanted to become a Special Minister 'cause like I wanted another badge like (laughter) so terrible, but like that was kind of like the initial reason why I wanted to do it. And then like I actually gave out the communion like at the – at the first Mass, like it just felt so amazing like, It was like wow! All these people I'm like giving something to them. It's o – ah – it just felt so good and like we did it – I – I did it like a couple of weeks ago and I just had that like, y'know, glowing feeling and – I think that like has really, really strengthened my relationship with like God an’ stuff.

Interviewer: I can relate to that.

Glynna: It’s so great.

Interviewer: Isn’t it. Yeah. It really is. Okay, so what do you think of when you’re holding the host? What’s the host mean to you?

Glynna: It's a piece of bread that has like (pause) When like – When we got put into the session for those who were new, Fr Chris was like “You, what do you believe in it?” And I'm like, “Oh, it's not like Jesus' flesh, or anything. Like I don't believe that. It's just like his Spirit sort of thing like residing in it – in like the piece of bread, like infused into it.” And, y'know, that's kind of what I – I
think about like (pause) How amazing it is that this tradition has been passed on for so long as well like sometimes I just words an' stuff, you know, they've been these ritualistic stirred for like two thousand years. That's pretty amazing.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the impact of the school on your faith?

Glynna: (pause) Like high school? or primary school? or both?

Interviewer: High school.

Glynna: Okay, high school? Initially, it made me like less inclined to be like all religious-like, which is, you know, which wa – isn't cool. An' I s'pose I kinda gave in to like the peer pressures type thing, y'know, I sort of (pause) like and I got into witchcraft an' stuff like, like I was always interested in that type of stuff. But for a while I was pretty into that. I was still like a Catholic. I would never would have said like I was pagan or anything. But I got into that an' so (pause) Like until like Year 11 I wasn't really like, you know, "Oh yeah, I go to Church every week." I wouldn't – I would try to avoid mentioning that to people an' stuff, but then I kind of realised that it was like a good thing, you know. It show that like I'm committed to something an' (pause)

Interviewer: Was there anything that sparked that off – that realisation?

Glynna: I think it was just like a lot of things, like – like the kind of going back to the Church, even though I didn’t really leave for that long, like after my friend died. And like (pause) wanting to be more involved in the school and like that kind of stuff it kind of (pause) like going to Church, and, y’know, being a Catholic, like not just in name, y’know, but by my actions an’ stuff that would make me like a better person, y’know. (pause) Like yep. I think. I dunno.

Interviewer: Very good. Yeah. Any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the ways you think about and relate to God?

Glynna: (pause) In primary school, we had like a priest and like he died, an’ like that had no effect on me ’cause I didn’t really know him really, or anything, an’ then we had this really cool priest for like seven years or something and I used to go to that church. And then like, like he did all these renovations an’ stuff and then he just left and it kind of made me think like, y’know, he was only here to make the money and for the grandeur, and like being like the priest that changed everything. He wasn’t really in it for what it should be for, like, y’know, to help people an’ stuff. So that’s like ....

Interviewer: Is that Fr Tom Cohen?

Glynna: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, he had to move on.
Glynna: Yeah, I – I know that. I know he had to. And also like – um – Fr Paul – like the Archbishop now. So I shouldn’t really bad-mouth him really, or anything, but he like really stuffed my Grandmother over because he wasn’t the nicest person, I don’t think. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Glynna: But like in high school, sorry. I got off the track. Um (pause) my Year 11 religion teacher like I really hated her at the start because she was so arrogant. And like I just thought, y’know, aw, how could someone be so like ignorant. You know, she refused to believe in evolution, y’know. How could she like (short pause) you know – There’s so much evidence, you can’t just say that it didn’t happen and she made me so angry. But like because she made me so angry, it made me like really get into like details of stuff an’ read more an’ all that kind of stuff. An’ like I kind of realised how like I don’t know if she was doing it on purpose to make us question ourselves more. Or if she was doing it because she really believed it. But it really kind of made me think more about stuff.

Interviewer: Did she give you any clues at all that maybe she was just trying to trick you into – ?

Glynna: I think sometimes she was, but, I don’t know, sometimes I’m pretty sure she was being serious.

Interviewer: How can you tell when a teacher has your best interests at heart?

Glynna: (pause) I don’t know.

Interviewer: Okay. That’s all right.

Glynna: Um (pause) No, I think you just do.

Interviewer: Is Year 12 different from Year 11 when it comes to RE?

Glynna: Yep!

Interviewer: What’s the difference?

Glynna: Last year, I was in a class that started off thirteen people and that ended up with four. And now – and I was like really good friends with like – like half way through the year there was only six of us left. An’ like that was the main class that lasted. An’ we were all really close and we felt really comfortable discussing like personal issues and this year I’m in the INSTEP class and like with – like it’s like segregated an’ – Mrs Thomas, she’s a really nice lady an’ stuff, but sometimes she gets angry and we don’t really have class discussions an’ stuff. So, it’s really different.

Interviewer: INSTEP people are often out of the school.

Glynna: Yeah.

Interviewer: They’re on a different learning programme from you.
Glynna: An' sometimes like 'cause there's three of us like TEE students an' like, you know – Sometimes Mrs Thomas would be like “Which one of you does History?” And it would be like me only and so she sort of singles me out and makes me explain stuff an' like I s'pose, y'know, she doesn't realise she's doing it, but it kind of just adds to like the barrier between all of us. Yeah.

Interviewer: Which is a lot different from the experience of Year 11 with the six of you.

Glynna: Yeah. Last year's religion class was the greatest class ever.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. Is there anything that has happened, or been said, in RE that you think has influenced you in your faith? You talked about the teacher who wouldn't accept that evolution was real. That would have happened in RE, so, obviously that has led you to sort of re-assess what faith is and what to believe and what not to believe. Would that be true?

Glynna: Yes.

Interviewer: Is there anything further that you would want to add to that?

Glynna: With that situation it kind of made me realise that some people just can follow something mindlessly and that like that is not a good thing. Like I really disagree with people that just do that and so it kind of made me, y'know, aware that there were really people like that out there.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. To just round that off, what impact do you think your RE teachers have had on your relationship with God?

Glynna: (long pause) They've ma – they've brou – brought up interesting points to like think about. 'cause in Year 9, I remember we had like this question like we had a class debate and it was like “Does the ends justify the means?” I had to argue that the ends justify the means. And, you know, like my ultimate point was like well Jesus died to get us into heaven, so the ends do justify the means. And like, I wouldn't have thought of that if the a – like the debate hadn't been put forth. Some said, “Wow! That's cool!”

Interviewer: Okay. The last thing I wanted to ask you to reflect on was about the people who've played a significant part in your faith development. And you spent a little bit of time talking about your Mum and your Dad. I suppose the thing I'm interested in getting you to reflect on is firstly whether or Mum or your Dad or both have prompted you to move closer to God, or away from God, and then to reflect further on the differences between your Mum and your Dad.

Glynna: Well, okay, my Mum like kind of made me be Catholic. You know, like my Dad didn't really get a say in it. And my Dad's atheist. He doesn't believe at all. And like um (pause) – because my Dad would be like – like he didn't used to do this when I was younger, he would like let my Mum be responsible
for my faith. But, like lately, he will say stuff like, aw, you know, “Catholics blah, blah, blah.” And because like I find myself backing mostly – y’know, like my entire religion up, it’s like (pause) Yeah, we are right, y’know, we have the right to believe what we want. So that’s like a way my Dad has – But my Dad sort of like because he’s more of like the rational type person, he’s kind of impacted in my, you know, weird melding of science and religion, so that’s like the major part he’s played in my – Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Mum? Where does Mum come from?

**Glynna:** Mum’s from Burma. And she came out like about thirty-five years ago. And my Dad’s from England, and he came out like about twenty-five years ago. Yeah. And like when – in Burma like – I don’t know if like Catholicness – Catholicism (laughter) is like the major religion, or anything, but – I just make up words all the time, so – um, that a lot of like the Burmese community is Catholic, and so sometimes I feel as though like she wants me to be like a Special Minister an’ all that kind of stuff so that she can show me off to her friends an’ stuff which kind of irritates me.

**Interviewer:** That’s part of the culture, yeah.

**Glynna:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** It comes with the territory, doesn’t it.

**Glynna:** Yeah, it’s really annoying.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So obviously you Mum has influenced you to be Catholic and you’re trying to forge your own understanding of it, aren’t you?

**Glynna:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And to co-exist. But there are some things that you are finding useful. Is that right?

**Glynna:** Yeah. I would say so. She’s like kind of instilled in me that like it’s important to believe in something like, ’cause like whenever she has a problem she’ll pray. And like, I’m not like that, like not – ’cause she says the Rosary like – six times a day, or something. An’ I just can’t concentrate for that long.

**Interviewer:** I couldn’t either.

**Glynna:** I don’t know how she does it, but – she’s kinda shown me that like, yeah, there’s always some way to like express myself, you know, like through religion.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Your Mum gives you a way of thinking about things.

**Glynna:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** What about your Dad? You talked about your Dad and you’ve said a number of times that he’s a rational sort of person.
Glynna: Okay. Like my Mum like is a bit of an idiot, like, not to be mean to her or anything, but she’s not like as educated as I am, and she – she – she thinks like really stupid things sometimes, like, y’know, she’ll jump to really illogical conclusions an’ stuff. So sometimes I like think that aw Mum’s a bit of an idiot, I think. And my Dad’s, y’know, like the logical one. My Dad kind of gives me the logical side to stuff. He’s encouraged me to think stuff through reasonably rather than (pause) If I see a car on the side of the street, it’s not a stolen car. It could just be that the person is having a party type thing. Like that type of thing. Yeah.

Interviewer: I think that’s probably given me enough to work with. Lastly, is there anything that you would want to say that I haven’t asked you about?

Glynna: (pause) That like books an’ stuff has like impacted a lot on what I think, like – like fictional books. Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there a book that sticks in your mind more than any other?

Glynna: All the Raymond D. Vice books, like science fictiony stuff, like – it’s sort of all magical an’ stuff and so, like they have their gods that – (pause) There’s this guy that has this theory that the universe is a living entity and that like everything – that all the mistakes we make, an’ stuff, it’s just the universe learning. And that made me think about stuff in such a different way, you know. I was like, “Wow! That’s so cool!” And Harry Potter probably happens in some way “cause I love Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings – I’m such a nerd! (laughter) Like I always read. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. We will stop here. Thanks for sharing your story with me, Glynna. I have enjoyed meeting with you and listening to you.
Interviewer: Gunter, what do you believe about God?

Gunter: Ooh, that’s a hard question. I dunno, I jus’ tend to follow what the Church says – um – most of the time. I haven’t really gone into it and researched it a lot myself but I tend to follow what the Church says about God an’ I don’t really disagree with it in any way at the moment. Um –

Interviewer: What do you think the Church says about God?

Gunter: Well, they say that he’s the creator of everything and – um – he – he created us people and animals an’ stuff. He created the environment for us to live in – um – an’ they say that God’s good an’ things like that.

Interviewer: Have you always thought about God in that way?

Gunter: Most of the time, yeah. I haven’t really ever thought different ‘cause I mean I know some people I’ve heard like they get angry at God an’ stuff, but like I’ve never really seen any reason to get angry at God because, (pause) y’ know, – what was I gonna say? – yeah, because like – well, I’m trying to think of an example – um – (pause) – aw, like maybe when someone’s – um – someone an’ someone in their family’s died through a car crash or something, they blame God for it. There may be other reasons, y’ know.

Interviewer: Okay, we’ll come back to that one. What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Gunter: (pause) A person. (laughs)

Interviewer: Yeah. Any other words?

Gunter: Mmm. Not really. I dunno. Mmm, one of God’s people? One of many?

Interviewer: Yes. In what ways is your faith in God today different from what it was some years ago, like when you were in primary school?

Gunter: I don’t really think it’s changed much – um – over that time because I’ve always believed in God – um – an’ like the Christmas story an’ all that sorta stuff. I haven’t really changed my beliefs much. Um – I s’pose watching a lota movies about that – that involved the Church an’ stuff – um – have had a bit of an influence, but not much, like they sort of reinforce the fact that maybe there is a God there even though we can’t see him or –

Interviewer: Good. Is Jesus different from God?

Gunter: That’s a really hard question ’cause what I’ve been told from the Bible an’ stuff an’ parts I’ve read from the Bible, Jesus seems to jus’ do all God’s work, so he seems just like a person that does
all that God works through sorta thing, so – He’s kinda like part
of God – seems like part of God, not someone separate.

Interviewer: But is he different from God?

Gunter: Maybe the fact that he’s an actual person an’ you can see him
an’ touch him an’ stuff like that but – um – like apart from that I
don’t think there would be much difference.

Interviewer: Is that important to you that Jesus is part of God?

Gunter: Mmm – yeah, I s’pose so ‘cause he can sort of – if God’s got an
important message that he wants to sort of tell people he would
do it through Jesus an’ – an’ it makes it easy for people around
to sort of understand, I s’pose.

Interviewer: Can you recall any message that Jesus has given that you
would think has come from God?

Gunter: As in from the Bible?

Interviewer: Yeah

Gunter: Okay. Um – (pause) not off the top o’ my head, I couldn’t.
(pause) I can remember stuff where he healed blind people
an’ stuff like that, where he performed miracles like that –

Interviewer: So do you see that as something that God wanted Jesus to do?

Gunter: I s’pose so.

Interviewer: What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy
Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

Something to do with God. Um – maybe it’s just a spirit or
something and it’s there. It’s just – I dunno. It’s something that’s
just there, I guess.

Interviewer: So that’s how you would explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who
doesn’t believe in God?

Gunter: Mmmm, ah well, I would say to ’em that I don’t – like the Holy
Spirit, the Church talks a lot about it, an’ stuff like that, but – um
– it’s sorta something you can’t see or touch or – an – y’ told it’s
there but you don’t really know whether it’s there or not.

Interviewer: Okay. “Don’t really know”: could you explain that a bit more?

Gunter: That I don’t really know sorta thing?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gunter: Like I don’t know that much about it, so I haven’t really done any
reading or ever went into it. Um I jus’ remember, I think, this
part in the Bible where the Holy Spirit put flames above the
disciples’ heads. Yeah, I remember that from that bit.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move on to looking at prayer. So the first question
is: do you pray?
Gunter: Yes.

Interviewer: To whom do you pray?

Gunter: God.

Interviewer: How often do you pray?

Gunter: Every night.

Interviewer: And how do you pray?

Gunter: Um – I say the Our Father just before bed, or before I go to sleep.

Interviewer: Do you say it lying down? sitting up? kneeling?

Gunter: Lying down, normally.

Interviewer: To whom do you pray most often? God? Jesus? the Holy Spirit?

Gunter: God, I guess.

Interviewer: Why?

Gunter: 'Cause he’s the big guy. (laughs)

Interviewer: So, I suppose some words you could use to describe your relationship with God is

Gunter: He’s the boss.

Interviewer: He’s the boss, he’s the big guy.

Gunter: Mmm.

Interviewer: Okay. We’ve looked at what you believe about God and about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Is there anything you wanted to add to what you’ve said before we move on?

Gunter: Not really, no.

Interviewer: Okay. So here’s the next general question: How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Gunter: How does my belief in God influence – okay, – um (pause) I dunno. I jus’ seem – tend to go by what’s said like (pause) Christmas I – like us as a family we celebrate Christmas, Easter – um – New Year’s, but that’s not really anything to do with the Church, is it?

Interviewer: Well, it can be. The Church likes to make it that way, but most people don’t.

Gunter: Yeah – um – an’ – What was the question again? Sorry, I didn’t –

Interviewer: How does your faith influence or shape the way you live your life?

Gunter: Um – I dunno. I don’t think it – it does in a really big way, sorta thing. It’s jus’ through prayer an’ goin’ to Church occasionally an’ stuff like that.
Interviewer: Okay. How would prayer shape the way you live your life?

Gunter: I dunno. I can’t answer that.

Interviewer: Okay, let’s pull it apart a bit. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Gunter: As in my suffering, or others’ suffering?

Interviewer: It could be your suffering, it could be other people’s suffering.

Gunter: Um – (pause) well, I s’pose when other people suffer, like people from the tsunami disaster an’ things like that, – um – you sort of think why – why do things like this happen? An’ natural disasters – um – for a start because we can’t really control ’em – um – you sorta think ‘Why does God let things like this happen?’

Interviewer: So how would that affect your faith? Or how does your faith help you to answer that question?

Gunter: I dunno. I always think that God has reasons for doing things rather than – um – maybe things like that happen, but maybe he had a reason for that to happen.

Interviewer: Okay. So, is part of your belief about God that God controls things like natural disasters?

Gunter: I guess so. In – in a sense, yes, there’s – there’s always a scientific explanation for why the tsunami happened, but then, there’s the – how can I say it? –

Interviewer: Religious?

Gunter: Yeah, well, maybe a religious explanation, or why it didn’t happen earlier, or something like this. Or why did it happen at all? Why were all these people killed?

Interviewer: If you had to give a scientific explanation for the tsunami, what would you say?

Gunter: Um – I think it was – Wasn’t it that tectonic plates under the ocean that started a huge earthquake an’ then it forced the water to create the ts– that big wave.?

Interviewer: And if you had to give a religious explanation?

Gunter: (pause) I dunno. Um – I dunno. God told the water to make a wave an’ wash over the shores, somethin’ like that. I dunno how to explain that in religious terms.

Interviewer: I guess I’m trying to find out whether you believe that God actually influences these things, so God causes suffering. Or does God allow suffering? How do you see God and suffering?

Gunter: I dunno. I think I’d kind of relate it back to Noah’s Ark when God told Noah that he was going to – um – make – flood the earth for such-an’-such a time. An’ he told Noah to take animals from – like two of each animal from each species an’ to build a big ark an’ to put ‘em all in there an’ to take his family, an’ to jus’ live in the ark until the water dropped down again. But there was no
real explanation as to – well, there was actually, but (pause) sort of we think, “Why would God kill everybody on earth an’ then just leave it up to one person to sort it all out?”

Interviewer: So, do you have an answer to that question?

Gunter: Not really.

Interviewer: Okay. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?

Gunter: (pause) I dunno. Everybody dies. That’s what everybody says anyway. Um – I dunno. That’s a hard one ’cause people die of various things, of old age, of car crashes, of being shot, war (pause) yeah, I dunno.

Interviewer: So when you think about death, do you have on a pair of glasses that say ‘religion’, ‘faith’? Or do you have on a pair of glasses that don’t have those words attached to them?

Gunter: I dunno. I think a bit of both. Maybe one side has ‘religion’, ‘faith’; the other side has nothin’ ’cause – sort of one way I’m saying “Well, what happened? How – how did this person die?”

Like when you hear of someone getting killed. Um – on the other s–

Interviewer: So you close that eye and you’re looking with your religious eye?

Gunter: Yeah, an’ you think – um – I s’pose immediately comes the thought that if they were drink-driving an’ they crashed into a tree or somethin’ an’ killed themselves, you’d think – um – “Ah, well, they don’t h— – um – they don’t think much for the Catholic Church doin’ what they did.”

Interviewer: And what if they weren’t Catholic?

Gunter: I dunno. (laughs) Good question. That’s something we’ll never know.

Interviewer: Okay. What about yourself? You’re in the car, behind the wheel.

Gunter: And then what happens?

Interviewer: Well, you could either end up killing yourself, or driving sensibly.

Gunter: Drive sensibly.

Interviewer: So, does your faith have anything to do with that?

Gunter: Mmm, (pause) maybe not really, sorta thing. That one’s a hard one to explain though actually ’cause when you run into trouble an’ then you’re like –um – near death, sorta thing, you start praying to God, “Oh God, please save me.” Somethin’ like that. But if you’re just, I s’pose driving normally, you – you sort of don’t really think about it.

Interviewer: Okay. So have you ever been near to death?
Gunter: No.

Interviewer: So you’re basing this on what you hear being said?

Gunter: Mmm.

Interviewer: Is there anything out of your own experience that shows how your faith influences you in that situation?

Gunter: In –

Interviewer: It could be any situation.

Gunter: Any situation (long pause) I dunno. Experience – not really.

Interviewer: So this has never really occurred to you?

Gunter: Not really. I’ve never really been in a near life-death situation, a situation that’s so bad that –

Interviewer: Am I right in thinking that what you’re saying is that we tend not to think about how our faith influences us until we’re in a really critical situation? Is that what you’re saying”

Gunter: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you want to add anything to that?

Gunter: Well, I s’pose you can always go and relate it back to movies like how everybody does, I s’pose. Um – for example, on the – just over the holidays, I watched *The Exorcist*, the new one.

Have you – have you seen that one?

Interviewer: No. I saw the old one.

Gunter: Yeah, the new one, apparently the old one’s about some girl getting possessed, or something. Yeah, the new one’s a little bit different. It’s about – um (pause) – They discover this church an’ they don’t know why it’s built ’cause the Vatican’s got no record of why it was built, or that it was even built, but it’s a Catholic Church. An’ there was this guy who was an ex-priest – um – an’ he was an ex-Catholic priest an’ he was called in ’cause he – he’d gone into palaeontology, or whatever –

archaeology. Um – he was called in by another priest that wanted him to go and investigate with him an’ th’ dig site – at that dig site weird things were happening like – um – for example, hyenas started hanging around where they were digging up the church – um – people started seeing things. Ah, one guy that was there like when it first started went crazy an’

got sent to a mental institution. An’ when they went to go an’ visit that guy to find out what happened, he – he carved the Nazi symbol into his chest in front of them. Then he killed himself. An’ the priest that was there at the mental institution said – um – he – he wasn’t possessed, but he’d been touched by evil. An’ –

anyway, as the movie goes on, this priest discovers things that aren’t right, like, for example, when they go into the Church there’s these huge statues of warriors an’ stuff, an’ apparently the Catholic Church always has the swords an’ stuff pointing
upwards. The swords were pointing downwards with these guys and there was also the crucifix. There was a big massive crucifix but it was hanging upside down and – um – then as a – it goes on even further – um – There's this little boy and he – he sort of (pause) – He gets to know the priest and the priest gives him this – one of those archaeological tools they use to scrape stuff and his brother takes it from him and he's mucking around in front of this well and the boy's going on, “Aw, give it to me. It's mine.” An' there's this monkey there an' it – an' it goes – like it went crazy. An' all of a sudden it turned into hyena an' then all these hyenas come running in an' it – they killed the older brother, but they didn't touch the younger brother and they acted as if he wasn't there. An' then the two priests thought, “Well, this isn't right. Maybe this boy's possessed.” An' the story goes on an' this boy is being taken care of by this female doctor. And the priest starts to get a bit involved with her an' then as he finds out later on, this boy – they – the tribe that this boy belongs to tried to – um – well, they go to kill him because they think he's possessed, but they can't kill him. But the other priest, the one – or the guy that is a priest – um – not the archaeologist – he goes to do an exorcism on him in this church an' then you find out that it was actually the – the doctor that was looking after him that was possessed. An' the priest – that priest who had – was the archaeologist, didn't believe – well, he – he did believe in God, but he'd sort of lost his faith after World War II in which a Nazi forced him to kill people, like he – they – they got a big group of people together and he g– then the – the – one of the Nazis goes, “You, priest, choose who to kill.” An' then the priest goes, “No, I can't do that.” An' he grabs this little kid an' shot her in the head. An' then the priest had no choice, so he pointed to all the ol' people an' left the women and children. An' then that's where he lost his faith, but he regained his faith when he was confronted with this – um – woman who was possessed an' he managed to – um – drive the evil spirits out of her, but he didn't save her life 'cause she died soon after she was freed.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think you find that film fascinating?

**Gunter:** It's just the whole storyline, I guess. An' – 'cause I've seen other films like it, too, where people like don't have any faith an' then they regain their faith or – um – There's another movie, *Stigmata* – Have you seen that?

**Interviewer:** No.

**Gunter:** But that's also like that. There's a priest – that the priest who was investigating it worked for the Vatican but he strengthened his faith. He already had faith but it only got strengthened by seeing what he's seen.

**Interviewer:** So, do you think things like these can help to strengthen your faith?
Gunter: I guess so ’cause it’s sort of – you can believe in something that you can’t see or touch, or whatever, but when you see it an’ you can touch it or when it’s firsthand experience, it sort of strengthens your belief ’cause then you know it’s real.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you ready to move on?

Gunter: Yes.

Interviewer: What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Gunter: Mmm, I s’pose Confirmation, Holy Communion, things like that.

Interviewer: Okay. What about things that people have said?

Gunter: Mmm. (pause)

Interviewer: Can you think of anything?

Gunter: Mmm. Not really off the top of my head.

Interviewer: Anything that people might have said that challenged your relationship with God?

Gunter: Not really.

Interviewer: What about things that people have done?

Gunter: As in?

Interviewer: Well, it could be anything, anything that sort of jumps out at you.

Gunter: Not really.

Interviewer: That’s okay. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Gunter: Probably a little stronger, but hasn’t really – it’s probably a little bit stronger, but not heaps.

Interviewer: Do you know why it’s a little bit stronger?

Gunter: Mmm, probably just attending Church an’ stuff an’ being at a Catholic school.

Interviewer: So, how come that has affected you more now than in the past?

Gunter: I s’pose as you get older you sort of understand what they’re saying in Church a lot more, like you can understand it better, whereas little kids just tend to sit there and go, “Aw, this is boring. What’s he goin’ on about?”

Interviewer: So what’s one thing you think you understand more now than before?

Gunter: Mmm, s’pose the whole story of Jesus, like being raised up and then being crucified, an’ the reasons as why he was crucified.

Interviewer: Okay, and how does that help you, knowing that, understanding that?

Gunter: I dunno.
Interviewer: That’s okay. We keep coming up against that wall, don’t we.

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: What has been the impact of your school on your faith?

Gunter: Um – it’s kept it up, being a Catholic school an’ the RE isn’t – isn’t too boring. It’s quite interesting, learning new things ’cause I’ve always found I’ve learned new things in RE other than just goin’ – going over past ground.

Interviewer: Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about and relate to God?

Gunter: Mmm, I s’pose last year on Retreat, um – Mr Anderson conducting the liturgy. The way he conducted it sort of made everything sound really true an’ I think that was very good the way he did that.

Interviewer: Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?

Gunter: Mmm, not really, not in the past.

Interviewer: What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?

Gunter: Um – a good one. I guess they’ve just sort of re-confirmed the fact that there is a God there an’ there’s more to it than just going to Church an’ listening to a priest talk an’ that. There’s more to it on a personal level, like in it – in how it relates to each individual person.

Interviewer: Can you talk more about that?

Gunter: Um – not really, but – um – I’ve always been taught that each one – each person is – um – an individual an’ God always looks at you in an – pardon me – looks at you as an individual rather than the whole group.

Interviewer: Is that something you have learned through RE?

Gunter: Mmm, yes.

Interviewer: And how have your RE teachers influenced you in that belief?

Gunter: Um – jus’ the way that they explain it. They sort of – they – they’ll explain it in a way that it’s easy to understand.

Interviewer: Can you comment on the place of prayer and liturgy in developing a relationship with God?

Gunter: Mmm (pause) prayer an’ lit – Read the question again please?

Interviewer: Can you comment on the place of prayer and liturgy in developing a relationship with God?
Gunter: Um – I s’pose it’s like talking to God when you say a prayer, like say a prayer. I guess that’s – that’s the main thing. I don’t know of any other smaller things, but that’s the main way I see it.

Interviewer: Okay. What people have played a significant part in your faith development?

Gunter: Um – I s’pose everybody that’s taught me RE in the past.

Interviewer: What about your parents?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anything your remember that your parents have said or done that’s prompted you to grow closer to God?

Gunter: Um – yeah, just I s’pose introducing me into the Catholic faith, making me take the lessons to get Holy Communion an’ Confirmation, ’cause I didn’t go to a Catholic primary school. Um – yeah, I s’pose that’s the way they prompted me, an’ then taking me to Church an’ stuff at Christmas times an’ – yeah.

Interviewer: How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?

Gunter: Not much.

Interviewer: So they’re pretty much the same?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: What stories from your life describe how each of your parents has influenced you in your relationship with God?

Gunter: Um – (pause) – tryin’ to think now. Aw, I guess when I was really young, I didn’t want to take the lessons. Um – but then as I grew older I thought well, that’s not too bad. I mean, might as well do them an’ get ‘em over an’ done with. An’ that sort of introduced me to the whole Catholic faith an’ stuff.

Interviewer: Is there anything further you want to add to anything you’ve said before we finish the interview?

Gunter: Um – I s’pose other things, other small things that may influence my faith are some Masses you get priests that are really boring an’ you jus’ wanna get outa there, but other Masses you get priests that are really – like interesting to listen to an’ tell funny stories an’ stuff, like the new priest in Kalamunda – that’s Fr –

Interviewer: Jones

Gunter: Whatever his name is. (laughs) Um – yeah, well he’s not too bad, like he- he does a Christmas Mass in Brookton, yeah, an’ he tells jokes an’ stuff, yeah, an’ he’s pretty good to listen to.

Interviewer: Good. Do you want to say anything about YCS?

Gunter: Um – yeah, um – I s’pose YCS it – ’cause it’s a Christian youth group, but there’s also that fun side to it, so it sort of takes you into the – the Christian faith sort of in a fun way, rather than –
um – some people think you jus’ sit there an’ read Bibles an’ stuff an’ that’s boring. But really I find that it – it – it introduces you into it in a way that you sorta don’t realise that you’re getting like – I don’t know what happened on the camp, but from past camps an’ stuff, when we’ve had meditation before bed an’ stuff, um – an’ also we’ve had morning prayer an’ things like that, you – with all the fun activities going on, you sort of don’t realise that you’re being – how can I say it?

Interviewer: Educated?

Gunter: Yeah, that sorta thing. You – it’s done in a fun way so that people enjoy it an’ get the good experiences out of – out of it as well.

Interviewer: So, shall we hold it at this point?

Gunter: If you wish.

Interviewer: Okay. Thankyou, Gunter. That was good.
Interviewer: Well, Gunter, thank you for agreeing to this second interview. And in this second interview, I’d like you to imagine that you have a copy of your autobiography on the table in front of you. What title have you given it?

Gunter: A hard question.

Interviewer: It is a hard question.

Gunter: (long pause) Thousands o’ titles you could probably give it. Probably give it something like “My Journey Through Life.”

Interviewer: Okay. If you wrote the story of your life now, is that the title you’d give it?

Gunter: Probably, yeah, I would.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you like to reflect on why you’ve given it that title?

Gunter: Well, I guess the title sort of reflects like, as in theme, my journey through life, so it’ll – it sort of reflects like my journey from – um – well, I could say when I was born, but like the chances that I’m gonna remember stuff from when I was like a few months old now is quite unlikely, but from, say, way back when I can remember to now, like what – things I’ve gone through – um – the experiences I’ve had – um – and say, problems I’ve faced and how I’ve sort of gone around them – um – an’ then say good things that have happened and sort of – i- – it would reflect my journey from – say, a child to where I am now.

Interviewer: Okay. So if that’s the case, do you have any sense of what sorts of chapters would be in your autobiography?

Gunter: Um – the chapter’s a hard one. Um – maybe say for the first chapter – um – maybe might call it something like “Early” – um – how’d I put it – I’d say maybe “Early Life” or – um – “Early Times”, something like that.

Interviewer: Would that be your childhood?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Before going to school? Or would it include school?

Gunter: Probably include pre-primary.

Interviewer: Okay. So the next chapter would pick up from there. What would that be about?

Gunter: Um – probably my experiences starting primary school and move on. Um – an’ I actually can remember a lot o’ stuff. Will I move on?

Interviewer: Yeah.
Gunter: An’ then probably my journey through primary school up until about Year 5 or 6.

Interviewer: Okay, and what happens then? Do you move into another chapter?

Gunter: Yep. Um – an’ that would sorta cover maybe the journey from Year 5 to 6 to – um – well, from Year 5 an’ 6 to when I shifted house from Henley Brook to Serpentine. Um – and – sorta maybe talk about the – um – like, I didn’t really face any problems ‘cause I was quite happy to actually move. Um – I was qu- – happy to stay wherever anyway. Henley Brook had its good things and bad things and so does Serpentine. Um – an’ then sorta my experiences of trying to fit in at the new school there an’ – I didn’t find that too bad actually. People at the Serpentine Primary School are quite – were quite good – um – an’ then I probably end off there an’ then move into another chapter. I’d sort of describe the transition from primary school to high school an’ sorta maybe I would describe some o’ the things that primary school teachers say to – um – primary school students to scare them about high school an’ when you get there you find out that they’re not really true.

Interviewer: So what are some of those things?

Gunter: Oh, I can remember stuff like – um – y’ know, my Year 7 teacher used to say – um – oh at high school like they’re really strict, the teachers an’ stuff, an’ say if you forget something in y’ locker, they’re not gonna let you go back an’ get it, an’ stuff like that. An’, y’ know, they jist (pause) basically you live under Nazi rule.

Interviewer: Okay. Of course, you haven’t found that to be the case, have you?

Gunter: No.

Interviewer: So, your time at high school, would there be a couple of chapters in that?

Gunter: Probably yes, there would be because – um – a lot more’s happened I guess at high school than it has in primary school ‘cause you sorta move into where students are getting more mature an’ they sorta see things in – um – I can’t say sorta positive or negative light, but they sorta see things in different ways, like – um – for example, when you’re in primary school life an’ you jist used to say, “Oh, yeah, subjects – what the hell, we’ll jist do what the teacher says – um – where in high school you sort of – um – start seeing that if you don’t study y’ not gonna get anywhere. Um – an’ – um – I find like with studying stuff I sorta treat it as if – um – not as if it’s something like that I – how can I say it – um – like something that it – it’s extremely boring an’ I don’t wanna do, sorta thing, an’ that I should rebel against. I sort of try to see it as – um – I can sort of enjoy it an’ then – um – it’ll get me somewhere.
Interviewer: Okay. Good.

Gunter: An’ I sort of try to see it like in not such a harsh way an’ I find that helps because then if you’re sitting an’ y’ thinking “Oh yeah, I’m not studying hard enough – um – an’ I’m gonna fail” an’ so forth, an’ so forth, you sorta worry, an’ if you sorta take – become more relaxed and think – um – like about what y’ doing, you can take a lot more in an’ you’ll remember a lot more. That’s what I find.

Interviewer: Okay, so if you take the last chapter of your autobiography, what sort of title do you think you’d give it?

Gunter: Um – the last chapter as in being like wha – wha – what?

Interviewer: The last chapter after this point?

Gunter: After this point?

Interviewer: Yeah. We’ll talk about the future later on in the interview. So you have written your autobiography. It ends when you are in Year 12. So the last chapter, what sort of title do you think you would give it?

Gunter: (long pause) Don’t know.

Interviewer: Okay. What’s been the major characteristic of that last chapter? Is it the thing you’ve said about homework and realizing that study’s there for your own good? Or –

Gunter: Mmmm. Probably, most probably, yeah.

Interviewer: Well, we’ll leave that and move on. What about God and religion? Where do they fit into your story?

Gunter: Um – good question.

Interviewer: Is there a chapter where they seem to fit the most when you stop and think about it?

Gunter: Um – probably when I was in Year Seven when I did the – like the classes outside o’ school to get confirmed. That’s probably – um – where I spent most time – um – working with like – um – how can I say it? – God an’ religion or – yeah.

Interviewer: Was it intensive in that time, more so than at other times?

Gunter: Um – I didn’t find it intense actually. I found it quite fun. Like the stuff you do in those extra classes isn’t like the – like the lady we had teaching us wasn’t really boring. She sorta made things really interesting an’ brought out a fun side to doing a lot of the stuff. An’ then we came to Confirmation. I really enjoyed it. I was looking forward to getting confirmed.

Interviewer: Was it because of enjoyment that it was important to you or were there other reasons why at that particular time in your life God and religion were important?

Gunter: Mmmm. (long pause) I guess – um – the sorta enjoyment made it important. Um – but the whole fact that I guess ‘cause I’m
Catholic – um – and that I – like I don’t sorta see anything
against the Catholic Church that I – um – wanna be part of it.

Interviewer: And this was an important step in becoming part of things?

Gunter: Yeah. I guess I – um – come to think of it now 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.

Interviewer: Okay, do you want to leave that there for the moment and move
on? There’s no other reason why you think it would have been
an important time for you?

Gunter: Um – I dunno. I can sort of relate a bit to Year 12 as well with
that. Um - like, for example, this year, I’ve sort of noticed that
we do a lot more to do with the Masses an’ liturgies an’ stuff. Um
– particularly our Year 12 Mass which I think was quite well
done. Um – an’ the whole thing about where it – um – we had
the morning tea after it an’ that an’ it sort of kept that like – we
have a Mass together as a group then we’ll go and have
morning tea together as a group an’ we can sort of talk an’ have
a bit of a fun time – um – which sort of bought
– like made the
Mass special.

Interviewer: So, in what way was that like your Confirmation?

Gunter: Um – I guess like with the Confirmation you go an’ like have the
– um – Confirmation ceremony an’ – it’s ceremony? – yeah –
ceremony in the Church an’ – um – then you’ll go an’ have lunch
or something at a restaurant sorta thing. An’ it’s sort of similar in
a way ’caus you’re not getting confirmed or whatever, but you
have the Mass with your own Year group an’ no – nobody else
sorta thing. An’ then you’ll go an’ – um – morning tea together.

Interviewer: So, the conclusion you’d draw?

Gunter: I guess that springs me off to That is one of my beliefs God
intended people not to fight like he intended them to sort of work
together as a group. It goes the old saying: “Together we are
strong, divided we are weak.” Um – an’ like being the whole
community thing like sort of proves that – um – we live up to
what God expects us to live up to.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, let’s move on. In one of the chapters of your story,
you’ve written about an experience that confirmed for you that
God exists. So was there ever a time in your life when you were
convinced that God exists?

Gunter: Mmm. (pause) Not really any one particular time. I sort of always
– I’ve been of the belief that God exists.

Interviewer: So nothing’s ever happened for you that confirmed for you that
belief?

Gunter: Um – not really, no.
Interviewer: Okay.

Gunter: S’pose watching shows like documentaries like *Signs of God* an’ stuff makes you think twice. Um – I s’pose that may have been like a sort of point in thinking that – um – God’s more real – um – an’ he sort of can influence people more than some people think, like by seeing all the strange things that happen to – like pictures an’ stuff, the stigmata, an’ that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Okay. It’s obvious from the last interview and this one that films and documentaries are an important source of ideas for you about your religion. Would that be true?

Gunter: Quite true. Depending on what like what context the film is an’ isn’t an’ is in an’ stuff. Like – um – say it’s a comedy or something, an’ it includes people goin’ to Church an’ stuff –

Interviewer: *Bruce Almighty*, for instance.

Gunter: Yeah, *Bruce Almighty*, for instance. Like, I – I don’t normally take that sorta thing seriously, but if it’s something serious like – um – the documentary *Signs o’ God*, or the movie *Stigmata* – um – I don’t know whether you seen it or not –

Interviewer: No, I haven’t. That’s one you spoke about at length in the first interview.

Gunter: Mmm.

Interviewer: Obviously it had a huge impact on you.

Gunter: Yeah. Well, I – like some o’ the stuff shown in that film might – like I thought ’cause i – it didn’t sort of take a ridiculous angle sorta thing, it took a serious angle an’ it kept that like – it kept – um – the main views of the Catholic Church an’ stuff.

Interviewer: Okay. There are things there that I’d like to come back to and talk about in about twelve months time after you’ve left school and you’re at Uni. Imagine that you’re thumbing through your book and you stop at a page in which you describe something that happened in an RE class that you found challenging.

Gunter: Um – if you’d asked me this actually next week, it would be the test. Um – I guess each RE lesson has its own challenge in it – um – but I can’t really recall anything particularly challenging about one specific RE lesson.

Interviewer: So has there been anything at all that stays in your mind?

Gunter: Um – (*pause*) – Oh – I do think about the stuff we talk about in RE – um – but I – I dunno – it’s hard to sort of regurgitate something that – um –

Interviewer: That’s okay. The question is based on my personal experience.

Gunter: I guess the collages that we did in the beginning of the year were a bit of a challenge ’cause I didn’t know what to put on there. Y’ just like look through magazines an’ stuff an’ jus’ think, “Oh God, what do I put on here?”
Interviewer: Can you recall that experience from last year as well?
Gunter: Um – yeah, I can actually, uh, the beginning of last year, an’ we did that one, too.
Interviewer: Can you recall your collage from last year?
Interviewer: What can you remember about the houses?
Gunter: Mmm. (pause) A few o’ them were big, I think. An’ the bush.
Interviewer: Why?
Gunter: I dunno. I seem to like houses out in the bush.
Interviewer: Where do you live?
Gunter: Neerabup.
Interviewer: Out in the bush.
Gunter: In the bush, yeah.
Interviewer: How would you describe the house you live in?
Gunter: Pretty good.
Interviewer: What do you mean by that?
Gunter: Oh, it’s a fairly new house. We built it, an’ designed it ourselves. Um – an’ it’s – aw, it’s out in the bush. Um – an’ it’s quiet out there. Um – an’ the house is pretty comfortable to live in. Um – it’s fairly warm in winter, – um – cool in summer, provided people shut the doors an’ windows. If you leave them open then it becomes like an oven. Um – yeah.
Interviewer: What about your grandparents?
Gunter: Um – like – like what sorta house they live in?
Interviewer: Mmm.
Gunter: They live in – um – in the city. Um – but they’ve got a house they designed and built themselves as well. Um – they originally used to live on our farm in a really old house. Um – but the other house is – um – slightly smaller than ours except it’s a double storey – um – an’ they’ve got a garden out the back an’ they also have – um – own the house next door which is their old house – um – it has also got a garden out the back an’ a few chickens an’ stuff at that house, yeah.
Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move on. When you stop and think about things that have happened in RE, like doing Art and things like that, has it had any impact on your faith as far as you can see?
Gunter: (pause) Not really.
Interviewer: So what things do impact on your faith? On your faith in God?
Gunter: Mmmm. I guess things that I see – um – things that I might read about in the paper – um – yeah, probably basically just those.

Interviewer: So do they cause you to question? Or do they lead you to pray? What, what do they do, these things that you see?

Gunter: Probably question an’ maybe also strengthen.

Interviewer: Can you recall anything that you feel comfortable enough talking about that sort of links in to all of that?

Gunter: Not recently, no.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you think of any time when something did make an impact on you?

Gunter: Mmm, the twin towers.

Interviewer: Yeah, and so when you recall that, when that happened and how old you were and the sorts of things that went through your mind, ah, what is it that you remember first?

Gunter: Why did they do it?

Interviewer: And why would that question have an impact on your faith?

Gunter: Um – because – um – basically people shouldn’t go doing things like that, killing thousands of people for no reason.

Interviewer: And that’s what your faith tells you? (Gunter nods.) And do you think it’s always been like that for you to have that sort of faith?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. You’ve written the last chapter in your book and it’s about the future. Amazing biography because you can actually see into the future. So what title did you give that chapter?

Gunter: (pause) Mm, probably “Things to Come.”

Interviewer: What sort of things would you like to project into the future?

Gunter: (pause) Ah, finish high school. Um – (sighs) become a teacher. Um – I dunno, maybe later on get married. Ah – have – have a family, not excessively large, just – small, maybe one or two children. Um – an’ from there on, I don’t know.

Interviewer: Okay. Teaching what?

Gunter: Um – perhaps biological science, like biology, human biology – um – computing, maybe a bit of RE.

Interviewer: So that’s the future chapter. Does it have a title?

Gunter: Mm – didn’t I say “Things to Come”?

Interviewer: Okay. And what about God in this future? What part does God have?

Gunter: Um – (sighs) – That’s – I dunno. That’s the hardest bit.

Interviewer: Why would that be the hardest bit?
Gunter: Um – ’cause I sort of – I’ll take things maybe like sort of as they come rather than try to predict something that’s gonna happen that won’t or that doesn’t.

Interviewer: So even in terms of your relationship with God you don’t know what that will be in the future?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have any dream of what you’d like it to be?

Gunter: Not really.

Interviewer: And yet you have a dream about teaching biological sciences? So do you know why God wouldn’t have the same sort of place in your future as, say, biological sciences or computing?

Gunter: Well, oh I do intend to like continue being a Catholic an’ – um – go to Church an’ stuff. Um – like – like the way I see God now, I don’t know whether it’ll change or not in the future.

Interviewer: Okay. Could it change?

Gunter: Mmm. At the moment, I don’t think so, but I’ve changed my views on like many things – um – in the past an’ something might come along that’ll make me change my views.

Interviewer: Okay. I understand now.

Gunter: Mmm. That’s why I like sorta can’t predict anything for the future because I don’t know what’s gonna happen.

Interviewer: So, even in projecting like I’ll be a teacher, you don’t know whether that’ll actually happen either.

Gunter: No.

Interviewer: But you’ll hope for that?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you think of anything that could intervene and change things?

Gunter: Not, not really, at the moment.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gunter: Oh (*pause*) no (*pause*) Can’t think of anything at the moment, but things just pop up outa nowhere sometimes.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s certainly true. And they can change the direction of your life and you could end up doing something that you’d never even thought you’d be doing.

Gunter: Mmm. Like a particular doctor I know. He wanted to become an electrician, or electrical technician sorta thing and – he – um – was told there weren’t many jobs available in that area – um – an’ then he decided to become a doctor an’ he’s one of the best doctors I’ve known.
Interviewer: So, when you say “a Catholic in the future” would you like to project what that really means in terms of a relationship with God?

Gunter: Um – I guess I’ll remain a practicing Catholic – um – an’ perhaps if I ever get married get married in the Catholic faith – um –

Interviewer: What about your parents involvement in Church: is there anything there that you could see that maybe you might take on?

Gunter: Mmm. (pause)

Interviewer: What sort of involvement does your Mum have in Church?

Gunter: Um – she used to help out with the running of the – ah – like Catechist classes – I s’pose that’s what they call it – um – but she doesn’t do that anymore. She doesn’t have time, but – um – occasionally when we go to Mass – um – on special occasions, like Father’s Day or – um – Easter an’ Christmas, she’ll help out – um – setting stuff up, or with readings an’ I’ll sometimes help out with readings an’ setting stuff up.

Interviewer: So, can you see yourself doing those sorts of things?

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Or would you tend to be more like your Dad? Is your Dad more withdrawn from those sorts of things?

Gunter: Not really.

Interviewer: So your Dad sometimes gets involved in those sorts of things.

Gunter: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, in a sense, you’re not doing anything different from what you’ve been brought up to do. Your involvement in Church is to get in there and help?

Gunter: Mmm.

Interviewer: Can you relate that back to the early part of the interview when we were talking about Confirmation and the Year 12 Mass? Do you draw any parallels between all of this?

Gunter: Mmm, yeah.

Interviewer: What is it?

Gunter: Um – well, the Year 12 Mass sort of had everything from – um – like all of us – an’ so – so we all sort of put the Mass together an’ the Confirmation without the students to be confirmed wouldn’t have happened. A Mass without the people to celebrate the Mass wouldn’t happen.

Interviewer: Okay, well we’ve come to the end of the interview, but if I have left anything out, if there’s anything you’d like to say about this
amazing biography of yours that we haven’t touched on that you might like to add before we finish. Is there anything?

Gunter: Not really. I think you’ve covered everything.

Interviewer: Thank you for the interview.
Interviewer: Well, Kevin, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. I have five main questions to ask you. The first question I want to ask you is: What do you believe about God?

Kevin: Well, there's stuff that I believe about God is he's like the supreme being sort of. He's like the – like all-powerful, like the – like master sort of thing. So like I'm his servant and that how you go about pleasing him you commit – you keep his commandments, like in the Bible, so believe the stuff that's in the Bible, and sort of revolves around there.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you always thought about God in this way?

Kevin: Ah, yes because my Mum an' Dad have brought me up like that and I think it's very valid what they have to say, so yeah, I've made that decision myself.

Interviewer: Good. What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Kevin: Oh, the words – amazing, powerful, um – affectionate, ah – yeah.

Interviewer: In what ways is your faith in God today different from what it was some years ago?

Kevin: Well, it's different today is because a few years back when I was like in Year 8, I – um – as soon as I got into Year 8, I was prep- – sort of taught 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, so they said – they – um – so that meant then that I found that it was totally different to what they – to what I originally thought. And – um – and so I started to explore deeper into that and until – and recently – um – um – I was in- – involved in – um – some – ah – meetings an’ I got asked if – because this youth group’s part of my c- – community called the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community and because I turn – was turning eighteen then, they asked if I wanted to go on a seminar sort of thing – um – to sort of discern or decide or make a decision if I wanted to join this community. And so I look – really looked into that and – an’ that was like the turning point literally in my life because – because like I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, my be- – closest friend came to me said he had a strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right thing And so, yeah, I took the
process in joining this community. And so I joined and from there I
started getting like been exposed to great things to do that.

**Interviewer:** Good. You’ve explained that well. Is Jesus different from God?

**Kevin:** Ah, yeah. Well, not really because what I believe in is that Jesus an’
God are the same, but sep- – but – um – they’ve just separated into –
God’s just put himself into human form so, yeah, they’re really the
same person in like same, like one being in two persons, or in two
people.

**Interviewer:** Do you think there was a time when you didn’t see any difference
between God and Jesus?

**Kevin:** Ah, not really. It was – when I was born like I been – Mum an’ Dad – ah
– really taught me about the – about my faith and so I got to know that
– yeah – really early in my childhood that they are not the same
person.

**Interviewer:** And that has stayed with you all this time?

**Kevin:** Yeah, because they re-introduce the subject each time.

**Interviewer:** What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a
friend who does not believe in God?

**Kevin:** I would explain the Holy Spirit as like the – as grace, sort of. Grace
meaning power. It will give you like a sort of buzz sort of – like sort of
excitement in and – in what you do – are you doing, so let’s just say
that you’re giving a talk in front of some students, you pray about the
Holy Spirit to give you like a sort of – ah – buzz so – sss – buzz to help
you to not feel stressed so you will be able to give a good talk. So it’s
just like a hel- – a divine helper.

**Interviewer:** Okay. I have four questions for you. Do you pray? To whom do you
pray? How often do you pray? and How do you pray?

**Kevin:** Ah, yeah, but for the first question, ah, I do pray. Mum an’ Dad taught
me at a young age to pray and as part of the community we devote
ourselves to praying at least. And I pray – the amount of time I pray is
like an hour, for only an hour a day an’ so that probly be in the morning,
so – um – in the mornings, so I’m prepared – I can take school on s-
sort of get the Holy Spirit to clear my head a bit so I can have more
self-control.

**Interviewer:** To whom do you pray?

**Kevin:** Sort of to God an’ to Jesus an’ to Mary to ask me to get through the
day.

**Interviewer:** And how do you pray? What’s your prayer like?

**Kevin:** I pray – well, first of all I go into a sort of – I t- – I do the Sign of the
Cross an’ then I would call on God to – an’ ask him what he would want
me to do for the day. An’ then I would – then I’d probly get into some
Bible – reading the Bible and then I'd say a decade of the Rosary an’
then to conclude. An’ as well as writing in my prayer journal all the stuff
I’ve been reading in the Bible that really speaks to me.

Interviewer: When you write in your journal, is that like notes to yourself? Or is it like
a prayer?

Kevin: Ah, it’s really like when I’m praying I get sort of like a word, some like
words that just come out, an’ I believe that's God telling me stuff that’s
called “prophetic word”, what I call the prophetic word an’ so – and so
I’m open to that. Sometimes I don’t write anything because I haven’t –
he doesn’t do it all the time but just I write – sometimes I just get this
feeling that I have to write this word. One – for example, one time I was
praying an’ I felt compelled to write my testimony, that’s my life story,
an so I started writing an’ by the end I finished and, yeah, it was just
great when I had written – yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember how much you wrote?

Kevin: Oh, about four pages. It’s the longest I’ve ever written.

Interviewer: That’s good. Okay, to whom do you pray most often? God? Jesus? or
the Holy Spirit?

Kevin: Well, I pray to all – all of them about the same, but really because I put
it into one prayer, sort of – yeah it’s part of beliefs that they’re all the
same person though three different aspects.

Interviewer: Okay. We’ll move on to the next major question. How does your faith in
God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Kevin: Um – my belief in God like really influences my life because like I’ll do
things different to other people, say people – some people believe – ah
– it’s okay to have sex before marriage, whereas my beliefs, I believe
to stay sexually pure before you’ll – be - like – before you’re married,
to you marriage day. So, yeah, it’s really different in that and – I – I
might come across as-s-s-s a different person pe- – person to other
people because of that. What I believe in and – yeah, it’s really
different an’ I will – I would structure my life around my beliefs and so,
yeah, I live very different – prob’ly live very different life to what other
people would.

Interviewer: What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Kevin: Um – my faith impacted on this because if suffering – I would just take
it, sort of take – take it instead of just not breaking down. I’d like believe
that God had a plan an’ that this was part of the plan. So, yeah, I would
pray more that the – like in the process to give me strength to get past
that pain.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever experienced suffering?

Kevin: Yes. Actually I have. More than one occasion where I’ve been really
down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally and s-so I – I – I was just – I
call on the Lord to really – ah – get me through the rough times an’ – yeah – so.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned a while ago that when you started in Year 8 people picked on you. Was there suffering there?

**Kevin:** Yes, um – Yeah, I’ve been – It took me a long while to get to understand that bit, but I feel that God has used that suffering to make me stronger in my faith, so I am stronger – a stronger person in that he has a big – a much bigger plan for me for that where I can use that strength to overcome some of the stuff that he has planned.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And what about your attitude towards death? How has your faith impacted on that?

**Kevin:** Well, my faith impacted a lot on that matter. I’m not afraid to die, s- – if God has – wants me to die I’ll take it graciously. I would even give my life for him because – yeah – it’s just – be a great thing because dying for someone you believe in it’s just the best. It’s better than dying without someone.

**Interviewer:** Okay. In what ways do you think your faith helps to give your life a sense of purpose and meaning?

**Kevin:** Well, it does fill me with like a sense of meaning because I have someone to believe in becau- – yeah, ‘cause – I – if I ha- didn’t have that sense of purpose I probably wouldn’t have been here today ‘cause I would’ve cracked under the pressure, probly done something really bad.

**Interviewer:** So you’ve managed to get through?

**Kevin:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Alright the next major question is this one: What events in your life has led to changes in your relationship with God?

**(pause)** Um – the events would probably have been my – before in primary school I was sorta the outcast sort of thing. Then when I got to high school I was ss-s-so emotionally broken down that (pause) I didn’t really care about myself personally an’ then to upper school I started to realize that someone did care for me an’ that they could straighten out my life. And so I took steps in doing that.

**Interviewer:** So are there things that people have said or done that have contributed to your relationship with God?

**Kevin:** Um – yes. S- – um – my youth leader, ah, the leader that’s there, he – um – actually approached me an’ said – because he knew I had – because he’s been praying before, an’ then said, “You were down you s-“ – an’ that “you should really like take courage” an’ he’s literally taught me what some of the basic s- – ah – like, yeah, he made me realize that I – I’d been wrong, made me admit to my – my – admit my pain and suffering an’ t- – to let it all go so I can deal with it.
Interviewer: Okay, so that was an event, wasn’t it?

Kevin: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anything that people have said that hasn’t contributed to your relationship with God?

Kevin: No, well – not really.

Interviewer: What about when you were much younger and people made fun of you and picked on you?

Kevin: Oh, yeah. Ah, yeah, some of the stuff, like some of the teachers they’d say – say some stuff that were really bad because they’d – they’d literally – um – like some kid’d start teasing me an then I – or – and then I’d be – like walk out and I’d come in and someone else would do something bad to the tea – behind the teacher’s back and I’d get blamed for it because I’d get into fights a lot an’ so they’d got – so I’ll get blamed for nothing an’ so really didn’t help me a lot when that was happening.

Interviewer: Okay. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Kevin: Well, I’d have to say it’s got a lot stronger.

Interviewer: Why?

Kevin: Well, because I’ve been going to these groups call – called sharing groups an’ they – are designed to get – get you in a group of like where you have single sex, so that’s males that – so we talk about our problems an’ stuff, so – and they really hold you accountable for your faith. And so you’d get stronger ‘cause of that.

Interviewer: Okay. What has been the impact of the school on your faith?

Kevin: Oh, it’s actually been a lot ‘cause it’s actually challenged me ‘cause there are a lot of people – kids that don’t believe in Christ an’ so I feel compelled to like take a h-l- – like leadership role, so I’ll – ah - be a role model sort of thing for them. So that’s definitely strengthened my faith.

Interviewer: Can you think of any occasion where that might have happened?

Kevin: Yeah, when I – well ‘cause I’m at Mass – go to – at the liturgy choir. Some people would like sit and then I’d encourage them to kneel and if they don’t – don’t like if they need some explaining about the Mass, I’d gladly do that.

Interviewer: Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to the way you think about God, or have changed the way you think about God?

Kevin: Yeah. Um – I had a friend whose – where – aw, he left in Year 11, the start of Year 11. Shannon. And he had a very different view th- – um what it – religion was. An’ so, it was really – I really took that on board
and – yeah, it’s really – it’s Kevin like sort of. It made me understand that it’s not just that, that there’re other equations to think of as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you explain that a bit more for me?

Kevin: Um – so ‘cause he came from a – he came from a very – ah – like non-Catholic view of things, like his per- – like struggle. Well, I took that on board and, ah, I really wanted to understand him, so we came good friends because – and some – got to know him a lot more an’ he had like – he had like a much different faith like he saw things differently. Saw – like he had to please people just like to please people an’ that he saw God like he experienced God through others as – and I really didn’t know much about that at that time and, yeah, he really made the light shine – an’ that.

Interviewer: Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?

Kevin: Um – yeah, not really. Most of the stuff, I’d been taught. It just like reminded. It reminds me of that, so – yeah.

Interviewer: What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?

Kevin: Well, impact on – yeah, their impact is quite significant because I see the – how religion has affected my RE teachers’ life an’ stuff an’ so I take that into account. And it really inspires me to like be more like Chri- – yeah, like Christ.

Interviewer: What about the place of prayer and liturgy at school on the development of your relationship with God?

Kevin: That’s helped significantly because I’ve been actually able to do what I would do out of school an’ so I would – it gives me real courage an’ s- – I would – gives me since I don’t have to be different so I’d be – be normal, so I can practise what I preach.

Interviewer: Good. Now the last major question’s about people who played a significant part in your faith development and developing your relationship with God. And so let’s take a look at your Mum and Dad and what they’ve said or done that has prompted you to grow closer to God.

Kevin: Well, my Mum an’ Dad have been very – they’ve played the most important role because they have – they are Mum an’ Dad. They brought me up an’ they – they askin’ me to do these things like praying an’ that stuff while like most of the time I was doubting an’ I really didn’t like take that on to more, so I really didn’t – um – like use them very much.

Interviewer: What changed all that?
Kevin: Well, when I – ah – finally realized that – that no one was out to get me – an’ so I started listening an’ then really took what they had said on board as well as other people. That really brought a real big change.

Interviewer: How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?

Kevin: Well, my Mum – ah – is very different because she is more into quiet prayer where my Dad is more – um – more open like he’d sing, use his talents to pray, like he’d chant an’ be more like loud sort of. Some people would say it’s extreme though.

Interviewer: What do you think?

Kevin: I reckon it’s great.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would want to add about that, the difference between them?

Kevin: Um – well, Mum has a very emotional side, while Dad’s not very. He sort of tell you to do it an’ tell you to see it this way an’ that. In a way, very stern an’ won’t like take insults lightly, where my Mum would just take it an’ emotionally deal with it – yeah, deal with things.

Interviewer: And what stories from you life describe how each of your parents has influenced your relationship with God?

Kevin: Um – stories – be the time when – ah – I was really down, like I’d come home an’ I burst into tears and my Mum was there. She give me a hug and when my Dad came home, Dad says, “What’s the matter?” Like, really stern. “What’s the matter?” An’ I – ah – when I told him, he – he was – ah – “Oh, I’ll sort it out.” He was really action man sort of. He’d take action. He was just about to go over to teachers. Oh – yeah – an’ it really encouraged me a lot.

Interviewer: Okay. Now to finish, was there anything you wanted me to ask, that I didn’t ask, that you’d like to talk about?

Kevin: Not really.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, thanks very much, Kevin, that was a great interview.
Interviewer: What do you believe about God?

Luke: Um – I believe he’s there and that he’s an important part of everyone’s life. He – even if you don’t believe in him, I believe he still has an effect on your life. He still controls that. Um – just many people don’t know it.

Interviewer: Have you always thought about God like that?

Luke: Um – not as much as I do now. I knew he was – I’ve always known he’s been there and there to help us, but I’d only really thought about it in the past couple of years.

Interviewer: So prior to that, what would you have thought about God?

Luke: That – um – he was – I didn’t – I was – didn’t really know much. Like we got taught RE but it wasn’t the sort of – it was just he was there and we got told the stories about him. We didn’t get taught how he affects – how he is with us and – I don’t know how to explain it.

Interviewer: That’s okay. That’s actually very good. So if you think about your relationship with God now, what sort of words would you want to use to describe that relationship?


Interviewer: Could you explain what you mean by “free”?

Luke: Um – I feel like he’s always there with me and I can just – I’m free to tell him anything, ask him anything, ask him for help anytime just – just – just – I don’t know – free. Just – there.

Interviewer: St Augustine said, “Love God and do what you will.” Does that make any sense to you given what you believe your relationship with God is?

Luke: Um – I’d say, “Love him and do accordingly, like what you believe you should do because of that love.”

Interviewer: What is what St Augustine meant by it. So how is your faith today different from what it was some few years ago.

Luke: Um – I think about it more now. Um – I didn’t used to pray as much when I was younger. And that’s really only changed because of youth groups. I’ve been to youth groups and camps that have taught us how to pray and how to actually feel it. Um – yeah, and so I find I pray a lot more. I ask God for a lot more, but I also thank him more. That’s – yeah.

Interviewer: So youth groups have taught you a lot about that?


Interviewer: Okay. What about Jesus? Is Jesus different from God?
Luke: Um – I’m not sure. I think it’s easier to relate to Jesus because people have seen him and he was an actual person whereas God’s just some person that we’re told about but we don’t know anything about him. Well, we sort a do, but Jesus where we know what he looks like everything about him so that we can actually sort of feel that we know him more than God. So there’s that sort a thing. Um – but, yeah.

Interviewer: What image do you have of Jesus?

Luke: Um – probably the most common one of him just with the beard, always smiling, his long hair – ah – white robe, all that.

Interviewer: So have you always had that image of Jesus?

Luke: Yeah, pretty much ’cos we’ve got a lot of pictures around the house of him.

Interviewer: Okay. What about images of God?

Luke: Mainly – When I think of God I think of light coming through the cloud. That image that most people will link it with, that’s what I think of God.

Interviewer: And so you associate words like strength, openness, freedom with that sort of image?

Luke: Yeah. And also you see other images of hands coming from the cloud and stuff just showing his power.

Interviewer: You associate the hand with power?


Interviewer: Could you talk more about that power?

Luke: Um – he has the power to do anything and I believe that he will use that power to help us. Yeah. We have a part of that power – is in us to do things as – to others. It’s just not as strong and he will – um - I’ll have a think about that one.

Interviewer: Okay. You’re doing very well. Was there ever a time in your life when the difference between Jesus and God wasn’t there?

Luke: Yeah. When I was younger I just thought they were the same person, really.

Interviewer: Is there anything that’s happened in your life that led you to see that the two were different?

Luke: Um – just reading the Bible really when he said sayings like “You are my Son” and then you hear the saying that God’s up there and Jesus is at the right hand side. That and just when you see Jesus praying to God, then you sort of think “Well, they can’t be the same person.” So – yeah.

Interviewer: So, these are conclusions you have reached yourself?

Interviewer: What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend of yours who doesn’t believe in God?

Luke: I would say – um – it’s like the wind, you feel it, you can see it in other places but you can’t actually see it, an’ – ah – yeah. I’d say generally comes after Confirmation. You can see it clearer and you can feel it more after that. But – yeah.

Interviewer: If you had to categorise people, how would you do that?

Luke: People, like – what do you mean

Interviewer: The whole mass of people

Luke: Well, I’d say there’s people who just don’t believe in anything an’ they’ll just go about life and just do stuff. And you have people who do believe and pray to God and say that there’s things that they’ve done because of God and I’d say there’s people who believe in something but don’t know what it is and those are the people who try to find this what it is and try to find themselves.

Interviewer: Where do you put yourself?


Interviewer: If I gave you two categories, thinkers and doers, which category would you put yourself in?


Interviewer: In this activity you can’t.


Interviewer: To whom do you pray?


Interviewer: What about Jesus. It’s easier to image Jesus and yet you pray more to God.

Luke: Yeah. I feel that God’s the higher power and I just – I’m not sure. My prayer is to – I just find it easier to pray him and – it’s really weird now that you say that. I’ve never really thought of it.

Interviewer: What about at Mass?


Interviewer: This belief you have in God, how does it shape or influence your life?

Luke: Um – it’s – it would – um – I will try to – subconsciously, the way I’ve been brought up I will try and be like – um – Jesus tells us to. Like I’ll always try and be nice to people, help out where I
Interviewer: Could you comment on the way you've been brought up?

Luke: The way – Well, ever since – I was baptised really early, couple a weeks, I think. Um – ever since then I've been too Church, um – we've always said grace before meals, um – we've always – both my parents were in youth groups when they were young and both went to Church an' stuff, so they've continued to go to Church with us kids as well. We've been taught the way – being at a Catholic school all my life has taught me a lot. Um – I did altar serving which also I think brought me closer. And then just yeah as growing older going through all the sacraments and then getting to these youth groups. My parents have had a lot of influence.

Interviewer: You said “subconsciously”. Could you comment on that word?

Luke: Um – well, some of the times you don’t have to think, “Should I be doing or not doing this?” “No, you don’t do this.” “You should do this.”

Interviewer: What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?


Interviewer: You paused and you changed your words and said “No one really deserves it.” Meaning?

Luke: I was thinking, well, some people do bad things and they get it that – they don’t really deserve suffering.

Interviewer: Okay. What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?

Luke: Um – I'm not really afraid of it. People are scared when they die – um – but – um – I'm not really worried by it ’cause I know what’s going to happen afterwards, hopefully.

Interviewer: What will happen after death?

Luke: Um – hopefully, I should go through Purgatory – hopefully, it won’t be too hard – and then through to heaven.

Interviewer: Hopefully?

Interviewer: What does that word mean for you?

Luke: It’s hard to – for us to say if we’ve done enough good deeds to outweigh the bad deeds and – even though we try to do the good things we’ll always have the bad things. Y’re just hopeful that he’ll have – that God will have mercy on us.

Interviewer: That’s what you’ve been taught, that’s what you believe. Have you always believed that?

Luke: Believe that we go to heaven?

Interviewer: Yeah.


Interviewer: What about your faith giving you a sense of purpose or sense of fulfilment in your life?

Luke: Um – yeah. I’ve always – 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.

Interviewer: So God couldn’t be accused of making your life boring?


Interviewer: What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Luke: Um – definitely camps, whether it be a retreat, like last year’s retreat, or camps, with groups, just being with other people in the same sort of circumstances.

Interviewer: What about people? Are there people who have said things to you, or contributed in some way to changes in your relationship with God?

Luke: Um – probably priests have done a lot, especially Fr Paul. He taught me how to pray properly and generally being with other people who are not afraid to pray helps you to show how you – yeah, I don’t know how to explain that.

Interviewer: Anyone else who’s had an influence? What about Mum and Dad?

Luke: Oh, big influence, yeah. They – um – haven’t really been there on the prayer side, like, but they’d be there in support.
gave me all the opportunities to grow and it would – yeah, I don’t know….

**Interviewer:** Do you have any images that you associate with your Mum and your faith?

**Luke:** Probably our first Church that we went to. It’s – um – Year 4 when we left. We left at the end of Year 3, so I would have been about nine or ten and I spent every weekend there. I just remember it was always a family thing going to Church. Everyone would always go. And just, yeah, when I think about that, that’s what comes there.

**Interviewer:** So you associate your Mum, your faith and that Church?

**Luke:** Mm.

**Interviewer:** What about your Dad?

**Luke:** Probably the same. Um – yeah. Dad not as much though. He didn’t really give me as much in the faith side of things, but – yeah….

**Interviewer:** Could you explain that a bit more, what you mean by that?

**Luke:** Um – He would be there to support me an’ everything, but he didn’t – um – that’s really all. He didn’t show me things, he didn’t teach me things. Um – other than when I asked. If I asked him something he’d help me, but he didn’t initiate it. He didn’t do that.

**Interviewer:** So your Mum is the initiator?

**Luke:** Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that’s the role of the mother?

**Luke:** Um – think when you’re a child you’re closer to y’ Mum so in a way, yeah. It would – It’s hard to say. I don’t every Mum should have to do it, but I think they end up doing it.

**Interviewer:** What about school?

**Luke:** School’s had a big influence on me. Um – being with – um – a class of people, you get to hear everyone’s views and you can either reinforce yours or it can sorta make you think about it and delve deeper into it. Then you start looking for answers. Which is sometimes good – sometimes you think, “Why am I doing this?” But, but, yeah, school’s been a good influence.

**Interviewer:** So, here’s Luke at St Luke’s and doing RE: so when you’re talking about school having a good influence, where does RE fit into that good influence?

**Luke:** Um – mm - not sure about RE.

**Interviewer:** What’s one thing in RE that springs to mind that someone’s said to you?

Interviewer: There’s no image that comes to mind straightaway?

Luke: When you say RE in school?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Luke: There’s too many to say.

Interviewer: Would you say those “too many” are positive or negative?

Luke: They’d all be positive. You always come out of an RE lesson knowing something else, feeling that way, which is good. Yeah. Probably it helps with the Bible study because you get the – you get the hidden messages within the Bible. Other stuff that you wouldn’t pick up if you were just reading it.

Interviewer: So does that happen in RE or what you are getting through youth group?

Luke: Um – it started here in RE in the younger years, Year 8. Year 8, you mainly get to know yourself and your relationships with other people. When you get Year 9, you go a bit deeper into that knowing yourself. By Year 12, you just – it’s just you and God, the relationship there, try and strengthen that which I agree with because you need to know yourself before you can start relationships.

Interviewer: What impact has your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?

Luke: Um – I find that their views become my views. Things they say you’ll remember and you’ll – just one day you’ll be thinking about that in the context and you’ll think back and say, “I remember someone said that.” And you’ll think about it. “Mm, that makes sense now.” It might not make sense at the time of the RE lesson but later on you’ll think back and “Yeah, I realise that now.”

Interviewer: Anything in the last twelve months that became a focal point for you?

Luke: Um – not that I can think of right now.

Interviewer: Why do you think your faith’s grown stronger in the last couple of years?

Luke: Um – I think because I’ve allowed it for one. A lot of people they’ll think – they don’t know what’s happened so they’ll just shut it all out and they just don’t allow it to grow. But I’ve tried to allow it to grow, tried to get closer by talking.

Interviewer: Why?

Luke: Because I feel that we need something, we need some – something to fall back on. There’s not much in this life that will
stay the same and constant whereas you’ll always know that
God’s gonna be there, and we can always fall back on him.

Interviewer: You view God as a constant?

Luke’s second interview

Interviewer: Through the first interview and your journal, you reflected on how your faith has changed as you have been growing up. Is there anything further you would like to add to what you have stated in the past about the changes you have experienced?

Luke: No I can’t think about anything really.

Interviewer: If you think about the role of Jesus in your life, is there anything you’d like to add about that?

Luke: Um, no, not really. ... Just that I could add – you see – you see it in things that you don’t think it could be. You can see – sometimes you think – if you look too hard you won’t find it. You just gotta let it happen. Um, that’s confusing. I’m not sure.

Interviewer: Do you want to work on that a bit more?

Luke: Um – no, ’cause I think I wrote about it better in my journal.

Interviewer: Alright. What about images of God? Let’s come back to that for a moment. Is there anything about how your image of God has changed over the years?

Luke: Um – it used to be just a hand really – ’cause you see in TV an’ stuff – you see the hand coming out of the clouds and the act of God as the hand. But now it’s turned into a figure, a whole figure. I can’t see detail ’cause I don’t know. That’d just be making it up. But I see a figure on the clouds, yeah, as God.

Interviewer: Okay, would you like to comment more about clouds?

Luke: Well – um – I believe that he’s up there because he’s always looking on us, looking over us to me. Um – and – yeah, that’s the only reason he’s up there on the clouds.

Interviewer: What about your image of Jesus?

Luke: Um – always the face that we see in pictures, on cards, always that with the hair down, the curly hair, just always that smile. He’s just inviting you – an’ stuff like that.

Interviewer: Are there any words in the songs that you sing that you relate to Jesus?


Interviewer: Where do the songs you sing fit into your faith?

Luke: Oh, they – it’s a way of expressing myself towards him, like towards Jesus and God. It’s saying all the things – it’s confirming all my beliefs and saying them in a way I can relate to. I find that more powerful to me than some prayers.
Interviewer: Okay. What about the Holy Spirit? Is there anything you would like to add to what you have said or written about before?

Luke: Um – I don’t see it as a figure. I see it as the tongue, the flames. I think it’s like people have said, it’s like the wind and I believe that I can see it literally – you can see it acting on things an’ you can feel it. Sometimes it’s strong, sometimes it’s weak.

Interviewer: In your journal and even in your interview you made statements about meaning, finding meaning in your life and that your faith helps you to find meaning in life. Is there anything further you would like to add?

Luke: Not really, no. I think sometimes it’s hard because you don’t – you can’t find that meaning.

Interviewer: What do you do when it’s hard?

Luke: Ask for guidance and, hopefully, it’ll happen. I mean you can’t really tell when it’s happening. You just believe that guidance is occurring, he’s helping you. Sometimes you can feel it, but other times you just think and hope he’s guiding you.

Interviewer: And in the end?

Luke: In the end – um – yeah, you probably look back and think, “Yeah, you got me through that. I got through it alright.”

Interviewer: Is there anything further you might like to say about the people in your life, like your parents, your sister.

Luke: Um – my parents have been a great help to me, to my faith. They’ve got – they’ve brought me to where it is.

Interviewer: Okay. Anything further you want to add about your involvement in youth groups?

Luke: Just that they help so much and hopefully –

Interviewer: Could you explain what you mean by “help so much”?

Luke: Well, just – you don’t have much motivation when you’re at home just to pray. But if you were out with a group and everyone’s doing it and you just like – yeah, it’s time to do this now. And you can get so much guidance and good advice from them and just to be with people who feel the same way that you do helps you just so much to understand new things, like you have problems understanding, some doubts maybe, and just to talk them through with people, you just feel that so much better, like you fill in gaps.

Interviewer: Good. Is there anything else that you would like to add about prayer and your relationship with God?

Luke: Um – sometimes it’s a bit hard. I feel, like I said before, you don’t have much motivation to do it. Before bed, you’ll feel really tired. You might have had a hard day. You think, “Aw, can I be
bothered or not?” In the end, you do, but you might not say it as
meaningfully as you would usually. Yeah. Yeah. What was the
question again? Sorry.

Interviewer: That’s okay. When you’re tired and you can’t be bothered, what
sort of prayer do you pray?

Luke: I’ll generally start with a thanks for all the good things. Ask him
for forgiveness. Then go on with things that I will need help with:
my family –

Interviewer: So, it’s spontaneous?


Interviewer: Not set prayers?

Luke: Set order, but different sayings sort of thing and then I finish with
other prayers.

Interviewer: Good. Thankyou. Is there anything else that occurs to you
about your experience of school, of RE classes, of teachers, of
your peers that you would like to add; about how these have
helped or hindered your relationship with God?

Luke: Well, the stuff that we’re doing at the moment with other
religions has just reinforced it so much like researching other
religions and finding out they have the same sort of ideals and
beliefs as us. You think, “Well, there must be something there if
so many people can believe it.” So many different religions,
even though they’re all – I think they’re all derived from one main
religion. I don’t know which one was the first one.

Interviewer: Okay. What about teachers?

Luke: Um – they definitely help understand the concepts. They can
explain things in a good way that priests can’t. They’re – priests
I find are very formal in their talking and they often talk about the
old ways and put it in the old context, the Bible and stuff. But
the RE teachers can put it in modern day terms for us and that’s
a lot easier.

Interviewer: Good. What about your peers?

Luke: Um – in what context?

Interviewer: Like in terms of either helping or hindering your relationship with
God?

Luke: Um – my friends are very accepting of it, so that they – yeah,
they don’t do either really. They just are accepting of it. I’ve got
some friends that are in the groups with me and they’re really
good. I always go to them. But my other friends just neither
help it nor hinder it. They’re just accepting.

Interviewer: Good. Now is there anything you would like to add to what
you’ve said or written that we haven’t covered?

Luke’s journal

Week One

If I wrote the story of my life now it would be called The Steady Rollercoaster. The reason I would name it this is because not everything we do in life we are going to know about. It could be an up or down but you know that it is always steady because God is there with you. Just as you have ups and downs in life you will also have ups and downs with God. God is like our seatbelt on a rollercoaster. He will keep us safe during the ups and downs.

I think that my story would have about 5 or 6 chapters. They would be:

1. When I’m born until around 2 years old
2. from 2 till 5 years old
3. from 5 till 10 years old
4. from 10 till 13 years old
5. from 13 till present.

I couldn’t think of names for the chapters but I will still tell you of their significance. The first chapter would just be telling the reader really of how my life was set up and how I was brought up for the first two years of my life. It would also talk about the start of my religious life: my Baptism.

The next chapter will show my thoughts about different things and just wonder about different things.

Chapter 3 is the start of my schooling. It will show how people taught us at school and also the way we were taught religion. It will also show how I formed my friendships and relationships.

Chapter 4 brings up the sports. It will tell of all the sports that I started to play. It will also tell of the next steps that I took in my religion: my First Reconciliation and First Communion. It would also tell the story of beginning my musical career.

Chapter 5 would be the longest chapter in the book. It was when everything started making sense. Things like youth groups, more music and more sport would be included, as well as some of my greatest achievements. during the last few years I would tell of how it was the closest I have ever been to God.

Chapter 5 would be the chapter which had the most to do with God. I think that religion played a big part in the way I acted and that helped me through those years because often people find them the hardest. I believe that God gave me my talents to use so I started playing music at Masses and that, I believe, has brought me closer to God because I have met new people because of it and also been able to get together with others and share ideas and other things about God.
Week Two

A moment in my life would have to be at a youth camp we had. There were about 150 kids all in this room from ages 12-18 and we were listening to a talk that a guy was giving and he had been in a crash (car). His story just hit me and made me think. From the things he was telling us that were happening, they couldn’t have happened without God.

There are so many other moments, but there is one person who convinced me that God exists. I met up with this person through the band that I play in at Church and him and his wife are just awesome. They are like perfect people and will do anything to help you. This person is always happy and just has the perfect attitude to life. He has the ability to talk to people and make them feel really good about themselves and is just always so genuine. I just love being with him and his wife. They are just beautiful people.

My thinking about God changed because of these two things because they showed me what is possible.
Week Three

I can’t think of an actual lesson but I think that they all did their little part.
We would talk about certain topics and they would reinforce what I thought
already, or they would make me stop and think about it. However, they did
help me when it came to other religions. We learnt a lot about other
religions and it shows you how much they all have in common which helps
my belief that there is a god. I remember learning about four different
religions and all of them believed in certain things which were all common
to us as Catholics.

There must be something big to make us all believe in the same thing.
How could all of these people on different sides of the earth, speaking
different languages, believe in the same thing as me. There’s only one
thing: God. Once this connection was made my faith was just
strengthened because it was easier to believe and suddenly it all made
sense.

This changed my attitude towards God and religion because I was now
sure of it. I could do things now, not just because I had to or to please my
parents, but to please God because I was sure that he was there. Even
though I had believed in him all my life, it just helped to know.

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.
I think the next chapter of my book would be *The Real World*. It would be all about how I continued my life spiritually and physically. It would show what I did and how they both interacted with each other. How my spiritual actions affected my physical and vice versa. This would probably be the most interesting because all the people I had known and had been there teaching me would be gone. I would be on my own finding things out for myself.

I would hope that my relationship with God would only get stronger in the future. I know that there will be points in life when I question it and wonder why but I would hope it would be strong. There are so many influences in my life at the moment but most of them are good which to me is a good sign. I have many religious influences as well that I will keep no matter where or what I do. This is what is encouraging: to be around so many people that are just like me. I will try to be around people like this so that I can feel good and it reminds me of what is important in life. When I am with them I don’t think about other things in life. I just think about them and how good it is being with them.

Involvement also helps me to keep my faith with God. While I’m involved at churches, I will go, but that isn’t the only reason I would go. It does, however, help me to go if I ever lose that faith and through that I would hopefully regain that faith.
Concluding Remarks

Influences are one of the biggest parts of your life. People can influence you in both good and bad ways but we need to focus on the good. I have been lucky and had mostly good. They have allowed me to be the person that I am and hopefully I can pass these influences on to others in order to help them see what I see.
Mikaela’s first interview

Interviewer: What do you believe about God?
Mikaela: God’s the creator of the universe. He gave his only son to us. He’s basically the top guy. . . he’s the top guy.
Interviewer: Mmm . . . So there’s no one above God?
Mikaela: No one above him.
Interviewer: Okay. Have you always thought about God in this way?
Mikaela: No. When I was tiny as anything . . . When you’re little you can think “Oh, God, ah, that’s like the only person you learn about before Jesus” and then like when you’re little, you jus’ think “Yes, he created the earth, he made me.” And when you get older you tend to think a little bit more deeper about God “What has he given me? What am I gonna give him?”
Interviewer: Okay, so it’s like a relationship?
Mikaela: Yeah, like a relationship.
Interviewer: So, when you were younger did you think of God in terms of relationship?
Mikaela: Mm, I thought of God more like a parent.
Interviewer: Okay.
Mikaela: Like if I didn’t do something right he’d punish me for it.
Interviewer: Okay, so today do you see God that way? Like in this stage in your life, is God still someone who punishes you when you do something wrong?
Mikaela: No, because he’s a very – when you’re very little, y’think “Yeah, I’ve done something wrong. He’s never gonna forgive me for this.” But I know that if I ask for forgiveness then he’ll probably – he’ll give it to me if I am truly repentful for what I’ve done.
Interviewer: And is there a word you could use to describe your relationship with God?
Mikaela: Yeah. Ah, complex.
Interviewer: Complex?
Mikaela: Complex.
Interviewer: Good. Did you think of that word now? Or is that a word that has been sitting there with you?
Mikaela: Um – yeah, it’s been sitting there with me for ages. It was “complicated,” now it’s “complex”. Two different – “complicated” means, um, yeah, I didn’t get along with him very well. “Complex” means it’s very deep and they –
Interviewer: Okay.
Mikaela: So it’s hard to explain.

Interviewer: Yes. Okay. And do you know when you started to change from thinking about it being complicated to being complex?

Mikaela: In the last … 4 or 5 months.

Interviewer: Has that got anything to do with your decision to prepare to become a Catholic?

Mikaela: Um, most of it, but not all of it.

Interviewer: So, are there any other ways in which your faith has changed from when you were little to – to now?

Mikaela: Um, when I was little I was forced to go to Church. Now I go to Church on my own accord. And I’m – out of my family – out of me and my sister and my Dad and my Mum, me and my sister are the only two who actually do go to Church – and we’ve actually got really good friends who take us to our churches. Me and my sister go to different Church – I go to Catholic; she goes to born-again, Lutheran-based religion Church. And that – we’ve just chosen two different paths, but they’re basically the same.

Interviewer: Mm-mm.

Mikaela: That my parents don’t go to Church.

Interviewer: Now, what about Jesus? Is Jesus different from God for you?

Mikaela: Jesus, he’s our saviour. God, he’s – he’s – well, he’s heavenly Father. Jesus came to this earth. He changed a lot of people. He brought religion, the Catholic Christian religion to the earth. He was – yeah – he gave his only – he gave his life up for everybody else, which not many people would do.

Interviewer: So, is Jesus different from God? Or is Jesus God? Or –?

Mikaela: Jesus is different from God. God and Jesus are two different people – are two different beings.

Interviewer: Okay. So, for you, is God like Father, Creator?

Mikaela: God is Father, Creator. Jesus is Son, Saviour.

Interviewer: So is that sort of difference important to you?

Mikaela: Important as a religion? as a faith? as –?

Interviewer: Yeah, to your own faith, to your own beliefs.

Mikaela: I think of – if it was the same person, I wouldn’t be able to understand so much than - If it was Jesus and God as one person then I would be able – hold on, I don’t get that. There can’t be two people inside one person. If they’re separate it’s a lot easier for me to understand because then I can understand what Jesus has been teaching and what God has handed down, like Old Testament and New Testament.
Interviewer: Have you always believed it that way?

Mikaela: Always. Ever since I was very little. Two different people.

Interviewer: Two different people. Okay. Does that fit with what you’ve been taught?

Mikaela: Um, well, yes, except that recently reading through the Bible says that God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus are all the – in the same – are the same body, so now it’s becoming a little more confusing. I have to think about it a little bit more.

Interviewer: Three persons in the one Trinity? In the one God? Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God? So, is that the confusing bit?

Mikaela: That’s the confusing bit. I’d like to think of them as separate people but with the same belief.

Interviewer: Okay, we are two different people, two persons with the same human nature. God is three persons, separate distinct, but with the same nature. Does that help?

Mikaela: Sort of, but not completely. I’ve still got this image of two, three people. Jesus, you see Jesus God, you don’t know what he looks like so you pretend you do know, and the Holy Spirit you see flame. That’s what I see because that’s what’s always done in pictures.

Interviewer: How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who didn’t believe in God?

Mikaela: Mm, this is hard. Okay, note I’m scratching my head. (laughter) Ah, Holy Spirit, Um – Holy Spirit is a gift, sort of Jesus gave it to us when he ascended into heaven to say yep! I am – I am sending you the Holy Spirit. And I will watch over you as if I were there but I’m not as such – which is confusing me even more. Um – I don’t know. It’s hard. It’s really hard. I can’t explain it. I just know. It’s – it’s like I know that the Holy Spirit’s there, but I don’t know how to explain it to somebody else.

Interviewer: What are the signs of the Spirit being here? How do you know? Do you see things? Hear things? Think about things? that say to you, “The Holy Spirit’s here”?

Mikaela: Well during prayer when I – when I pray before I go to bed, or when I get up, I say, “Yeah, he’s here.” He’s not anywhere else. When bad things happen to you, you just get this – like I’ll give you an example. Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt yep – I’m gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them. That’s the first thing that came into my head. I wasn’t angry. I wasn’t disappointed as much as I thought I would probably would have been, but I actually thought, “Yep, I’m gonna go out and help them because they’ve obviously got a problem that can be fixed.” Weird.
Interviewer: Weird.
Mikaela: That is weird.
Interviewer: Is that because you expected yourself to be different from that?
Mikaela: Different as in what?
Interviewer: Well, did you say weird – would you have expected yourself to have been different?
Mikaela: I would have expected myself to be pretty angry, but I wasn’t. I was – okay, at first I was upset. I couldn’t believe it happened. And then after I said, “Okay, I can get over this. It’s just a little hitch.” But that’s not a hitch for them, there’s a problem for them. I’ll go help them if I found out who they were.

Interviewer: So how do you explain that difference?
Mikaela: Because it’s a difference in thought –
Interviewer: Yeah, you were surprised that you weren’t angry, but you feel sorry for these people, so …
Mikaela: Ah, because lately I’ve been praying and asking him “If you want me to do anything, just tell me so.”
Interviewer: Okay, alright. So “him”. Who were you praying to? God? or Jesus?
Mikaela: I pray – I pray directly to God.

Interviewer: So you go to the top man?
Mikaela: Yeah, I go to the top man.

Interviewer: Why would you do that?
Mikaela: Why do I do that? I dunno. Maybe – like I used pray years ago “through your Son Jesus Christ” I go “Heavenly Father, please look after me, look after.” then end it with an “Amen”. I don’t usually start “Dear Jesus”.

Interviewer: So do you ever talk to Jesus? Obviously talking to God there. What about to Jesus?
Mikaela: Do I ever talk to Jesus? Probably at Mass. I pray to Jesus at Mass. Sometimes Mary, but not as often as most people do. People pray to saints to get to God, but I – I personally prefer to go straight to God.

Interviewer: Now, has it always been that way for you with prayer?
Mikaela: Mm-mm. I used to pray to Jesus more but now I only pray to God instead.

Interviewer: Do you know why the change has happened?
Mikaela: I have no idea. It’s just – it’s just a change.

Interviewer: Are you aware when the change started to happen?
Mikaela: Probably about January this year. I used to say “Dear Jesus”. Now I go “Dear heavenly Father”. I dunno. It’s just a different – I was just trying something new.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay.

Mikaela: It’s working so far.

Interviewer: So you’ve noticed the change in yourself because of prayer?

Mikaela: I have. Prayer is a release but I pray for people that I don’t know and they don’t know me, just that – I dunno, I just – For the last – actually, for the last couple of months, I’ve been praying about, for everyone else and not for myself as such. And I remember hearing ages and ages ago somebody says ‘If you pray for somebody else, God will give you something in return.’ So I – every night I’d say, “Please bless people, please, the people I love and the people that don’t like me, that I don’t get along with. It’s just – I dunno – even though I would – I’d never want to wish anything bad on anybody any more anyway.

Interviewer: So when did you start praying like that? This year?

Mikaela: Yeah, this year. When y’little, like you’d say bed time prayers: “Jesus, please don’t let father or mother find out that I took 50 cents out of the cookie jar.” y’know.

Interviewer: But you weren’t little last year.

Mikaela: Little last year? Last year, I didn’t pray very much. I had very low faith.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mikaela: No faith whatsoever. I think it’s been through YCS and – just being around – being at St Clotilde’s probably played a big part. It’s probably – like Year 8 I hardly – I went to Church Year 8 and some of Year 9. In Year 9 – in the middle of Year 9, Year 10, Year 11, – hardly ever went and then recently I’ve gone every Sunday – If I could, like if I could get there, but there’s sometimes when I can’t because there’s just too much stuff on. But I make an effort. I make an effort just for – after I study.

Interviewer: How does your faith, or your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Mikaela: I think about things like – I think about things a little bit more. Some – like – with this whole – um – Josie and me thing. I like – try to be very understanding but there’s just a point when – there’s a – right now I’m not really in the mood to – I ha- think about it. I think I need a little bit of space to think by myself and not have to be forced to make a decision right now, but like – here it does make a bit difference if – I don’t wanna – if somebody’s being totally – ah, some of the things they think are
totally immoral I'm not gonna force them to change. I'll just give them an option.

Like I'm not gonna go – shove it down y'throat with a plunger but – um – um – yeah – there's been times when like I know it's wrong and so therefore I'll walk away and not do it with that person and say "I don't wanna do this. You can do it, but I'm not going to." So I think about things a little bit more than I did.

Interviewer: So you're a lot more self-reflective?

Mikaela: I reflect a lot. When I've done something wrong I sit there for ages thinking: "Yep! Why did I do that? Yep, that's pretty stupid. Maybe next time I'll think a little bit quicker. Yeah. I have done some silly things this year. Yeah, but they – they're all in good humour.

Interviewer: This faith that you've found, that's been given to you, or that's been developing in you, what impact has it had on your attitude towards suffering?

Mikaela: Suffering, as in human suffering?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mikaela: Well, I've always been quite the little "Greenpeace" lady, but – um – a little bit more now I'm like seeing two sides of the story instead of one, like before I used to be like – y'know, refugees they're allowed in here. Why do we have to – Why does John Howard have to be so selfish 'n' stuff. And now I'm seeing both sides, so I can understand where John Howard's coming from, but I would prefer him to see where they're coming from. But, y'know, the whole refugee thing it is like the Bible teaches us compassion and most of our laws are based on the Bible, like the Ten Commandments, "Love your neighbour as I have loved you." and I just – sometimes you can't understand where he's getting his ideas from, but if I had it my way those refugees would be running around in my school.

Interviewer: Do you know when you started to change your attitude?

Mikaela: Ever since YCS. Being in YCS is being – just the whole Review of Life thing seems amazing like I use that in real life now. I use that every day – Review of Life – I think about –yeah – w-would Jesus want me to do this? Is this the right thing to do? What would be the consequences – what would be the good stuff of this? I use that every single day?

Interviewer: What about your attitude towards death?

Mikaela: I remember I used to fear death and be petrified: I don't want to die. Not now. Where am I gonna go afterwards? Now I'm not – too concerned about death. I – would gladly accept it sometimes. But then at other times – I'm very comfortable with death. I would work in a morgue if I was allowed, but I'm not. I
– Look, death is just your soul leaving your body and it’s – your body is only a vessel and it’s not really –

**Interviewer:** So what has happened for you to change your attitude like that?

**Mikaela:** Just stuff that happened. Stuff that I’ve had to go through, I’ve like slowly gotten over. It’s an – like now I think there’s just been a big personal change and not really influ- – like I don’t want to do down my Dad’s path and I don’t want to go down my Mum’s. Um –

**Interviewer:** What was wrong with their paths? What couldn’t you accept?

**Mikaela:** My Dad is just – he’s not what – not the sort of person I want to be. And my Mum, yeah, to a degree, some parts I’d like to be like, but then, there’s others I wouldn’t want to be. And it’s more of a personal choice. Or it’s like with – like some of my other friends at other schools. I see them mucking up their lives and I’ve tried to change them and make – not force them – to come with me to Church but just ask them – but I remember there was a point when I wasn’t exactly the best Christian in the world and I wasn’t the best Christian in the world, but I tried to force everybody else to come and as a consequence I left that Church and then um – only recently did I go back and actually see them and they said – that’s – that’s the one of the weirdest things they had is that if you aren’t a real Christian, you can’t survive there. It’s – it’s – it’s something weird but it’s mostly youth they’ve got a high youth – um – they’ve got a very big youth group and most of them are full-blown Christians. They wouldn’t think of anything else. And that’s the weird thing because that – I remember they’ve always been like that and I – best – one of the best Churches because they all believe. Like you don’t have people pretending to believe. That’s like a little bit weird. I know that with the Catholic Church some of the kids are forced to go to Church. That I actually prefer that they not be forced if they don’t wanna go. It’s their own choice – that I go to Church. I’m going to Church. I’ve made my own choice.

**Interviewer:** And in what ways does your faith help you give your life a sense of purpose? a sense of fulfilment?

**Mikaela:** Um – I do feel a lot more for – um – I don’t feel so alone and don’t feel empty – I feel very full – but there’s still things I have to grasp and –

**Interviewer:** Could you explain that sense of feeling full?

**Mikaela:** Feeling full? I feel that if I get any fuller I might explode! I mean – um – full – like he’s in my life now and I’m not going to let him leave because I like him where he is and actually I don’t think he’ll ever leave me and just that footsteps – footsteps poem thing that that sums everything up mostly, most of it up, not all of it. The other bits, well just like – yeah, he’s there, when I need
his help. He’s there when I don’t even need his help, but he’s always like giving me a little push in the right direction. He’s not like giving me a full-blown nudge, but I’ve felt a little push and if I don’t want to go there I’ll say, “God, is there an alternative?”

Interviewer: It sounds like you’ve had lots of really good experiences.

Mikaela: For somebody my age.

Interviewer: This is where we get down to trying to identify when changes took place for you. Are there any events in your life that have led to your relationship changing with God? Are there some of those events that you can talk about?

Mikaela: Mm, yeah, okay. When I was ten, my parents used to fight all the time and then that’s when I really really hated Church because I didn’t see any point in me going with them if they weren’t even getting along, so then I stopped. And then 13, they split up and so that was even worse then, like she – they’d both go to Church they’d both go to the same Church and they’d act all happy families and at home they’d be separated and living in the same house. They’d be two different people. So then I just hated that – never ever – I vowed never to step into a Church ever again. And like I think it’s been – after Mum’s divorce, it finalised everything for me. After the divorce, it finalised everything for me. So now I didn’t have to be forced to go with Mum or be forced to go with Dad. I could make my own choice. As it was said on the paper, if I didn’t have to want to go to my Dad’s I didn’t have to. Then, just to make my Dad happy, I would go even if I did fight with him.

And that’s another thing, I used to fight with both of them, really, really badly, which is – had blues and sit in my room for like three days straight and not exit. It usually happened in the holidays. That was good. My Mum didn’t have to worry where I was, but like, yeah, like Dad and me used to have the biggest fights and I used to sit out in the bush for like an hour and come home back and then sneak in. Yeah, but that was one of the changes. And then I joined YCS. I think YCS was the biggest change. If I wasn’t in YCS, I dunno what I would’ve been doing.

I think – I don’t even know how I came to YCS. I just remember I think it was Gertie. Gertie said, “Hey, Mikaela, wanna come with me?” And I go, “Yeah, okay, might as well.” And now I’m full-blown into it which is something – I picked up on it quite well.

Interviewer: So it was your parents splitting up?

Mikaela: Mostly.

Interviewer: And then joining YCS?

Mikaela: Yeah. And there’s just random little thoughts like people go “Mikaela, are you goin’ to Church with us tonight?” I’d be going, “Yeah, might as well.” and then like slowly getting back into it
like this, just going with different people to different churches
would be in addition to that. And people saying stuff like “What
class do y’ belong to?” And then I would never be able to say
and I actually wanted to be able to say it. “I belong to this
Church and I’ve been here for this long.”

**Interviewer:** So, how important is the word “belong” to you?

**Mikaela:** Belong? It’s – it’s an important word because everybody want to
belong somewhere. We are naturally mammals. All mammals
stay together – except leopards. I mean my – you wanna be in
a group. Everybody wants to be in a group. An’ most people go
for any group. They’d be happy with any group an’ people –
some people are just picky. And I would’ve been one of those
people who are just picky. I would’ve said “No, I don’t wanna be
in that group because – um – yeah – they drink too much”, or “I
don’t wanna be in this group because they’re just weird” or
something, y’know. “They don’t like me; so I just chose this.” I
said, “What better group to belong to than a Church group.
Then I wouldn’t actually – everybody there would understand me
and they wouldn’t back stab and be horrible. And like if they had
the same beliefs as me, they wouldn’t exactly say, “Oh no,
you’re wrong! That’s not right!” Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay, good. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last
twelve months?

**Mikaela:** That’s a definite “yes”!

**Interviewer:** It has, hasn’t it! And we’ve already talked about YCS which has
been an important part of that, hasn’t it.

**Mikaela:** Yeah. And I’ve had pretty good RE teachers as well. Miss
Jones, a very good RE teacher. Mr Smith was – like Miss Jones
gave me like that little push I needed. She go “Talk to the
Father. He’s pretty good about stuff like this.” And then Mr
Smith made me think, like “Why am I thinking this about God?”
“What has happened to make me think about God like that?”
And drawing helps. I’m not a very good writer. Like I write stuff
and people go “Huh? What is she talkin’ about?” Drawing
helps!. Painting, sewing – doing little bits of art help. An’ like
most of the people art these days is based on religion
sometimes. Like – like most – like I see people sitting there in
class and they scribble down an eyeball and they’re thinking “I
see they’re looking for something.” Flame, well, they’re not
gonna become pyromaniacs and burn anything, but flame
usually symbolises God. And like Mr Court did an exercise with
us. He says, “Draw God.” An’ he says the best picture he got
was a Year 11 boy who just drew a figure of a human’s shape or
a body and he says, “Because we are part of God, but we don’t
know what he looks like, so I know I am part of him, so I just
drew a human body.” An’ me and my sister drew the same thing
which is a little bit weird. Yeah, we both drew a flame which was
the first thing that came into my head.

Interviewer: So do you think that would be the drawing that you would tend to
want to draw each time first of all if you were thinking about
God?

Mikaela: So I think now I would – I don’t – I think I’d leave my page blank
because –

Interviewer: Could you explain why?

Mikaela: Because I don’t know what he looks like an’ I never will until I go
to heaven – if I do go to heaven, which I’m hoping I do. But I
don’t know what he looks like. I don’t even – have any clue. I
just know he’s there. So I’d leave my page blank and so – I
don’t know, except because I – from reading the Bible I haven’t
exactly got the best clue. Because he appeared to Moses as a
flame in a bush and like Noah – was just a dove and olive leaves
an’ – there’s different symbols all through the Bible, so you
never know. So if I drew all of them maybe that like – yeah.

Interviewer: Or a blank page is in itself a symbol.

Mikaela: Yeah.

Interviewer: You talked about Mr Smith and Miss Jones playing significant
roles in your life. Is there anything that your parents would have
said or done that would have prompted you to draw closer to
God or even to move away from God? Remember you talked
about how when they split up you didn’t want to have anything to
do with God for a while there. Was there anything they would
have said or done prior to that that would have drawn you closer
to God?

Mikaela: Never! Its – the ritual was youth group Friday, Sunday Church.
And that’s the way all it was. And in between all that my parents
separated and divorced.

Interviewer: And yet they still went to Church?


Interviewer: Do you see your Mum as a “pretend” Christian now?

Mikaela: Um – no, not so much. Like she wants to go back to Church but
there’s ALWAYS something that she has to do or has to be done
that will make her not go to Church and I remember hearing
ages and ages ago that the Devil tries to put things there that
aren’t that urgent but you think they are so – I sort of started not
thinking like that. Before I go to bed I make sure I pray even if I
have – even if I’m - I know I’m about to fall asleep, even if I
know I’m about to pass out, I make sure I pray and then I’ll go to
sleep. Um – I remember Michael said to me he can’t EVER go
to sleep unless he prays. He'll sit there in the dark go “Yep! This is pretty boring.”

My Dad – my Dad – um – he goes – he goes “What are y’doing on Sunday?” I say, “I’m going to Church.” An’ he goes, “Aw yeah, that’s good.” I go, “Why don’t you come?” “I can’t. Mirna won’t let me.” But Mirna goes to Church with me sometimes. So I can’t understand that. But – um – Mum – one of the main reasons – Mum an’ me – oh, I said I don’t wanna go to the Church she wants to go to an’ I think she’s too scared to go by herself. But I think my sister will end up going with her.

Interviewer: Do you know why your Mum’s too scared?
Mikaela: I have no idea but I should ask her.

Interviewer: If you asked your Mum, what do you think that might do to your relationship with her?
Mikaela: Um – like – earlier when we went on Retreat I remember getting a letter saying asking why I wanted to join the Catholic Church and what was the difference. And I said, “Because it’s – it’s a personal choice. and it’s taken me how long to decide on it. But I had to think about things that I have to give up to be a Catholic and – I’m not missing out on much, but – um – yeah, I wrote back and I said because this is – it’s like a vocation. It’s something I want to do and I won’t stop until I do it. And I might have a few hiccoughs that – um – eventually I get over them. Like I’ve had a couple of hiccoughs in the last four weeks an’ I just thought: “Well, find, I’ll leave that there an’ I’ll just jump over that. I think well that hiccough wasn’t that big, but there is – yeah, there’s I – I can see some coming, I can see some huge hiccoughs coming.

Interviewer: Okay. So when one of these huge hiccoughs comes, what do you think would run through your mind?
Mikaela: Pros and cons. If I do it, what will happen? If I don’t, what will happen? What am I – what do I really, really want? And like – people – the selfish thing to be thinking – that’s what I want. I don’t care what anybody else thinks. I know exactly the example I’ve got in my head, but I don’t want to say it.

Interviewer: That’s okay. You don’t have to.
Mikaela: But yeah, I can see that it might affect somebody else if my choice is – if my choice is – the right one it will affect the other person, but then they’ll understand why I made that choice. And if I chose the wrong one, it affects both of us.

Interviewer: And I’m just guessing at the moment – you can tell me whether I’m right or wrong – that you started to think this way once you got yourself into reviewing.
Mikaela: Yeah.
Interviewer: Can you identify a time when you had to make a choice between YCS and something else?

Mikaela: YCS and something else?

Interviewer: Yeah. Were you ever faced with that decision?

Mikaela: Not using the Review of Life?

Interviewer: Yeah – of coming to the meetings and being part of it or going and doing something else.

Mikaela: I’m trying to think of a good example. I can’t think of one.

Interviewer: You don’t know because it hasn’t happened to you.

Mikaela: No, it hasn’t. I haven’t actually had a situation. Like there’ve been days when I’m sick and you obviously can’t come to the meetings, but like when Rod asked me to go and get food with him and it takes him a good half-hour to make a sandwich, I think “Mm, I don’t want to. I’d rather stay here and finish off what we started”, but maybe there might be a situation coming up, maybe.

Interviewer: Remember you said that when you came to YCS, it was sort of like tagging along with Gertie, you think.

Mikaela: I think I was a bit of a “tag-along.”

Interviewer: You’re not really sure about that?

Mikaela: I have no idea. I just remember – I do remember there was one stage when I did come to YCS and they kept reviewing the same thing over and over, and I just thought, “No, this is pretty boring. I’m leaving.” Gertie came back and she joined YCS. I thought, “Yep I might – I’ll come for a little while.” I came and like it started getting interesting so I thought, “Yeah, I’ll stay here.” and then it was just like “Yeah, I’m staying here permanently.”

Interviewer: What made it interesting?

Mikaela: Um – actually we didn’t really do the Review of Life but – this is before Adelaide – but we still managed to talk things through and think about them as a group and like though we had little tiffs ’n’ stuff, by the end of the meeting we’d have something solved or like agree to disagree or – yeah, it’s better than leaving it, like leaving it and not finishing it off. To finish things off and not leave them hanging.

Interviewer: Why was that important to you?

Mikaela: Because I hate being left in the lurch and not finding out about things and not – um – knowing what’s gonna – like I know that I don’t know what’s gonna happen next – I don’t even know what’s gonna happen tomorrow, but I would hate to know what the topic was and not find out what the solution was. I like things to be finished off, to be solved, like I think as I said before
when my parents were separated, it was like “Are they going to
get back together? Are they not?” But when they got divorced,
it was like END. Nothing else. So that was like a good example
of a solution.

**Interviewer:** The last thing is whether you see that as something that is
central to your personality?

**Mikaela:** Solving things?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Mikaela:** Ah, it’s not the main point of my personality but I do keep it – like
there’s times when I really cannot be bothered wasting my time
trying to solve it because I know that in the end, whatever
solution I come up with, it won’t be used, but I’ll – like I’ll give it a
– give it a good try, but I’m not gonna spend all my time on one
thing for one person who won’t even use it.

**Interviewer:** So things have to have a purpose?

**Mikaela:** They have to have – if – I’d actually like it if the person actually
considered it as a really good option, but not as like a “Yeah,
whatever” or a “I’ll think about it.” But yeah, if they said “I’ll think
about it” that would be good because I know they probably
would, ‘cause some people say it just to palm me off.

**Interviewer:** You’ve used the word “option” quite a bit.

**Mikaela:** I like that word. I like options. I hate having just one choice. If I
had a choice between chocolate and vanilla, I’d probably go “Do
you have anything else?” Y’know? I want to have an array of
things to choose from and not just one or two, but like with
Maximilian, y’know, the whole thing with Maximilian Kolbe and
the crowns. I think I would’ve gone, “Yeah, I want both.
Because I can’t make a choice I’ll take both.”

**Interviewer:** So that obviously has an impact on your faith, this whole options
thing, this number of choices: you go to this Church or you go
that Church, narrowing it down?

**Mikaela:** Yeah, I had two choices. I had Lutheran Church or Catholic
Church. I don’t know why – I have no idea why I thought
Catholic Church over Lutheran Church. I – like I remember
when I was little I used to be fascinated by Catholic churches
because it was totally different from mine and I had been in a
Catholic Church and a Catholic school for five years. – Um – I
went to a Catholic Primary school and I had Fr Timms as my
priest and I could never understand everybody else would be
doing things and they’d have to go like (whispers) “Mikaela, you
gotta go on your knees.” “What? Okay!” It used to be
something following everybody else and then I decided, well, I’ll
make my own choice – be – grow up – start making my own
decisions instead of having everybody else telling me what to do. You're nodding and smiling.

Interviewer: Not for any research purposes. More for just the joy of listening to your growing up.

Mikaela: (laughing) You'll see me in ten years and you go, “That's Mikaela. I know her.”
Mikaela's second interview

Interviewer: In the interview and in the journal you were reflecting on how your faith has changed since you've been growing up. Is there anything further that you would like to add to what you stated in the past about the changes you have experienced?

Mikaela: It’s a lot harder when you leave school ‘cause the school environment made it easier for me definitely. Meeting new people out of school who are a different influence to people old friends within school. The people who were friends within school changed a lot from what I knew them before. For some reason, they all just went different. And I found it really difficult to adjust and so when I adjusted to it I adjusted to be like them. And then I realised – Somebody said to me that I wasn’t the person I was before and that they preferred the person I was before and then I sort of began to change and then the people who were different from me didn't accept it because they thought I was being boring, put it that way.

Interviewer: How did that affect your faith?

Mikaela: I wanted to be a sheep and they didn’t go to Church and so I didn’t go to Church. And they didn’t totally, honestly believe in God. I still believed in him but I felt it harder to follow him because they weren’t and I sort of felt like a sheep amongst a bunch of lions. And they were dictating how I, where I should be. And finally I thought, “Nup! I’m gonna go out on my own” and got away.

Interviewer: Which is what you wrote about in the last part of your journal, isn’t it?

Mikaela: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you know when you became aware of that?

Mikaela: Um – probably about February – March. I was a little bit of a bitch to my Mum and nearly everyone I was – like I lived with and they didn’t like it and they tried to talk about it and I said “Suck! I don’t want to listen to you!” and walked out and don’t come back. Go to stay at somebody’s house for like a day or two and then come back and then they’d be like all quiet and they wouldn’t talk to me ‘cause I told them not to the day before, three days before. I think Joan leaving was much to do with that. She’s the person who used to hang around the most other than Josie before she met George.

Interviewer: Has your image of God changed?

Mikaela: Oh, definitely not. Still the same. It was when I wrote in the journal what I said to you before. Hasn’t changed.
Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add before we move on?
Mikaela: No, not really. It hasn’t changed. I mean – mm, that’s okay.
Interviewer: Do you have anything further to say about the people, such as parents, your sister, friends, others?
Mikaela: Start with friends. A lot of people who I was friends with in school they’re very different to when I knew them and they say to me I’m the one who’s changed when really I’m still the same person they went to school with. It’s just that they got different influences in their lives and they want different things to what I want.
Interviewer: What about your parents?
Mikaela: Um, Mum’s all right. She’s still trying to find her way. Leslie-Ann needs more guidance than she thinks she does. She’s sort of like me in the fact that ‘I don’t need your help to do my own thing’. When she does ask for help it’s usually her last resort of asking not like the first person she asks. That sort of make – that’s what upsets me because I usually would ask for help the first person that I knew could help me. That’s what it’s like with school work and then what makes it worse ‘cause her friends just – they rub things in her face and make her feel pretty bad. And she doesn’t have a lot of money. Our whole family doesn’t have a lot of money and they do. And they say, “Come out with us. We’ll pay for you but you gotta pay me back.” But she doesn’t have money to go out or pay them back either.
Interviewer: You haven’t mentioned your Dad.
Mikaela: Ah, Dad. Still the same person. Still very pushy, annoying, dictating, governing, um, wants what’s best for me but doesn’t realise that I have to make my own choices. And he likes sport as well and he said to me every time I’m playing hockey, he’s like, “No, you have to do this, you have to do this, you have to do this.” And I’m like “You’re never a goalie. You didn’t even once pick up a stick in your life other than picking up my hockey bag to put it in the car.” Y’know?
Interviewer: And yet he’ll take you driving?
Mikaela: He’ll take me driving if I – if I go on my hands and knees and say, “Please, please, I want to go for a drive.” And then it’s only around the block. If I’m very lucky, it’s around Perth.
Interviewer: So with all of these people is there anything you’ve noticed about them that’s influencing how you relate with God?
Mikaela: I think my Dad makes me relate with him a lot better since I see God as a better father than he is most of the time. Um – Mum?
Interviewer: Not really. My sister? I just pray to him and say, “She needs help. Can you help her before you help me?” With my friends, I really have no idea what to do. I think they push me a lot closer
than they obviously think they have. They – they think – they
think of me sometimes as still a wild child, the one who starts off
parties or whatever when realistically I’m only like that
sometimes when I’m in the mood for that and not all the time.
So when they want to come out to restaurants and stuff like that
they say, “Mikaela, you go up to him and flirt with him. See if
you can get half the meal for free.” I’d go and do it. And
sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. And – um – I think
that Joan leaving is probably the worst thing that happened. I
hate – I actually – she – her going just put me right off my goals.

Interviewer: But you are back on track again now?

Mikaela: Almost there. Not exactly. Every now and then I go to Church
and every now and then I get Jehovah Witnesses in our house
and I talk to them. Not about their religion so much just about
the similarities between our religions. I mean it’s the same
religion basically except that Jehovah is their saviour
instead of Jesus. Yeah.

Interviewer: Anything further about Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

Mikaela: Um – not sure. I still pray to Jesus and not to God. It’s just the
way it is. You can’t get out of old habits, and that’s the way I see
it. It’s easier to do it like that. At this very moment, I really have
no idea. I mean sometimes think he’s there, sometimes think
he’s not.

Interviewer: Would you like to comment about praying to Jesus as a habit?

Mikaela: Every night before I go to bed – um – just about things that
happen that day and what I want to happen the next day or the
day after that. Or long term. And it’s usually not about myself
but about everybody else. And if it is about myself it’s only
asking if he’ll help me in hockey. And that’s it. And usually it
works.

Interviewer: Is there anything that occurs to you about your experience of
school, RE classes, teachers – you’ve commented about your
peers and how they’ve changed since they’ve left school – but
what about those other areas?

Mikaela: Um – I’m actually still happy that I’m in YCS. A lot of people that
were in YCS don’t want to have anything to do with it anymore.
And even though I don’t have a lot of time on my hands, I mean,
like when I have TAFE and like Friday is probably the worst day
to have a YCS meeting for me I still – I’m actually happy that I’m
still in it. I don’t really do much although at the moment, just
guiding them to figure out things for themselves not making –
not me making decisions ’cause it’s now their group, not mine.
Teachers. Don’t really see many of my teachers. I wish I did,
though. Um – I – I wish I could see Miss Jones again to say
thank you, but I don’t know where she is. I know she’s at school somewhere.

**Interviewer:** She’s only a phone call away.

**Mikaela:** True. I must try to catch her one day.

**Interviewer:** What about RE?

**Mikaela:** I miss RE. Really do miss RE. I mean last year’s RE was pretty boring. Don’t know why, but Year 9, Year 10, Year 8, a bit of Year 11 were the best RE classes I ever had. I actually enjoyed it. I enjoyed Year 11 most. Mr Smith was very insightful. He used to talk about things like – he used to say, “Draw us a picture. Then see how that relates to God. I give you a word and you draw anything that relates to it.” The same with Mr Court. He did it once or twice. And that was really weird. Me and my sister drew the same thing.

**Interviewer:** You have mentioned that before. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven’t covered?

**Mikaela:** No, not really. Um – I can’t really think of anything off the top of my head. Would you like to give me an example?

**Interviewer:** No, I would much rather it came from you.

**Mikaela:** Okay, today I was going to show you where my favourite place was to sit and think, but, y’know, it’s a long track. It takes me an hour to get there and about two hours to get back for no particular reason. Um – I just sit there and think. It’s the most quiet place you could ever find. And um – I don’t know – it’s just very – something just draws me there every time.

**Interviewer:** Good. And you have a need for that?

**Mikaela:** Yeah. I like being by myself. I mean I like being among people but being by yourself is so much better.

**Interviewer:** Why is that?

**Mikaela:** You don’t have to put up with them all the time. Like some people you can put up with a little while and there’s people you can put up with for ages. It used to be Josie and me but now I don’t like being around her ’cause she’s a bit annoying and George – I’ve already mentioned about him. Um – Erin, I like being around Erin. And she’s probably the person I probably see the most times. And there’s another one of my friends called Tammy. She’d be the person I spend the most time with. She’s been my friend for ten years this year. And I wish I could see her more often. She’s the one person I can stand being around the most.

**Interviewer:** I think we will conclude our interview here.
Week One

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story? Reflect on why you would name it in that way.

How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings.

Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

My life title would be Elevator. We all have ups and downs. In my life I have had ups and downs and sometimes felt like I wasn't moving at all.

The first chapter would be called The First Step and the First Button. This would be when I first had good, but this was all to do with my parents. I was a good child throughout my life but I never seemed to know much about life picking up on small pieces of a huge puzzle that I would probably never figure out. Slowly but surely by the work of a lot of older people I began to tell me things even when I didn't want to believe it.

The next chapter was the Plunge. It was like being on a bungee jump that didn't rebound. Travelling down without slowly. This was when my parents broke up. I didn't care life or anything it stood for. This is where I met Josie. Though right now our relationship is not on the best of terms she somehow made the plunge seem less like a plunge and more like a dip. But personally I know that no matter what anyone said I was falling. They couldn't help me and even if they could they probably wouldn't know how to. I pushed everyone away including my parents. I refused for anyone to feel my pain or let myself become vulnerable.

Next Floor Clotilde Religious Team is my next chapter. I found that religion wasn't boring and began to be fun. I began exploring me and my thoughts and what I wanted from my life spiritually and physically. I soon found myself on the trail to become a Catholic with Young Christian Students becoming a motive. To be a person who receives Holy Communion for the fact that it brings me closer to God, than just because I know I can without having the faith and belief in anything it stands for.

Joan's Spiritually Mentor was my next floor and I got off as soon as I could. Joan has strong faith and with her strong faith I came to believe that I too could have faith exactly like her. Joan though she didn't know it was the person I placed my getting Catholicism on. I needed her to help me to guide me and give me advice when a lot of my other friends turned me away from the right path. But the Joan floor soon disappeared and yet again I was swamped with feelings of mistrust, hatred, rebellion and no faith.

I thought by Joan leaving me God was also leaving me. Abandoning me just like everyone else had done, he was just another person out to hurt me. So the next chapter is called Basement.

I had hit the basement. Not only did I not follow rules that were set for me, I refused to do anything if I felt it was a waste of my precious breathing time.
Slowly the friends that I made changed into people I couldn’t relate to. I
couldn’t understand why they treated me like they did. Slowly but surely my
finger reached for the button to take me away from where I was.

The floor I’m on right now is *Under Construction:* to rebuild my life and do the
things that I planned to do when I was younger and find friends who are
wanting the same things from life as I want and not trying to make me feel
insignificant. To find God again in my life and instead of asking him for things
just receive what he thinks is good for me.
Week Two

Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn’t exist and that God cares or doesn’t care for you.

Describe the situation.

Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognise God’s presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself.

Describe how your thinking about God changes because of your encounter with this person or event.

The major point in my life where I really came to know God was when I first came to St Clotilde’s. Up to this point I used to shut myself away from the world and mostly through the hurt that I had felt as a result of my parents break up and the continual abuse that I suffered from my Dad’s abusive and negative behaviour. Up until that point I didn’t believe that God existed and that if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life.

I remember the day I began to believe in God heaps more was when I was invited to Mass by someone. They said it may make me feel better about myself. I was hoping it did. I felt a little bit out of place but I soon grew to coming more often. Then going with Joan to Church on Sunday. Eventually I began to realise what effect it had on me. Through Joan and that other person inviting me my faith was re-ignited to some degree. But I knew it would take more than just to Church to make me feel God, even more to believe in him. I sorta felt as if I need to see and hear more.

Finally after months of contemplation I decided to become a Catholic. Though recently it has been put on hold so I can start TAFE, I’m sure that it will work out. The Catholic idea was a sign that there was a God that he did exist because the idea seemed to come out of no where and felt so right at the time.

I remember feeling worth and a sudden burst of energy and happiness when the idea or epiphany came to me. I then told Joan and she said it was a sign that God was making contact with me because I made contact or finally read the signs he was sending me through my whole life.

God does exist and I know it almost hands on!!
Week Three

Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson. Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief? How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

A religious lesson that changed my ideas about my faith was in Year 10, Miss Jones’s class. The majority of my peers were Catholics but somehow the way they reacted to religious education proved that they were not strong Catholics like I wanted to be. We were talking about human rights to do with teasing. Three or four boys claimed that the people they teased deserved it. I began to think what Jesus would do. Would he tease someone if they deserved it when the majority of the people teased didn’t deserve to be teased? This was not long before I became a permanent member of YCS.

Miss Jones then began to tell them that teasing was due to people having a low self esteem. This made me think that people with a low self esteem may also have low faith in God and be pretending to be Christians for their parents but not for themselves. At the time I had only just begun Church and had my idea about converting to Catholicism.

My belief I now find to be wrong is that some people have NO good in them. But Miss Jones proved it through a story about a saint who began his life stealing and then converted his evil ways into Catholicism and then before he died became a priest.

God didn’t make us evil but gave us freedom of choice and when Adam and Eve ate the apple we began to realise what was right and what was wrong. We still weren’t evil and never have been. It’s just that the devil lures people into his trap and seduces our minds so our freedom of choice has been taken away. This made me realise that the boys in my class had been seduced into teasing and had their minds closed over not letting them see their actions and what it does to people.

God created everyone in an equal stance and that through mutual respect we can understand each other. Our religion teaches us to do unto others as they would do unto you.

So that’s what I plan to do. Be able to say sorry, accept sorry and be able to understand when I and many people are in the wrong.
Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book?

Give the chapter a title and explain its significance.

How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

Ever After

You know how in stories or fairy tales the prince and princess lived happily ever after, well that’s what I want: to live happily for ever. To live my life instead of loathing it how some people do. Unfortunately, just like Job, God gives us trials and tribulations to test our faith.

God in the past has tested me and sometimes I have failed and other times I have succeeded in proving to him that I am a good person some of the time. In the future I would like God to be more in my life to be with him in an “ever after” scenario.

The main theme is Love because it is and will always be a big part of my life and many others. I want to be able to love God for the rest of my life and my life after death be with him in heaven if I am just that little bit worthy of it.

I see that in my relationship with him how I have just begun to see what he wants me to see about my friends and the people around me, maybe even possibly my life. Through seeing what he wants me to do with my life, I can see that he has shown me what he wants me to do with my life.

If I just follow him, I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I even will. He knows more than I would ever realise. So if I follow his lead, my life will not only be a fairy tale but something better.
Concluding Remarks

After looking back on what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?

I think that there are some things I have no control over like Sue and my friendship with her. I never saw it coming and because I have no control or influence over her mind – not that friends should – I cannot help her, not if she doesn’t want it, or can’t see that I only want the best for her.

My faith was based on what others wanted for me, but slowly I have begun to realise that it is my choice and my choice alone. Jesus is my saviour and I thank God that he was here to help me remove the plank and see what was wanted for me.
Interviewer: Morgan, what do you believe about God?

Morgan: Well, that’s – sometimes you get into a bit of a dilemma when it comes to that because you think, “Is he real? Or is he not?” But, y’know, I believe in God, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that I believe in all the Bible stuff that they say and things like that. Y’know, some things it does make you think of a – Yeah, yeah, I believe in God. He’s a sort of spirit who’s always there.

Interviewer: Good. Do you have any words that you would use to describe how you would relate with God?

Morgan: Kind of hard to put into words.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, let’s go a different way. What sort of image do you have of God?

Morgan: Sort of like the Jesus figure, in a way, but not exactly a person like not, y’know, the – Yeah, it’s hard to explain, like, just – It’s like a vibe that’s there. Just – Yeah. Hard to explain.

Interviewer: Have you always had that sort of image of God. For instance, if you went right back into primary school, or even earlier?

Morgan: No, I probably thought, “Oh – ” Like when I was in primary school, I thought that God was Jesus. So I didn’t know there was something like bigger than that. I didn’t – Yeah – I didn’t …

Interviewer: So, is God different from Jesus?

Morgan: In a way, yeah, ’cause God’s not – wasn’t a living thing, wasn’t a living human being. He’s just the creator of the universe sort of thing and Jesus was just there to bring out his word.

Interviewer: Could you explain what you understand by that?

Morgan: How do you mean like?

Interviewer: Like “to bring out his word”. What does that mean for you?

Morgan: Sort of to let everyone know about God. Um – sort of – y’know, like – um – the Ten Commandments, things like that, like – um – just, y’know, be kind to one another, y’know, all that. Sort of like the rules.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you finding this hard, Morgan?

Morgan: Yeah. Quite hard. It’s hard to explain. You know what you’re talking about yourself but then it’s hard to explain to another person what you mean by that.

Interviewer: Why do you think it’s like that?

Morgan: I’m not sure. Um – I don’t know. It’s just something ab- It’s always like in you sort of thing. It’s not – y’know – Other
people probably don’t experience God the way others want to see it.

**Interviewer:** So, how do you think you experience God?

**Morgan:** Just through thinking and through things that I do, like, say if something bad happens, you think, “Oh, why isn’t he here right now?” y’know. “Why isn’t he helping me?” You think, “Oh, that’s it”, y’know. But then when something really – like, you’ve achieve something that you’ve wanted to, or something really good happens in your life, you think, “Oh, thanks! You’re always there.” Or someone’s sick and you pray for them and they get better, you think, “Oh, yeah.”

**Interviewer:** So, what does that say about God? God is …?

**Morgan:** Great. He’s always there to help. He’s always - always there to listen. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Good. So what about images of Jesus? What image of Jesus do you have?

**Morgan:** Sort of like the statue, like, y’know, how the way he’s dressed in a white robe, a sort of beard, like, sorta like. I don’t know why – it’s sort of like a sadness look on his face. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Has it always been like that for you?

**Morgan:** Yeah. Pretty much. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** What about the Holy Spirit?

**Morgan:** I haven’t thought about that. You talk about it in class, but you don’t really think about it.

**Interviewer:** Alright. What about prayer?

**Morgan:** Mm. What can I say about it?

**Interviewer:** I’ll give you a number of questions. Do you pray? And if you do, to whom do you pray?

**Morgan:** Well, really, it’s supposed to be to God, but you usually pray to Jesus, or to Mary, y’know, if you’re saying the Our Father, or the Hail Mary, or – yeah.

**Interviewer:** So, think of the last time you prayed. Who did you pray to?

**Morgan:** God.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Are you aware of how often you pray?

**Morgan:** Not really. Well, y’know, you always do the Sign of the Cross when y’goin’ out, like in the car, or something, just in case. Y’know, it’s just like a family tradition thing ‘cause my parents are Catholic. Our whole family’s Catholic. So I was brought up with that faith. Um –

**Interviewer:** So you bless yourself when you …?
Morgan: Bless yourself, or you – like only bless myself when my Dad’s there ‘cause he doesn’t usually like say the prayer out loud because we say it in Spanish, so – yeah, we say it in our own language. So, like, when my Mum’s driving she’ll just quickly s – we’ll all quickly join in and say a prayer, or something. We never – we never pray before a meal, or anything like that, so it’s just …

Interviewer: What is the prayer that you pray when you set off in your car?

Morgan: It’s sort of like to the angels to protect – to protect you from any danger and harm and stuff like …. Yeah, an’ then when I go to Church as well, I just sit there and – yeah – just think about all the things that’s going on in your life – Yeah …

Interviewer: So, how do you pray? What is your prayer like most often?

Morgan: Like what is it about? or …?

Interviewer: Yeah, it could be that. Think about how you pray. Is it Our Fathers and Hail Marys?

Morgan: No, just – not like general prayers, or anything like that. More like just – y’know – um …. Like, I know, praying for, I don’t know, if I do well in exams, or praying for other people who are sick. Sometimes I’ll – y’know – If everything’s all right in my life, I’ll probably pray for people who don’t have what I have. Like, y’know, poor people who don’t have anything. Yeah.

Interviewer: Have you always prayed like that?

Morgan: Um – well, no, not before. Ah – well, at the beginning, like in Year 8 and stuff like that I probably just prayed for my own family, my own things, my own issues. I was more involved into what I was doing. I wasn’t really thinking more outside of the boundaries, more outside, like what other people were thinking, what other people were going through. You don’t think about that –

Interviewer: When do you think you changed?

Morgan: I don’t know.

Interviewer: Okay. So how does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

Morgan: Oh, it’s made me think about things when I’m in a bad situation, or something, because if – It’s kinda hard because I was brought up with it anyways. I was taught by my parents and then, y’know’ you’re taught in school ‘cause I went to Catholic schools. I was taught in school – um – yeah. But sometimes you hide that sort of belief when you’re in front of your friends, or something, because maybe they’re not Catholic. Maybe they don’t believe in that and you think, “Oh, I’ll get teased now.” Or like you’d rather just not say something, y’know, just –
Interviewer: Good. What impact does your faith have on your attitude towards suffering?

Morgan: Mm, I'm not sure I understand.

Interviewer: Well, what do you think about suffering? Would you accept suffering as part of life? Or would you want to try and get rid of it?

Morgan: Well, it's horrible when you see people suffering. Obviously, you'd want to get rid of it. Yeah. But then again, some people go through that to show other people and think, "This is what it's like." And then other people say, "I don't want to go through that." Depending on what it is.

Interviewer: Is Year 12 suffering?

Morgan: Yes.

Interviewer: So how does your faith influence your attitude towards being in Year 12?

Morgan: Um – I don't know. It's made me try and look forward, look positive at everything. Try not to be so pessimistic towards things and – Yeah.

Interviewer: Good. You're doing really well with this interview, Morgan. It's not easy.

Morgan: No, it's not. Some things you think, "Oh, hold on, I haven't really thought about that yet."

Interviewer: So what about your attitude towards death?

Morgan: Towards death. Scary.

Interviewer: So you're scared about death? About your own death?

Morgan: Well, now I've – Ah, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. Before I used to think about it a lot because – Oh, you'd – I'd probably just sit in my room and my parents'd be talking about it and I'd be like – I don't know – I'd like get really, really, really, really, really scared to think, oh, y'know, they're talking about dying and stuff. It really scares me. And I tell 'em, "Don't talk about it in front of me because it scares me." To think that they're gonna die and you think, "Oh well, where am I gonna be left off, y'know, 'cause I'm so close to them.

Interviewer: Now is that a recent experience, or something from the past?

Morgan: That was something from the past.

Interviewer: Okay. What about now?

Morgan: Now? Now that I'm older I didn't – I don't dwell upon that anymore.

Interviewer: Do you think your life gives you a sense of purpose and meaning?
Morgan: Um–well, it sorta shapes me who I am in a way, shapes the way I am.

Interviewer: Could you explain what you mean by that?

Morgan: Um–well, say if I wasn't – if I wasn't Catholic, if I wasn't brought up in the family that I am, if I was a totally different person – You don't know who – how I'm gonna act. You don't know what situations I'm gonna be in. Yeah, you don't know – y'know, I could react to something totally different as to what I'd react now. Yeah.

Interviewer: Good. Okay, are there events in your life that have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Morgan: Um–I dunno. I haven't thought about that one either. I guess there have been events, not that I can remember off the top of my head right now.

Interviewer: Okay. So do you think your faith has grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months?

Morgan: The last twelve months? I'm not sure 'cause there's been a series of events, you know, good and bad, so it's – I don't know. It varies. At the moment it's alright. Yeah.

Interviewer: So it's like on a plateau?

Morgan: Yeah.

Interviewer: Prior to that, had it dipped down? Or was it higher? If you go back earlier in your life, do you think your faith was stronger then than it is now?

Morgan: It's probably stronger now because now that I've been in different situations and different obstacles to overcome, it's – yeah, you go – you sort of think about it more often than what I used to think about it. Like I used to think, "Ah yeah, whatever God, yeah, whatever." But now that, y'know, I'm more mature about it, I understand it a bit more.

Interviewer: Could you talk a bit more about that understanding?

Morgan: Um – I don't know. It's hard.

Interviewer: That's okay. What about the impact of your school on your faith?

Morgan: Um–yeah, sometimes it's – it's like, y'know, hard for me like when it comes to like school or something like that. It's just – um - how can I explain it – mm – um – Yeah, like it's like if you do something wrong or something at school, if you get a bad grade or something, you automatically think, "Oh God, what am I gonna do?" Yeah, and you think – and you think about your parents and you think “Do I want a life if it's like this?” But then there are other things like you get good grades, y – you're doing well in school, y – getting along with your teachers and
everything else. You think it’s all worth it and God’s there every step of the way.

**Interviewer:** Does your school add to the teaching that your parents have given you about your faith? Or does it add to the teaching that you were given when you were in primary school? Or that you get through going to Mass?

**Morgan:** No, no it’s different. It’s probably – The school adds to what I was taught in primary school. Um – some of it comes from my parents but not all of it. Mostly my Mum’s like “Well, if – if you’re not gonna be good then God doesn’t love you anymore.” Or something like that. And I’d be like, “Okay!” But I think – then you think about it and you say, “Yeah, well God’s supposed to love everyone no matter what you do.” But then you think about it. If you repeat those wrongs, is he still gonna love you? That’s a question that I don’t know about. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** You don’t know about that yet?

**Morgan:** No. It’s different. I don’t know. It’s – the – the stuff that you learn at school is more like, y’know, Bible Studies and “What did Jesus say?” and “What did this …?” Y’know, like all the stories and things. And you think it’s a – y’know, a load of rubbish sometimes. You think, y’know, that – I don’t know. It’s – …

**Interviewer:** Are there significant people in your school life? Are there people at school who’ve had a big influence on you in terms of the way your faith has been developing?

**Morgan:** Mm, not really.

**Interviewer:** What about amongst your peers? your friends?

**Morgan:** Well, one of them’s really, really Catholic that – Yeah – I know, she – if you like swear, or something, or say something rude, or other friends are saying, “Ah, y’know, God this and God that doesn’t exist, blah, blah.” It sort of upsets her and – but, y’know, it doesn’t really bother me in that sense because it’s what they believe, y’know. If they want to believe it, it’s find. But, y’know, people have different views. Mmm. Yeah, no, I don’t I haven’t really learnt much through my friends. You – you mostly don’t want to talk about it in front of your friends ’cause they just like, “Oh, yeah, what d’ye want?” or something. And at school, like with teachers and stuff, it’s just the basics, y’know, “So what did Jesus say?” Y’know, the stuff that you learn from the Bible and – Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is there a significant teacher in your life?

**Morgan:** Um – no, not really.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Morgan:** Well, you do learn stuff from people.
Interviewer: What about RE? Is there anything you remember from your years of RE that has stuck with you?

Morgan: Probably the stuff about conscience, sort of like, y’know, “Is God telling you to do the right thing, or the wrong thing?” And that’s kind of something that’s sort of helped me develop what – my understanding of it.

Interviewer: Which year was that?

Morgan: I think that was last year. At the beginning of last year.

Interviewer: Okay. Was it the way it was taught? Or just the fact that you were getting the chance to take a good look at conscience?

Morgan: Yeah, probably at that. Yeah, and the big assignments that we had to do when – sort of – And it also said something about, oh, y’know, “write what you think an’ your point of view of …” Y’know. Yeah. I think it should be more about whether, y’know, things about what you experience and how it relates to you rather than just bulk material. Yeah.

Interviewer: So what impact have your RE teachers had on your faith development?

Morgan: Mmm. Um – not much ’cause I kind already had it within me. I already had that sort of thing more like with my family and through Church ’cause I have to go to Church every week. But – yeah, Mum’s like, “You have to go to Church otherwise God won’t love you.” And she’s – and she makes up all this stuff. And I think, “Yeah, okay, right.” But it – it doesn’t – I don’t – I don’t think, I don’t think it’s the wrong thing to say, y’know. You shouldn’t have to go to Church all the time. I mean once in a while it’s fine that – Yeah, like it’s not the only place that you can pray.

Interviewer: Yes. Good. You’ve talked a bit about your Mum and your Dad. Would you like to add anything further about their influence on you?

Morgan: Mmm. First of all, my Dad doesn’t go to Church, but – I don’t even – I’m not even sure if he even prays or anything like that. He’ll only go to Church like if it’s like Christmas. That he definitely goes ’cause Mum forces him to go. Um – Midnight Mass. Um – other than that – Or he’ll only go if like the world’s in trouble. If he sees something in the news like that’s gonna have an impact on him, he’ll go. Though, if, y’know, he feels insecure about a situation, or something, he’ll go to Church. But with my Mum it’s different “cause she – she could constantly go. She’ll probably go twice a week, or something. Friday, she’ll – I think she goes Fridays. She goes to Church to pray for her Mum. She’s still alive. So, yeah, ’cause she hasn’t seen her in years as well. She’ll – yeah, she just goes off and says that Mass for her and she’ll pray for her on a Friday. And then on
Sunday she just goes normal. She’s like, “Oh, yeah, we have to go to Church, so –

**Interviewer:** Do you think your Mum prays for you and your sister?

**Morgan:** Yeah. To get good grades and things. Obviously, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you think she might pray for anything else?

**Morgan:** Umm – not really sure. Just she wants us to be the best people that we can be. Y’know, some people that she’s proud of.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any stories from your life about how each of your parents have influenced you in your relationship with God? You told the story about when you are travelling, which is a great story – and there are a lot of us who pray when we hop into a motor vehicle. Are there any other stories?

**Morgan:** Not that I can think of at the moment. Don’t think so. There most probably are but I can – can’t remember.

**Interviewer:** Has anyone in your life said anything or done anything that has contributed to or helped your faith?

**Morgan:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is it something you can tell me?

**Morgan:** Um – Well there’s there’s – there are like many things. Um – yeah, nah, I don’t want to say….

**Interviewer:** That’s okay. That’s fine. I don’t think there is anything else I want to ask you at this point, so thank you, Morgan.

**Morgan:** You’re welcome.
Sophie's interview

Interviewer: Sophie, what do you believe about God?

Sophie: Um – I believe that God is present. I believe in God an’ – um – I sort of construct the idea that if you believe in God, you shouldn’t question, so when everyone’s like – when people we talk – this topic first comes up, people talk about God an’ stuff an’ like “But how can you prove it?” – an’ all this stuff, I’m just like ‘Well, I – I think that I’ – With my faith if I believe that – I don’t believe you have to question. I j– Yeah, so I just basically believe that there is a God an’ all that stuff, so yeah.

Interviewer: Good. You used the word “construct”.

Sophie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Would you like to say a bit about why you used that word?

Sophie: 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 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”. Yeah.

Interviewer: Good. Have you always thought about God in this way?

Sophie: Yeah. Aw, basically yeah. My s – sort of my beliefs sort of got stronger as I got older, but I’ve always been – yeah – faithful to God.

Interviewer: What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?

Sophie: Um – strong – um – I have a lot of trust, faith, belief, – um – lot of respect. Um – I sort of also bring that into everyday life. Um (pause) I think (pause) yeah, basically just them.

Interviewer: In what ways is your faith in God today, different from what it was some years ago?

Sophie: Okay, some years ago, like in primary school, or at the start of high school?

Sophie: Okay. Um – in primary school, since I did not attend a Catholic primary school, sort of God wa– God to me wasn’t developed as it has been over the past few years. I went to scripture classes an’ s– an’ that in the mornings an’ – um – but that was mostly just filling out worksheets, so it didn’t really – I didn’t really have a lot of practice in – in that sort of area. So, yeah – um – I think also being at a Catholic high school has changed because – um – just like you learn a lot from other people an’ their beliefs an’ stuff like that. So yeah, I jus’ think that because I wasn’t in that
atmosphere or that sur— the surroundings that’s why it’s changed a lot.

**Interviewer:** Is that what you mean by practice?

**Sophie:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is Jesus different from God?

**Sophie:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay. If he is, what about the differences?

**Sophie:** I think basically because God is— um— no so much— because Jesus was a physical form of God basically— um— was here on earth. I think that’s about the only difference. He does put into practice— um— everything about God an’— so, yeah. But yeah, they were a bit different.

**Interviewer:** Are those differences important to you?

**Sophie:** Sort of because being the model of— Jesus being the model of God to me— um— it jus’ makes it even more real, makes it more believable. An’— um— I just think that ’cause lots— lots of times when you think about— um— images of Christ, or images of faith an’ God an’ stuff, you sort of get the image of Jesus’ face an’ ’cause you don’t know what God looks like that’s jus’ basically why the difference.

**Interviewer:** Was there ever a time when you didn’t see any difference between God and Jesus?

**Sophie:** I don’t think so.

**Interviewer:** What about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn’t believe in God?

**Sophie:** Oh— um— I would jus’— I sort of don’t really think about that part very much but I would say that— um— the Holy Spirit is sort of— I would describe it as the feeling you get with faith an’— um— the— sort of the— guidance, the— um— the encouragement. That’s how I would explain it. It would— that’s a tough one— um— yeah.

**Interviewer:** That’s always been a tough one.

**Sophie:** Yeah— um— I didn’t really think about that part. Um— I think it’s just sort of (pause) yeah (pause) just sort of the strength an’— um— the guidance an’ support an’ stuff an’ faith. That’s what I would say.

**Interviewer:** Okay. You’ve done well.

**Sophie:** You caught me off guard there.

**Interviewer:** Now a set of questions about prayer: Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?

**Sophie:** Okay. Um— the f— first of all, I probably— I try to pray every day— um— mostly at night in bed, like if I’m laying down, or sometimes— um— if it’s in a special day or anniversary, I will
kneel down at the window – um – in – obviously in classes
when we pray. In PC we pray – um – I pray not only to God,
also to Jesus, Mary – um – to family members that are passed
away, or family and friends that are passed away. Um – just find
it easy f– to ask for their guidance an’ stuff. Um – also like, not
even – sometimes if I’m just in a bad situation or I’m just having
a bad day – um – I don’t even go away an’ jus’ – I don’t even do
the who– I do when I’m doing the praying at night stuff that – “In
the name of the Father an’ of the Son an’ of the Holy Spirit” an’
sometimes I’ll jus’ start praying in my head an’ – bef– before a
test, anything like that, that’s how I pray. Can’t remember all the
questions that you asked.

Interviewer: You’ve done well with those.

Sophie: Okay.

Interviewer: I will ask you the question: How often do you pray?

Sophie: Oh, okay. Um – that actually changed a bit. Um – last year I
think I made it a goal to pray every night like sit there and do my
prayers every night, but I think growing up – more so – I jus’
pray – I do pray every day. It’s jus’ like you don’– I don’t realise
I’m doing it. Like I – like I’ll jus’ be sitting in – like I say sitting in
bed, or whatever – even if – whenever I’m alone – um – an’ I’ll
jus’ say my little prayers an’ stuff like that. So basically I didn’t
make it a routine thing ’cause I think routine – um – sort of took
away from whole jus’ believing, having faith, sort of made it a
chore so that’s why I sorta changed an’ yeah, so I just pray at
home an’ stuff whenever I want.

Interviewer: How do you pray?

Sophie: Um – you can say I pray with words. Um (pause) you don’t –
like the actual actions in how I pray? Or in other forms?

Interviewer: You might pray like that, arms outstretched, or you said lying in
bed or sitting in bed. It could be anywhere, but – like, for
instance, you said “do my prayers” and you used another phrase
which suggested almost like repeating prayers that are
memorised. And yet, at another time, you seemed to be saying
that sometimes the prayers you pray are spontaneous.

Sophie: Yeah. Most of the time I start off with the Our Father and the
Hail Mary and then I will sort of go into the thankyous and – um
– then I’ll sort of generally ask for forgiveness and then – um –
even though those parts of routine, they’re always different, so –
um – an’ then pray – I pray for people who are sick, or need
help, guidance, – um – that sort of thing. Also whenever I’m
seem to pray wherever I am, even if I’m – I’m just alone or I – I –
just before a test I always put my hands together and pray like
that. It’s – I’ve always done it. Or if you’re in a group – um –
sometimes I hold other people’s hands I don’t know really why
just that’s just the habit of – that’s just what I picture prayer to
be. So yeah.
Interviewer: To whom do you pray most often? To God? To Jesus? To the Holy Spirit?

Sophie: Ah, probably to God and – um – to what I believe is my guardian angel, my aunty. Um – I pray to her a lot. Um – jus’ also for support, for guidance. Um – yeah, probably to Jesus as well and Mary a lot. So yeah.

Interviewer: How did you come to think of your aunty as your guardian angel?

Sophie: Um – she – um – passed away a– before I was born. An’ – um – because she was – she’s the only like blood-aunty in my – in my family. Um – she’s the only girl an’ – um – I sort of – because I never met her, it’s sort of sad but I – from what I heard I’ve always modelled her as like a very great person. My Mum always said, “You’d really get on with her an’ that’s like your guardian angel.” An’ – um – also the – one of the only photos I’ve got of her is a black-an’-white photo an’ it’s – um – she’s done it for my Dad an’ it’s – um – it’s la– it’s blown up an’ it’s – it’s – it’s really beautiful ‘cause she’s just sitting in a field an’ – um – I jus’ – I jus’ love that photo. I’ve got it in my room. An’ – um – I jus’ picture her as this – this beautiful, wonderful person that would always look after me an’ that’s sort of my gift – like having her in spirit with me. So that’s just how I’ve always thought about her. So yeah.

Interviewer: How do you think just generally your belief in God influences or shapes the way you live your life?

Sophie: I think – um – my belief in God influences me because – um – I sort of model my actions sort of from sort of what he would expect if you wanna play – um – like, like when we do the whole thing about conscience I have the – like the worst conscience I feel guilty if I don’t help Mum with the dishes like I have to go and help “cause I feel that bad, even if I’m doing homework I just sit there thinking, “Mum has to do that all alone” and I feel really bad so I always go – That’s just sort of how I try and do what’s right. Sometimes I try a bit too hard and get all stressed I tend to take on a lot of people’s problems and try to help an’ that. Sometimes in doing that doesn’t help myself but I can’t help but not help them. So yeah.

Interviewer: What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?

Sophie: Um – (pause) Can I have any example like

Interviewer: It could be anything, but these are the really hard questions.

Sophie: Um – I guess so because a lot of people – um – for instance, when my grandfather passed away, i– some people in that situation – um – would blame God, hate God for that. Um – and because of that maybe their fai– their faith is – is shown as a– weak, sort of weak. But I didn’t. I – um – with that situation I jus’
I kept praying he would pass peacefully and I didn't blame God. It wasn't his fault. An' I jus' sort of – so my shu– my faith – um – was still strong, but things like – um – the tsunami disaster, September 11, all that sort of stuff, again I don't blame God, I jus' hope that he can get those people through. An' – um – I don't – I'm not (pause) yeah, I – that's where I think I'm a bit different to some people, jus' turn around an' jus' like "Why did God do that?" y' know. If God's so great, you know, bu' I think that you have so many good things that do happen an' s– you know, that sometimes – not that has to balance out – maybe that – I don't even think that's God sometimes. I think that's the other side of it all. An' – um – yeah, it's h– it's hard to explain, but I don't, I don't blame God or anything like that. I jus' pray that people make it through, do what I can to help, something like that.

Interviewer: Okay, and what about your attitude towards death? Does your faith have any impact on that?

Sophie: I – um – personally, I'm actually very scared of death. Um – jus' because I'm scared that I won't achieve what I want out of life before I pass away. I think lotsa people are like that. But – um – yeah, jus' (pause) think – I believe they go to a better place, so really it's – sometimes it's not that bad. I jus' – it's unfair. Sometimes it's un– I view it as unfair when people pass away an' they've say got lots to do, children in their life, they've got family to bring up. That's unfair, but again, I don't blame God, I jus' hope that he helps them through the situation, through the tough times. So, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. In what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and fulfilment?

Sophie: Um- I think because it challenges me t– it challenges me to bring out the good – my faith – um – I sort of – that's how what I wanna do that's – I wanna – um – help people. I wanna – I wanna do religious teaching – um – I want to show people that the side of God not the whole “go to Church an' be a good Catholic” side, the whole – the more demonstrating – um – demonstrations of faith, helping people out an' stuff like that. That's just – yeah.

Interviewer: Good. Now we look at events and people in general and later on we'll come down to talk about Mum and Dad. In general, what events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

Sophie: Um – both retreats that I attended. Um – Year 11 retreat not as much as Year 12 retreat. I had a – a brilliant time on the Year 11 retreat, like it was – it was one of the best times in my life, but at – it really didn't associate very much with – like it did with God, but it's just because all my mates were on it an' it was just a really good time. I think Year 12 retreat because at first I didn't
think it would live up to Year 11 retreat but it so it is so spiritual it
didn’t matter – oh the surroundings were lovely because it was
very quiet, very peaceful, but – um – I think because I saw God
in other people an’ that really, really shocked me, like some
people I’ve known a majority of my life and I didn’t actually know
them. So that sort of bring – it jus’ – yeah, Year 12 retreat – it’s
sort of hard to explain – um – the feelings you sort of have on
that an’ when you come off it but you – you are, I feel, changed
an’ stuff. Um – another thing also my grandad (pause) that sort
of – it’s – all of them sort of strengthen my faith more so, so
yeah. Sort of lost what the question was half way through that.

Interviewer: No, no. You did that well. Is there anything that people have said
or done that have helped you grow closer to God, or even to
move away from God?

Sophie: Um (pause) sometimes – oh – there was the one time when I
was having a talk with a teacher an’ – um – I – it wasn’t moving
away, it was moving – made me like strengthen my faith
because –um – of their story of their life. Actually a few of – a
few teachers – um – the stories of their lives – um – an’ how
they’ve coped, how they’ve – um – their belief an’ faith in God
have helped them through. That sort of – um – just gives you
inspir– more inspiration to believe. Um – also jus’ in general
people who en– um – encourage you, people who help you out,
sort of – like I said you see the – the God in the faith that they
have and that jus’ sort of is even more reason to believe an’
have more strength an’ stuff an’ yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move on. Has your faith grown stronger or weaker
in the last twelve months?

Sophie: Stronger.

Interviewer: Do you know why?

Sophie: Yeah. Because of all those things I mentioned about that
happened in the last twelve months.

Interviewer: Good. What has been the impact of your school on your faith?

Sophie: Oh, like how my school has –

Interviewer: Yeah, has the school impacted on your faith?

Sophie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Would you like to say how it has?

Sophie: Um – I’ll leave – because I’ve already explained retreats an’ all
that I can leave that out of it – um – I think jus’ generally – um –
in religious classes – um – different teachers have shown – um
– different sides of faith an’ – um – God an’ how they – um –
believe how they interact, how they demonstrate an’ – um – I
think that even everyday school life, things that you see like
maybe someone’s dropped all their books an’ the kids around –
everyone, like every kid will help pick up an' I think that the
difference from high school an' primary school because it was
not Catholic, not Catholic, it's just amazing. Everyone wants to
help, everyone – um – an’ jus’ that a— that sort of atmosphere
has – um – has changed my faith because it’s more
demonstrated than – um – taught. That’s just how I would see it.
Also so many – um – people wanting to join in in – um – Mass
an’ all – an’ jus’ everyone’s jus’ really great an’ I jus’ think
because ev— because everyone gives it a go that’s sort of
showing how faith – everyone believes an’ – how God affects
their life an’ stuff. So yeah.

Interviewer: Good. Have there been any significant people or moments in
your school life that have led to changes in the way you think
about God and relate to God?

Sophie: Yeah. It’s heard to pinpoint it. I think Year 9 Religion. Mr Jones
because he en— he encouraged me so much an’ I got the
Religious Award that year an’ um an’ I think that his way in
teaching an’ his way in how he views faith is so different to some
people an’ it’s so inspirational to listen to some of his stories an’
his teachings an’ that’s really – that really encouraged me, that
really – I think that year was the year that I really came out with
my faith an’ my beliefs an’ that’s sort of my, if you like, climax of
when I was ver— very faithful, learnt a lot an’ – um – basically
also because I’m not a person that will learn much – I know it’s
bad with someone just standing there an’ telling me all these
facts, I don’t – I prefer the demonstration sort of side an’ he –
when with all – us all doing collages it really helped because you
think you’d – I did a collage and I just thought it was a simple
collage, but when he – you analyse it an’ you just realise there’s
so much more an’ it – that just really inspired me. That’s why I
think – yeah, that’s – I jus’ loved that year an’ stuff.

Interviewer: Good.

Sophie: He’s very inspirational. Also – um – Mr Bruce, just talking to him
and his stories an’ stuff, an’ how he only came about his faith –
y’ know, all that – when he was a ch— it wasn’t when he was my
age, it wasn’t in his younger years (laughs) – um – an’ it jus’ –
that was really inspirational how he had turned to God an’ stuff,
so yeah.

Interviewer: Good. Has anything happened or been said in RE that has
influenced you in your faith apart from what you have said?

Sophie: It’s hard to – yeah – definitely things in R – Religion – um – it’s
not so much by the teachers though, it’s also by the students –
um – sharing their stories an’ – um – their views. You sort of
ca— accept what others say an’ even you – you definitely learn
things from – um – others’ experiences, others’ challenge–
others – like their challenges an’ stuff, so – yeah, probably that
sort of thing.
Interviewer: You've already spoken about Mr Jones, but are there any other teachers who have had an impact on your faith in God?

Sophie: Um – there's Miss Allanson. Also talking to her – um – learned a lot about her on Retreat an' stuff, so – just her story an' her life, that has – just something that stuck in my head lately – um – when I talk to Mr Browning – 'cause he's helping me out with – um – on the Achievers Programme – um – he – he said something that made me cry – I don't even think – it's not even because it was about God or anything, it's just he said – he looked at me an' said, "Don't ever change, okay." An' I was jus' like – oh! It was a really weird thing to say 'cause it wasn't anything about – well, even though it was about me, it wasn't about my personality, or anything, it was to do with my schooling an' he said, "But don't ever change."

Interviewer: Good. Well, we're into the last section now. We come down to talking about family and in particular about your parents. If you want to, you can talk about your siblings. So what have your parents said or done that has prompted you to grow closer to God or to move away from God?

Sophie: Um – my Dad is – even though with the whole my Aunty Sue thing – she is on his side, but my Dad doesn't really get into whole religious thing – I think I learnt a lot of respect to learn about respect from my Dad. He's very much about respect. That's his whole thing, so I've learnt a lot to be respectful of other people's opinions – um – accepting what they think, like just because someone doesn't believe in God, I don't turn around an' say, "That's wrong." Like I – an' – an' I don't feel obligated to encourage them because that's their decision, that's their choice. I don't want them to turn around to me an' say, "Well, you shouldn't believe in God." So I think I've learned that from my Dad. But my Mum because – my Mum's like my best friend an' I – I can tell her everything an' I jus' feel like, (pause) you know, um – not that my Mum is my God, but like she – the way I talk to God is also the way I talk to Mum, so – um – also because Mum's the Catholic sort of side, her values an' beliefs I've, y' know, accepted into my life, an' that's what I've grown up with, going to Church, - um – jus' – yeah, how he's helped her through hard times as well and she's always stayed faithful to God as well, so she's sort of an inspiration to do the same. So –
Interviewer: Good. You actually answered a number of questions I was going to ask. You’ve done really well. You know how you were telling the story about your Aunty Sue an’ your Dad, do you have any other stories that describe how each of your parents have influenced you?

Sophie: Um – I think – um – jus’ – really because – because my Mum – um – grew – she grew up in Northam an’ – but her parents, my Nonna, Nonno came over from Italy when they were younger, an’ jus’ listening to their struggles through life – um – like how many – how their parents when they passed away – um – how they dealt with it, being over in Australia, being so far away, an’ it’s not like they could– they didn’t have the money to quickly go back – um – with their siblings passing away, sort of – I think it’s through them more – more so – ’cause my Mum sort of tells me all about them, so that’s how – um – jus’ how they’ve went from so little to so much an’ how they’ve always stayed so faithful, – um – stayed so strong. I think – um – when there was – there was a bush fire in Northam – um – a couple of years ago, six or seven years ago, maybe, - um – an’ just how – um – an’ they lost nearly everything. You know, they worked so hard in their life, but they never ever turned away from God. They always had so much faith an’ that sort of again encourages you to stay strong an’ stuff like that. So yeah.

Interviewer: Excellent. Well, okay, Sophie K. I think maybe we could stop at this point. I will pick up some of the things you have said in the next two interviews. Thank you.

Sophie: Thank you very much.
Stephen’s first interview

Interviewer: Stephen, what do you believe about God?

Stephen: Um – God’s the creator of everything. He’s – um – the one who helps us do the right thing.

Interviewer: Are there any words you use to describe what you believe about God?

Stephen: Um – guide, helper. He gives us strength and helps us when things are really hard.

Interviewer: So have you always believed this about God?

Stephen: Um – yeah, but probably more so since my cousin had her accident. She broke her neck and is now in a wheelchair.

Interviewer: So your cousin broke her neck?

Stephen: And – um – yeah, like she pulled through that. She’s – they thought that she’d be a full quadriplegic. She’s got movement in her arms and is regaining her strength. Over the past six months, she’s been able to like push herself around the house in a wheelchair, which is just like proof of someone getting through things like with a bit of help.

Interviewer: So do you see God as being the one who helped her get through that?

Stephen: Um – I believe that someone’s helped her but I also believe like mind over matter like she’s a really strong-willed person. And I believe that she’s like helped herself as well.

Interviewer: What does that say about God to you?

Stephen: He gives us the strength that we need to overcome certain obstacles.

Interviewer: So the strong will comes as a gift from God?

Stephen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Any other stories?

Stephen: Not really.

Interviewer: What about your faith today? Is it different from what it was when you were in primary school or early secondary?

Stephen: Um – I’d say it’s a lot different. I used to – I used – I don’t know, I was pretty arrogant in primary school, like if something bad had happened I’d like blame God, but I realised that He doesn’t – like he’s given earth and people like the will to do their own sort of – do what they want. So He – I understand he has a certain task for us all but it’s not his fault that certain things happen that we’ve done.
Interviewer: Okay, so you don’t see God like that now?

Stephen: No, I don’t see that it’s his fault that things happen. I see it’s his fault that better things happen, like things evolve.

Interviewer: Do you know what’s led you to change?

Stephen: Ah – just maturity, like I don’t have – I don’t – I dunno, I sometimes put myself in like his position, not that he could, but what would you have done, like you can’t watch everyone at the same time. I dunno, just a bit of thought on the matter.

Interviewer: How does that relate to how you’ve changed over the years?

Stephen: Um –

Interviewer: It’s okay to say you don’t know. What are some key events

Stephen: I’m not sure. Like my Dad’s been a pretty big influence on my thoughts. He’s a practising Catholic. He goes to Church each week. Um – and –

Interviewer: So does that mean you go to Church each week?

Stephen: Not as much anymore. I used to go – um – every fortnight when I was at his house, but, yeah, not as much these days.

Interviewer: Okay. Does that mean his influence has been less on you?

Stephen: Um – no. Like, I dunno, I sort of - I know you probably don’t agree, but I believe that I don’t need to go to Church to relate with God, like I can talk to him any time I want.

Interviewer: What about Jesus? Is Jesus different from God?

Stephen: Um – I don’t know. Jesus was physical, he was on this earth, he – I think he had the power of God, but had his own conscience and with his own sort of person that God worked through so – ’cause if he was God he wouldn’t have preached to himself. Like God would still be his Father, his leader.

Interviewer: Good. Is that difference important to you?

Stephen: No.

Interviewer: Was there ever a time when you didn’t see any difference between God and Jesus?

Stephen: Um – probably when I didn’t know the story of Jesus, like and what he’s done, like younger, everyone said, “Aw yeah, God and Jesus, like they’re the same person.” But, I dunno, just the same thing, like the thought of – like – and the difference.

Interviewer: So when did you learn the story about Jesus?

Stephen: Um – going to Church, just over the years. Just different scriptures. Oldies taught me a lot more, ’cause I didn’t go to a Catholic school, I went to a public school.
Interviewer: So coming to St Stephen’s was your first experience of a Catholic school?

Stephen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, I think we’ll explore that a bit further later on. What about the Holy Spirit?

Stephen: Um – what do you mean by that?

Interviewer: Well, how would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend of yours who isn’t a Christian?

Stephen: I haven’t really thought about what the Holy Spirit is. Is – Is that – D’ye mean like the Spirit, the power around us?

Interviewer: It could be that way, yes. If we talk about God being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, like in the Sign of the Cross, so how would you describe that Spirit?

Stephen: Um – How – How would you – I’ll sort of think about it. I don’t know what you mean still.

Interviewer: Okay, so you’ve never thought about that part of the Sign of the Cross?


Interviewer: Okay. You talked about the power in the world around us. Could you say a bit more about that?

Stephen: Um – the Holy Spirit like just through all the saints we’ve had all of the like marvellous people in this world – um – something has to be pushing them like help- like to believe in that sort of thing, leading them like they live. The Holy Spirit could be like that.

Interviewer: And that is what you meant by the Spirit in the world around you?

Stephen: Mmm.

Interviewer: Okay, good. Now you started to talk about prayer, you know, that prayer plays a part in things for you. And the changes that have taken place you thought that some of that would be due to the fact that you pray. So could you talk a bit more about prayer.

Stephen: Um – well, when you pray, it’s like a one-on-one with God, so you hear him and he hears you. And if he gives you the strength through prayer, it’s like – overcome obstacles or anything, like whatever you’re seeking in prayer or even just thanking him he sort of, I believe, will give you little signs he’s heard your prayer.

Interviewer: Have you always believed that about prayer?

Stephen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Even when you were little?
Stephen: Um, yeah, like I used – aw when I was younger I – I’d always start my prayer off like thanking God for my family and my friends, so I’ve always done that. I don’t know what started me to do it, but I always thought I should thank him, like prayer was the way.

Interviewer: What about now?

Stephen: I still actually thank him for my family and friends, so – and, ah, ask him to show me, give me the answers to certain obstacles in my life.

Interviewer: Okay, so that’s the way you pray, yourself to God? Is that right?

Stephen: Yep.

Interviewer: What about to Jesus?

Stephen: Um – I sometimes talk to him, but I don’t know, I always like thought of God as the figurehead, like if Jesus – if God like wanted Jesus to help me then he’d do it. But – I don’t know. Just – I always like say hello and I – I don’t know.

Interviewer: What about at Mass? Is it still God?

Stephen: Um – the whole receiving the Christ like with Jesus kinda – I can’t answer that.

Interviewer: That’s okay. You’re doing very well, Stephen. So you tend to pray to God rather than to Jesus and you’re aware of Spirit in the world in the way in which people live, and the way things happen so you can get a sense of God at work in the world: is this right?

Stephen: Mmm.

Interviewer: And so when you start to pray, what I heard you saying was that the first prayer is a prayer of thanks?

Stephen: Mmm.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move on. How does your belief in God shape the way you live your life?

Stephen: Um – treat others as they would wanna – like as you would want them to treat you. Y’know, just live the Christian life, just have respect for one another and help out people when they need it, ask for help when you need it.

Interviewer: Does that have any part to play in the sort of prayer that you pray?

Stephen: Yeah, like the way I picture God is the way I ask him for help. Yeah, like I said before, just the way he works, just gives you signs or sometimes, I don’t know, like I’ll ask for help and then all of a sudden a song on the radio will have the lyrics that I need to hear, just stuff like that.
Interviewer: Is that a sign?

Stephen: I be- yeah, I believe sometimes it is. It happens too often to be coincidence.

Interviewer: What about other signs? Have there been signs in the last twelve months that you've recognised?

Stephen: Well, um – is that in reference to me?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Stephen: Um – I don’t know. Like, sometimes I believe that God is disappointed in the way we’ve been treating the earth, like that’s why there’s like natural disasters. There’ve been more disasters, like natural disasters, recorded in the past two hundred years than in the previous thousand and, y’know, like just trying to let us know that we’re not living the life we should be.

Interviewer: How long have you believed that to be so?

Stephen: Probably over the past two years, like max.

Interviewer: Is it because of any change in the way you are educated?

Stephen: Yeah, like just stuff on the News. I watch the News more, like have more interest in what’s going on in the world and – yeah, as well as – I do Geography so I know like why natural disasters occur, but the earth’s changing pretty rapidly. We’ve changed basically so more in the past hundred years than what’s happened in the previous million and that’s gotta be pretty disappointing in his eyes.

Interviewer: What about impact of your faith on your attitude towards suffering?

Stephen: Um – I don’t really believe anyone should be suffering in this world. If everyone had faith and believed in sharing then everyone in this world could have a house over their head. We learned that in Geography last year. If the richest 361 people in this world gave only 4 per cent of their wealth then everyone in this world could have a house and be fed. When you look at like Mother Teresa and people like that who were poor and give all their money – It’s like pretty disappointing in like how much poverty there is in the world.

Interviewer: So if you could change things, what change would you want to make?

Stephen: I dunno, just preach to the people who have money who can spare it. Just everyone if you’ve got something you don’t need to give it to people who do.

Interviewer: And what about here at St Stephen’s? If you could wave a magic wand over St Stephen’s what would change?
Stephen: Project Compassion. Like even I see people like walking around drinking coke. There’s drink fountains around. Although – Although it’s nice you could spare those – that money like that could build up to fifty dollars a person I’ve seen. Over the time of Lent that would help out so many people in third world countries.

Interviewer: What about the impact your faith has had on your attitude towards death?

Stephen: Um – that – that’d be like – I’m not scared to die – I don’t wanna die. I’m not scared of dying ’cause I know there’s somewhere to lead on from.

Interviewer: Okay. So your faith teaches you that there’s life beyond this life. What is your faith saying to you about life beyond this one?

Stephen: Um – I believe that there’s like a heaven and hell, sort of as a metaphor. I don’t mean that there’s actually two distinct places, but, ah, heaven could be with our family or everyone or but – um – I dunno, like this is straying off the Catholic belief, I also believe in reincarnation, which is like other beliefs in the world. I got a bit of a multi-belief.

Interviewer: What led you to believe in reincarnation?

Stephen: Um – I dunno. You gotta – This life isn’t long enough for everyone to do what they wanna do and evolve into the person they should be. I think there’s that many saints out there that got to – I don’t know – I don’t think that they could’ve evolved into that person in one life time. I think we’ve got to extend our lives.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you talk a bit about how people evolve?

Stephen: Their consciousness as well.

Interviewer: Does God have a part to play in that?

Stephen: God has a part to do with it, I think. Like he puts us with who we need to be with to evolve into who we need to become. He – yeah, I think there’s a reason that we are in like which family, where we live.

Interviewer: If you wanted to look at that in terms of reincarnation, what happens to Stephen after his death?

Stephen: Um – if he needs to learn something he’ll be placed in a family like that will teach him in the surroundings.

Interviewer: And move him further along?

Stephen: Yeah. Create – help to create the image, like the Christian image.

Interviewer: Okay. So why Hell?
Stephen: I don’t know. The people that who have gone back repeatedly, done things they shouldn’t have like debating in their consciousness like – .

Interviewer: This is pretty deep stuff. When did you start thinking this way?

Stephen: As long as I can remember pretty much.

Interviewer: Do you know why you’ve been thinking this way?

Stephen: Not really. I’ve been interested in Buddhism. I – I wouldn’t do it, but like, I’ve read a lot of it, scriptures an’ that. We’ve got an actual book at home. It’s only little one but like there’s a lot of similarities between that and the Christian belief.

Interviewer: In what ways does your faith give you a sense of purpose in your life?

Stephen: Um – I’m not really sure.

Interviewer: Does your life have more meaning because of your faith?

Stephen: Yeah, I’d say so. Just I know how to live, just what will happen through my life, even down to what I want to be as a profession, I want to be like a mechanical engineer, but I want to design like cleaner cars so that they don’t pollute the world as much.

Interviewer: So you see your faith and your ideals being linked?

Stephen: Yep. Just my whole, my whole conscience like – yeah, they’re all, they’re all linked my faith, my conscience.

Interviewer: Does your faith and conscience play a role in any other way in your life?

Stephen: Um – not really, like just to live a good life and treat others how you want to be treated and just respect them.

Interviewer: So what events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God? You spoke about your Dad and your Dad taking you to Church. Do you want to talk more about that?

Stephen: There isn’t really anything else ’cause – I dunno – I enjoy going to Church, so nothing else has prompted me to go. I’ve always been doing it.

Interviewer: What about your Mum?

Stephen: 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.

Interviewer: Do you have brothers or sisters?

Stephen: I’ve got two brothers and a sister. We all – like all three don’t go to Church as much as we used to, but my little brother Bill, he’s nine and goes to Church every week.
Interviewer: Are there things that people have said or done that you can remember that have helped you in developing your relationship with God?

Stephen: There’s one that – I can’t remember it, but it stuck in my head for years. If I remember, I’ll say it later. There’s one sentence that someone said to me years ago.

Interviewer: It might come back to you. In the last twelve months, do you think your faith has grown stronger or weaker?

Stephen: Um – it’s sort of plateaued, stayed the same.

Interviewer: Do you know why it’s just sort of levelled out?

Stephen: Um – no real big significant events that have led it to become greater or less.

Interviewer: What part does school play in all of this?

Stephen: Um – it teaches me more about like why people do certain things but I don’t believe it evolves my beliefs like significantly.

Interviewer: What about teachers you’ve had or staff members in the school? Are there any who’ve had an influence on you?

Stephen: Names?

Interviewer: If you want to. You can make up a fictitious name if you want to.

Stephen: Miss Smith, I believe, had the same sort of thoughts that I had. I had her in Year 10 and she was a really good RE teacher. A lot of things she said I could relate to. She sort of spoke to us on our level like belief.

Interviewer: If you had to find a word to describe her in terms of her faith, could you think of a word?

Stephen: Um – inspiring.

Interviewer: What impact do you think your RE teachers have had on your relationship with God?

Stephen: Um – Mr Jones has a fairly large, significant role. In Year 10, although I had Miss Smith, I was still – my ideas hadn’t developed. And like last year, we had a few class debates which evolved my thoughts. And – yeah, just like songs we used to play like – we’d bring a CD in and play a song that related to like God and just different people’s aspects on the world. RE’s like there as well.

Interviewer: Could you talk a bit more about debating in class? Can you think back to that in Year 11?

Stephen: A lot of their topics, like abortion and all of that, I disagreed with a lot of the Catholic beliefs, but yeah, pretty much most of them. I agreed with a lot of them and disagreed with a lot of them, but I found that there was no middle ground with me.
Interviewer: Okay. What about the songs? Any song that jumps to your mind straight away from last year?

Stephen: *Tears in Heaven.* Eric Clapton

Interviewer: What is there about that song that strikes you?

Stephen: Um - Curiosity of – if you would know one another in heaven, like how he says, “Would you know my name? Would it be the same?” It just sort of made me stop and think. I’ve heard the song for years, but just haven’t like, like realised what it’s trying to say.

Interviewer: Was there a situation in your class where that song was used?

Stephen: Um – it was just a song that a student had brought in. It – like we didn’t have an actual class discussion on that song.

Interviewer: So how did you get to start to think about the ideas?

Stephen: Of that song?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Stephen: It was one of the topics, like we had to choose a song that stuck out to us the most and go home and talk about it and bring it back the next day. Oh, not talk about it, write it down, our beliefs, then talk about it the next day to the class which took off a few discussions.

Interviewer: So that’s what you did. You went home, thought about it, wrote down a few ideas, came back.

Stephen: But we didn’t use my words. Others that we used, like we used a certain few.

Interviewer: Okay, but at least it got you thinking.

Stephen: Yeah.

Interviewer: We talked about your Dad as playing a significant part in your faith. Can you remember things that he said to you that have stayed with you?

Stephen: Um – there’d be too many to say. A lot of what he’s said has …. 

Interviewer: How often do you see him?

Stephen: Because my parents are divorced. I see him probably twice during the school week. I – I go down there for a long time, like as soon as I go home from school til 9.00 on Wednesdays then drive back to my Mum’s ’cause all my stuff’s there and every second weekend.

Interviewer: So you’re very close to him.

Stephen: Yeah, especially over the past two years, I’ve got to know him a lot better.
Interviewer: And what about your Mum?

Stephen: My Mum’s my best mate. She – 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.

Interviewer: What about the difference in influence?

Stephen: Between my parents?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Stephen: My Mum’s been my mate my whole life, whereas me and my Dad have become mates pretty much over the past two years. Like, he was my mate before that but he was like more of a father figure, whereas my Mum’s been both. I’m not like bagging my Dad in any way but, um, just I knew my Mum more like she knew me ‘cause I like spent all my ups and downs with her.

Interviewer: So can you pinpoint the change in you that’s led to the change in your relationship with your Dad?

Stephen: Um – how much advice he gave me with my cousin’s accident, so much good advice.

Interviewer: So when did the accident happen?

Stephen: Um – I think it was 2000 – 2001, January. It was the one in Yallingup, the girl who broke her neck while diving into the water. And I’ve – interests, we like both love cars. He’s a surfer, I’m a body boarder, so we both love the waves. Footy. Just heaps of stuff. I’ve sorta grown into him. It’s just all things he likes I like.

Interviewer: And so you see the event that’s changed you.

Stephen: Ah, not really. It wasn’t like a significant event. I thought, Aw, yeah, he’s such a great man, I .... Yeah, just over the past two years.

Interviewer: But it all started with your cousin’s accident?

Stephen: Aw, not so much. That was one of the main things, but I was sort of becoming more of a friend with him around that time. It just did increase it.

Interviewer: Okay. Are there things that your Mother said to you that stayed with you?

Stephen: Um – I’m not sure that I’ve thought about it because of her. I dunno, like she’s a really kind person who wouldn’t offend anyone deliberately, just like a really good role model and I try to follow in her path.

Interviewer: Do you have an image of your Mum?

Stephen: Yeah, my –
Interviewer: When I said that did you see a photographic image of your Mum?

Stephen: Nah, like, I dunno, just she’s been a single for like – um – thirteen years. She’s just like developed herself – I’ve seen her develop over that time. She’s just become like such a like significant part of my life. A really, really good person.

Interviewer: Do you say that to your Mum?

Stephen: Yeah. Not – not enough. Everyone who knows her like says how like she’s strong-willed, how charismatic she is.

Interviewer: It’s very clear your parents have had a profound influence on you. Thank you, Stephen. Your life’s very rich.
Stephen's second interview

Interviewer: Is there anything you’d like to say about the experience of being interviewed and keeping a journal about your relationship with God?

Stephen: It’s been a pretty good thing to do because I’ve never actually sat down and thought extensively on my beliefs and values, y’know. I found it quite interesting like on behalf of myself especially reading over the interview that a lot of stuff I forgot that I said there I’ve remembered and sort of realised that was coming from my heart like I’ve never thought of it in depth that much.

Interviewer: Good. In the interview and in the journal you were reflecting on how your faith has changed as you have been growing up. Is there anything further that you would like to add about the experience of your faith changing?

Stephen: Ah, there’s not really any significant thing that I haven’t mentioned in that, so – not really.

Interviewer: Now, one of the things we started off with is how you image God. Is there anything you would like to add about how your image of God has changed from when you were a child to the present?

Stephen: When I was a child I saw God as probably a man, but now I see God as like everything, how he is in everything. He’s not just like one person prompting all of – like events that are going to happen, but he is always there. It’s not as if he does it, like “Do that, do that.” Like, it’s through him that everything happens.

Interviewer: You said, “through him”. Would you like to reflect on that a bit more?

Stephen: How he does it? How I believe he does it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Stephen: Everything from – anything growing is a miracle and I believe he starts it from like the very first – even like with a child, like first conception, trees, the seeds, everything just – If you look outside, it’s pretty amazing what’s actually going on. I was speaking to someone about two weeks ago and we were talking about does the chicken or the egg come first. And that got me thinking like how does everything know what to do, and how to give birth and – It’s pretty amazing. It’s been happening for years and years, but how did the first beings evolve like that? That got me thinking a lot. We had a big discussion on that and even, yeah, the last month I’ve thought a bit more what God is to me.

Interviewer: Good. What about your image of Jesus?
Stephen: That hasn’t greatly changed because Jesus was form – he was like a natural thing you could see. He worked through God I still believe, so he hasn’t greatly changed, but he might be up in heaven, he might help God like do certain acts.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. What about the image of the Holy Spirit?

Stephen: I’ve never really thought – this is not good. Last time I said that it was the – I can’t remember. The Holy Spirit hasn’t changed not greatly because I haven’t thought about it enough for it to evolve.

Interviewer: Okay. What about people in your life, such as parents, brothers, sisters, friends, others and events? Is there anything further you would like to add about how they might have influenced you in your relationship with God?

Stephen: Well, my Dad being a practising Catholic which led me to going to Church which like my faith evolved from that.

Interviewer: Where did you get your knowledge of your faith?

Stephen: From my Dad and then through him from the Church.

Interviewer: What about prayer and your relationship with God?

Stephen: I suppose this had degraded as I got older. I used to pray every night. Now I pray probably on, once, maybe twice a week, but the prayers are more in depth. Like as a child I just prayed like the same prayer every night. But now I actually thank God for certain things, ask him favours and so I suppose I look at God as a mate more so than someone you’re just repetitive towards. So although it’s decreased, it has also become – um – more personal. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes. When you say “more personal”, how does that show? If you had to analyse the sort of prayers you say, what is it about them that leads you to say they’re more personal?

Stephen: The fact that I’m thanking him for stuff I’m not – like I don’t say written prayers, like the Our Father, but I make my own prayers up which I believe is more in depth because I’m thanking him. It’s like thanking a friend for doing certain deeds.

Interviewer: You’ve been using the statement “I believe”. What does that mean for you?

Stephen: Not everyone has to have the same beliefs. You can get a number of things out of religion and your faith and if you get the things that you enjoy and use them to your advantage, then your faith is going to be reinforced. So when I say that “I believe” I don’t object to another people’s opinions. I – yeah, it’s just good that we’ve all got our own faith.

Interviewer: Okay. And you said “your religion and your faith”? 
Stephen: My religion is Catholicism, but my faith – like I said before, I have many beliefs of different religions, like Buddhism, reincarnation, so therefore I use them differently.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything that occurs to you about your experience of school, RE classes, teachers, or peers, that you haven’t said up to this point?

Stephen: This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, “It’s got as much right to live as you do.” And I’ve never done it since. So that’s one small thing. But Mr Jones’ class last year would have been one of the biggest RE things. But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you just – But that’s what the Buddhists also believe. Like they don’t, they don’t kill flies, or anything. I’ve spoken to a – like someone that follows Buddhism only last month and they don’t own fly spray. Like they treat their animals with respect ‘cause they believe that it could be like your grandmother or your grandfather that’s done something bad that have to learn a lesson, so you treat them with respect ‘cause you never know who they are.

Interviewer: Because not to treat them with respect brings bad karma?

Stephen: Yeah, which could lead to you being a dog and also you treating one of your family members bad.

Interviewer: So you can think of it selfishly, can’t you? I’ll avoid coming back as a fly by treating a fly with respect.

Stephen: They also believe that you have to be really bad to go back like the humans are the – like, the pinnacle.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Stephen: We’re doing the RE assignment at the moment on marriage and beliefs.

Interviewer: So you’ve chosen Buddhism for that?

Stephen: Nope. I know a bit about Buddhism, but I wanted to do Judaism because I don’t know anything, so I wanted to extend my knowledge.

Interviewer: Is there anything further that you would like to add that you think we haven’t covered either through the first interview or the journal.

Stephen: No. It’s been pretty broad so you can bring in a lot of factors, but I’ve answered pretty much most of my thoughts.

Week One

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story?
Reflect on why you would name it in that way.

How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings.

Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

Snakes and Ladders
The reason that I would name my story this is because up to now there have been many obstacles in my life. The snake represents that in my life, but there are many helping hands along the way. This can be through my family and friends.

Chapter One: Golden Entrance
The reason for this is because I was born in Kalgoorlie which is a gold mining town. I was born in Kalgoorlie Hospital. I was born with silver hair and apparently I never made a fuss. Subsequently I was the highlight of the Hospital with regular visits from the nurses. I believe this warm welcome to the world was a good one.

Chapter Two:

Chapter Three: Fork in the road
This chapter is about the divorce of my parents. Although I do not remember this separation much, it has still affected my life. I have a step-mum and a half brother whom I’m very close to. After living in Cocos for two years, we moved back to family and friends in Canalham.

Chapter Four: First Day Fear
My first day at school was a scary one. I hated school for six weeks until I finally settled in at Canalham Beach Primary School.

Chapter Five: New
I got a new brother in Year 3. I got a new house the same year and I went to a new school, Denton Primary School.

Chapter Six:

Chapter Seven: Andrea
This is the biggest chapter in my book. It is when my cousin Andrea dove into the water at Yallingup. She broke her neck on the sand-bar and is now a quadriplegic. She has inspired me in many ways, strengthening my faith.

Chapter Eight: The HAM
This is the final chapter. The HAM means Canalham. All my mates life here and I am content with this area. I have a great circle of friends, and I suppose, now with my licence I know how ‘the Ham’ works.
Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn’t exist and that God cares or doesn’t care for you.

Describe the situation.

Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognise God’s presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself.

Describe how your thinking about god changes because of your encounter with this person or event.

The only time I have really changed in faith was the time of my cousin’s accident. I have always believed in God, but her dedication has strengthened my religious beliefs.

Andrea may have very well have drowned not being able to turn over to breathe as she was face down in the water, but one of her friends was clever enough to swim out and turn her over. Most kids would think that she was kidding, lying face down, but he had a feeling Andrea was not OK.

I believe God was looking out for her.

This even, in the beginning questioned my faith. I thought that if there was a god, why would he let this happen. After much soul searching I realised that God did not control this, but he did give Andrea the strength to get through this.
Week Three

Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson.

Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief?

How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

Religious Education not dramatically changed my religion. There are no real lessons challenging my faith.

If I was asked what year challenged my faith, I would have to say that Mr Jones Year 11 class challenged me. There were many heated debates, the two main ones would have been abortion and stem cell research.

I realise the arguments of the Catholic Church in both of these topics but in both cases I disagree. This was the first time I had really disagreed with the Church. I had my own values and attitudes towards these topics and the debates along with the Catholic Church’s view did not change my opinion.

I agree with abortion, the reason being I don’t believe a child should be brought into this life if the parents cannot provide a sufficient life for the child. The Church says we should give the child up for adoption, but I believe that is too hard for the parents. A mother should not have to hold the baby for nine months and give the child away.

An example of a situation is a rape victim. If a girl is raped and falls pregnant I believe that she should not have to keep the baby. It will only bring back traumatic memories of the ordeal.

I agree with stem cell research. I would give anything for the technology to grow stems so that Andrea can walk again. I believe that there are many tragic stories of spinal injuries. It is the same principle as cancer. Most people agree with the treatment of cancer through technology, even though it is prolonging life.

Even down to colds and flue. We take medicine to get over it. Why shouldn’t people like Andrea be able to get over their spinal injuries?

The Catholic Church cannot have the best of both worlds. They should say it is okay for cancer treatment, but not for stem cell research. I know the ramifications of stem cell research and embryos, but my view is the same for abortion.
Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book?

Give the chapter a title and explain its significance.

How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

I am going to do two chapters: the distant future and the not-too-distant future.

Not-too-distant future: Party Time

I cannot wait until my TEE exams are over. It will be a heavy burden lifted off my shoulders. I will be able to relax for a year (I’m taking a year off before I go to Uni, I will get a job and buy a nice car.). I plan to hang out with my mates relaxing and partying on the weekends, spending my work money on whatever I like. After this time I will settle down and go to university where hopefully I will study mechanical engineering.

Distant future: First Steps

What I want more than anything is for Andrea to walk again. 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.

At this stage in my life, I would like for myself to work for Holden designing and making cars and car parts.

I would like to own my own home which I plan to own by the time I am thirty and one day I can hope to have a wife and a few rugrats of my own.

I would like to have a few toys, such as a nice fast car and a boat which I can fish off, wake board on, and big enough to sleep on and make trips to Rottnest and back. So it will have to be a decent size.
Concluding Remarks

After looking back on what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?

All of my stories can be elaborated on. I have been busy with the approaching exams, so a lot of my time is going into the preparation of these exams.