

**Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand
in the 21st Century**

**Master of Ministry Research Project
MINX 590**

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Preamble and Acknowledgements.

As I have studied how people come to faith in the 21st Century, my whole thinking about Christian faith has been challenged and stretched. I expected to re-visit areas of theology such as an understanding of humanity, sin and salvation. However, I was not prepared for the depth or the breadth of the challenge, which would develop. The experience of the process of doing research and observing what it accomplishes in you is humbling. I have found the journey of this study to be crucial for on-going ministry formation.

Listening to people tell their stories has, at times, felt like an indulgence. In a most enjoyable way it has left me with so much rich theological food to digest. It has been a precious experience. Each interview was a sacred moment as I was given a window into a crucial time in an individual's life where God was personally active to them.

My special thanks to the participants, and those who referred them to me.

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Introduction

This research seeks to understand how a particular group of people have come to faith in Christ. It is a theological study examining the work of God who is both knowable and personal but also mysterious and transcendent.¹ The data could be viewed through the lenses of psychology, sociology, or human development. These disciplines focus on the human perspective. While there will be overlap with these disciplines, primarily it is viewed through a theological framework. Stephen Hunt, commenting on the sociological approach states: “There is, of course, an unqualifiable element of the conversion encounter – the subjective spiritual experience of the individual. This is beyond the scope of the sociological exercise.”² Emphasising this as a theological study gives scope to examine people’s experiences of God.

There are possibly many starting points for theology. This study falls in the field of missions. Because God is missionary in nature, it could be argued that mission is the starting point of theology. Gordon Smith goes a step further: “conversion itself could be the starting point for the theological task.”³ Looking at our own faith stories and those of other people informs our theological view.

Evangelistic engagement stretches a person’s whole view of and approach to life. Chilcote and Warner comment:

Engaging in the study of evangelism elicits the most difficult and worthwhile questions related to the life of faith. How does one come to know God in Christ? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion? How does the disciple of Christ engage the culture in which he or she is immersed? What is the relationship between the worship of God and God’s claim upon us as Christian? What is the relationship between moments of crisis and the processes of spiritual discovery in the

¹ Aware of the issues surrounding reference to God, I endeavour to avoid using the male pronoun to refer to God, however, repeated use of such terms as “God’s self”, depersonalises God for me and it makes for clumsy language so, sometimes “he” is used in reference to God. I use both male and female images for God in my referencing of Gospel images.

² Steven Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise: Evangelism in a post-Christian Era*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 191.

³ Gordon T Smith, *Beginning well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 11.

Christian journey? Growing interest in evangelism gives rise to these questions and many more.⁴

John Saxbee asserts that the place to start is with genuine listening to others and their concerns and then to reflect on what aspect of the Gospel connects with them. He uses an image of listening to two tunes at once in talking about evangelism. For this image he draws on the formative childhood experiences of composer Charles Ives. Ives was taken to hear marching band parades where he could hear two tunes from different bands playing simultaneously. This experience inspired Ives in adult life to write music which ran two melodies side by side. Saxbee proposes that the task of evangelism is to sit in the space between two tunes: the tune of Christian faith and that of the issues of world.⁵ This is the position taken in this research, one of listening to people's stories and then assessing them against commonly held Christian beliefs.

The Reformed tradition normally holds that the starting point is Scripture as the supreme rule of life and faith. However, in this study, the starting point is necessarily the stories of how people came to Christ and then to reflect on what aspects of the gospel have impacted them. Doing this drives us to examine theological assumptions and interpretations of scripture, reviewing how valid they are.

The research tests the question: are there common factors which can be observed in the ways that adults come to Christian faith from non-Christian backgrounds in the 21st Century? If so, then how might they be described and how might they inform the church's mission? If not, then what might that say about the work of God and about the church's evangelistic efforts? The chosen method was to interview people hearing their stories of coming to faith in their own words.

⁴ Paul W Chilcote and Lacey C Warner, "Introduction" in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice in the Church*, ed. Paul W Chilcote and Lacey C Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xx-xxi.

⁵ John Saxbee, *Liberal Evangelism: A flexible response to the decade* (London SPCK, 1994), 15-22.

The setting is specific. It focuses on a sub-set of New Zealanders whose origins are from British/European backgrounds and whose lives are typical of those living in Howick Auckland where I currently live. This is my cultural background and is a significant group of people for the mission of Howick Presbyterian Church – St Andrews (HPC) in which I serve. This group is also regarded as being difficult to reach with the Gospel.

This study divides into three sections. It lays the groundwork in the first four chapters: looking at why this is an important study, from a personal and a ministry perspective, defining terms so that the meaning of key words used in this study are clear, describing the rationale behind the chosen research method and looking at what some of the anticipated results of the research might be. Chapters five to seven then describe how the participants came to faith and what effect that has had on them. Chapters eight to eleven reflect on what the narratives reveal and what implications there are for the church before returning to the question to see what conclusions can be made on how people become Christians in today's world.

Chapter 1

Motivations

This research topic has not arrived out of thin air. Many factors have led to this point, so I start by expressing why this topic is an important one for me. This section is in two parts. Firstly it examines the personal factors which drew me to this research. Secondly it discusses why this is an important study for the Church. This exposes my thinking processes as I approach the research.

Personal motivations ⁶

Evangelical Christian faith was the dominant worldview I grew up with. It was ingrained in me through home life and church attendance. I formally made a commitment to Christ as a child at a camp where for the first time I remember hearing I had to make a response to God. Before then, being a Christian meant being a good boy and correctly answering the minister's questions in the children's talk. ⁷ The framework of the gospel message I responded to was: God loves me, I have sinned (I had not always been a good boy), my sin separates me from God, the consequences of my sin is death, but Jesus paid the price for my sin so that by believing in him and asking for his forgiveness, I would have eternal life. ⁸ This was a defining moment in my life. I knew I was a different person and vividly remember a sense of awe and wonder at the goodness of God and the beauty of creation. I have always wanted to please God and after making that commitment I would try to share my faith with

⁶ Helpful to this reflection was being interviewed myself on my story by Liz Smythe PhD RM RGON, April 2012.

⁷ Over the years a number of tracts have been used including steps to peace with God, Bridge to life and The Four Spiritual Laws. All of these follow a similar pattern. For the purposes of this study we will call them the Four Spiritual laws. Campus Crusade, "The Four Spiritual Laws," <http://www.campuscrusade.com/fourlawseng.htm> (10 November 2012).

⁸ This sounds like a very adult explanation; however, even though only about 8 years old, the person who counselled me was very clear to make sure I understood what I was doing. He made me articulate this message back to him and once I had prayed "the prayer" he asked me to tell another person in my cabin what I had done. Michael Green, *Compelled by Joy: A lifelong passion for evangelism* (Nottingham: Inter-varsity Press, 2011), 14-23. Green's explanation of his conversion has a similar flavour: a confrontation of sin as doing bad things and as choosing to go his own way.

others, at school, then work and with family members. Later I studied at the Bible College of New Zealand because of its evangelical nature.⁹

This evangelical heart was at least partly behind my entering youth ministry.¹⁰ It was there that I believed the church was reaching out to young people calling them to faith. Conference speakers would motivate us with a statistic that eighty five percent of people who become Christians do so before they turn eighteen and that very few did so after they turned twenty five.¹¹ This would assure me I was concentrating on the right ministry.

Experiences of mass evangelism programmes dating back at least as far as the Louis Palau Crusade in 1986 have convinced me that it is not an effective way to reach non-churched people in New Zealand. In fact, I fear, some have done more harm than good. Following rallies and crusades I would often “follow up” some who had made a commitment. They were often unsure why they responded or what it had meant to them. I cannot recall any follow up visits with people not already in a local church who had been deeply changed as a result of “coming forward” to receive Christ.¹²

I also considered that some low integrity tactics were used. The World Impact Tour in the early 2000’s publically advertised a show with mighty motor bike tricks and incredible feats of strength. However, after a few tricks, the team began to talk about God and many people headed for the gates. I believe this to be because they had come to be entertained not coerced into becoming a Christian.¹³

⁹ Now Laidlaw College.

¹⁰ A pragmatic reason was also that this was where I could find work in Christian Ministry.

¹¹ Mike Fleischmann, "How Outsiders Find Faith," *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2012): 79.

¹² In later years, having set up a time for a “follow up” visit, commonly the person was not at home when I called, and I was left with the suspicion that they were avoiding the visit.

¹³ Impact World Tour. *The New Zealand Story*. By David and Susan Cole has another view. The cover page for this book states: ‘A remarkable journey of faith and dependence upon God, this story takes you inside the Impact World Tour in New Zealand, during which more than twenty-five thousand people committed their lives to Christ in a three-month period. David and Susan Cole, "Impact World Tour. The New Zealand Story," <http://www.ywampublishing.com/p-1004-impact-world-tourbrthe-new-zealand-story.aspx30th> (April 2012). However, as far as I know in Tauranga, the impact in terms of a flow into local churches of new believers was negligible. Bryan Gilling’s research cited later supports these subjective opinions.

In terms of other initiatives, I trained in Evangelism Explosion and have led Alpha courses. I have not observed many people who have been significantly affected by these who did not already have some basic Christian framework in their lives.

In recent years ordained ministry has given me opportunities to engage with non-churched people. While these are often short term relationships which operate for a particular reason, they are opportunities to have spiritual conversations. How this can be done purposefully but without abusing the reason the people have engaged with me is an on-going challenge.

So, I am motivated to do this study in order to better understand how non-churched people become Christians because their experience is so different to mine. I have an evangelical drive which comes from my upbringing. I am frustrated over an apparent lack of effectiveness from personal witnessing and evangelistic programmes. I desire to understand myself better and to formulate an approach which is true to my make-up and helpful for people who are coming to faith in the HPC environment. Also, I desire to help others who have a concern for evangelism, but who might not know an appropriate approach.

The importance of this Study for Christian Ministry in New Zealand

Having looked at personal factors, now we look at why this is an important study for the church. We examine theological and ministry issues that motivate the desire to study how un-churched people come to faith in Christ in a portion of New Zealand society.

We approach this by considering why evangelism is important. Some inadequate reasons are:

- Command - Christians are commanded to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:20).

- Conviction - some might engage in warning people of the possibility of a Godless eternity or to tell people about the possibility of an eternity with God.
- Compassion - the gospel is about transformation. It is good news to the poor and release to the captives (Luke 4:18-19). The lost are found; those in darkness come into the light.
- The number of empty seats in services of worship. Unless more people come to worship, many churches will close.

A more adequate reason relates to the truth claims of the gospel. Leslie Newbigin writes:

We have a gospel to proclaim. We have to proclaim it not merely to individuals in their personal and domestic lives. We do certainly have to do that. But we have to proclaim it as part of the continuing conversation which shapes public doctrine. It must be heard in the conversation of economists, psychiatrists, educators, scientists and politicians. We have to proclaim it not as a package of estimable values, but as the truth about what is the case, about what every human being and every human society will have to reckon with.¹⁴

David Bosch also argues forcefully:

The Christian faith, I submit, is intrinsically missionary. It is not the only persuasion that is missionary. Rather, it shares this characteristic with several other religions, notably Islam and Buddhism, and also with a variety of ideologies such as Marxism.¹⁵

A distinctive element of missionary religions is that they all hold to some great unveiling of ultimate truth believed to be of universal importance.

Because no one has all the truth, our truth will always be subjective and pluralistic. However, the revealed truth about God in Christ is ultimate truth for all people.¹⁶ There is then a responsibility for those, who know something of that truth, to make others aware of it. An aspect of this research considers whether these new believers have come to realise an ultimate reality in the midst of a pluralistic mindset and, if so how.

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 64.

¹⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 8-9.

¹⁶ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 15-39.

However, there must be a deeper motivation. A fundamental belief in the goodness of God must drive a passion for evangelism. If we are motivated to get others to come to church to improve attendance, then our focus is on preservation. If evangelism is done primarily out of obedience to command, then we are acting out of obligation. But if deep down, Christians believe God is good (Ps 100:5) and that God acts towards people with loving grace, then our deeper motivation is for people to encounter that goodness.

The primary reason for evangelism is then related to the belief that God is love and that love is available to all people through Jesus Christ. We also examine how the participants have come to believe in the goodness of God when they have not grown up knowing that love.

Despite the church's efforts to spread this good news the western church has been in decline for the past fifty years. We need to look at some reasons for this because they affect how we view this study. Both New Zealand Census and denominational statistics show declining numbers in church affiliation since the 1960's. In the Presbyterian Church attendance dropped from over 120,000 in 1960 to under 40,000 in 1995.¹⁷ Not all Christians attend church, and the statistics might indicate a drop in the average number of times a person attends worship. Even so, church attendance is a key indicator of the number of people who are exposed to the Christian message.¹⁸ Through these years there was considerable growth among some Pentecostal churches, but this growth did not match the drop off in mainline denominations and this growth plateaued in the late 1990's.¹⁹ Conservative groups are showing greater resilience.

¹⁷ Council of Assembly, "General Assembly Reports," (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand: 1998), E 15-16. In that same time period New Zealand's population increased from 2.5 to 3.5 million people. The Archbishops' Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (Brookvale: Willow, 2005), 40-41. In Britain it is estimated that 55% of children went to Sunday school in 1900 but only 4% in 2000.

¹⁸ The HPC experience would be common to many churches. In its traditional service where mainly older people attend, most attend every week. In its more contemporary service, people are more likely to be there once every three weeks.

¹⁹ Gordon Miller, *Growing Great Kiwi Churches*, Affirm booklet series, vol. 16, ed. George Bryant (Tauranga NZ: Affirm Publications, 2002), 7.

The figures might point to a drop off in church affiliation not to Christian belief.²⁰ Many beliefs common to Christianity still exist in society, like belief in God and in life after death. But Sylvie Collins points out that the content of their belief is unknown and unable shaped by the church. There is a climate of believing, but the content of that belief might not be well thought through.²¹

In many churches decline is masked by immigration from Asia, South Africa and the Pacific.²² One third of children and adults attending Presbyterian churches in Auckland are Pacifica people.²³ The 2011 Church Life Survey for HPC recorded that 37% of attenders were not born in New Zealand. Its contemporary service has about 50% which is a truer reflection of the Howick area.²⁴

This drop in church attendance is true across the western world.²⁵ It has been widely dissected and analysed. Blame is commonly laid on church leadership and the inability of the church to “move with the times.”²⁶ However, trends in western society have also had a major effect. A significant reason that is often overlooked relates to effective contraception which has reduced the average family size. Alan Roxburgh asserted that numbers growth in the

²⁰ Duncan MacLaren, *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church*, Studies in Religion and Culture, ed. Chris Partridge, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 57-93.

²¹ Sylvie Collins in Bob Mayo with Sara Savage and Sylvie Collins, *Ambiguous Evangelism* (London: SPCK, 2004), 13-29. Memory mutates and fades over successive generations (13-14). Non-church going means more subjectivity about belief (21). Saw little evidence that young people were wanting to search for a deeper understanding (28).

²² Rev Dr Stuart Vogel, E-mail, 6th May 2012. In 2011 the Northern Presbytery welcomed nine new Korean congregations into its fold with an estimated 400 adult members. South African immigration has also boosted church numbers.

²³ Peter Lineham, "What the numbers are telling us," Key-note speaker at Northern Presbytery, Lord's Korean Church, 13th July 2010. However, as the children of immigrants are exposed the forces of western culture, a generation or so later they face the same issues of decline. In Asian communities, where honouring family is deeply culturally ingrained, it seems to take longer for western thinking to affect. Their communities are more self-contained which keeps their cultural identity for longer but it also limits their ability to reach westerners. Evangelism for them is mainly contained within their own cultures.

²⁴ "Church Life Survey New Zealand," (Howick Presbyterian Church, 2012). Question A4. Which country were you born in? "2006 Census Howick Ward Statistics," N Z Statistics, <http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/SiteCollectionDocuments/HowickWardLocalBoard.pdf> (31st August 2012) In the Howick Ward 51.9% were born in New Zealand and 48.1% were born overseas. A significant proportion of these were born in Britain.

²⁵ The southern states of the United States are possibly an exception to this.

²⁶ MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, 1-10. Looks at church decline figures in Britain and at some of the blame which directed at the church. However he argues that societal pressures are more influential.

church had historically been reliant on biological growth but this is no longer the case.²⁷ This is backed up by local realities. The Herald newspaper reported in June 2012 that the average number of babies born per woman in New Zealand is 2.01.²⁸ In addition, a recent news report spoke of research which indicated that half of the people in youth groups go on with their Christian faith into university.²⁹ However, for those with no church connection as young people, the chances of them ever becoming Christians were slim.

So, if most people who become Christians do so from Christian families, reflected in the eighty five percent before eighteen statistic and the church matches society as a whole with birth rates, and half of those children will leave the church, then the church will naturally continue to decrease in numbers.

Roxburgh made another assertion that the church has never been good at evangelising non-churched people.³⁰ Numbers currently in the church supports this. The Church Life Survey showed that five percent of those in church came to it from a position of 'no religious belief' and only two percent began coming with 'no religious belief' who were not raised in Christian homes.³¹ Analysis by Kevin Ward supports this. He cites a number of examples within the New Zealand context where the percentage of people

²⁷ Alan Roxburgh, Speaking at Somervell Presbyterian Church, 26th November 2010.

²⁸ Simon Collins, "Great Kiwi Myths," *The New Zealand Herald*, June 27th 2012, A, 1. This an increase from 1.9 in 2002 but hardly a baby boom and ½ the average in 1961 (4.3) This is an issue affecting the whole western world and is a reality which is hitting the church hard and so that now many congregations have bulging numbers of older people in them and fewer young people.

²⁹ "Faith among young people," *Television New Zealand*, (8th April 2012). Paloma Migone reports on a study by Professor Paul Morris of Victoria University on the faith of University students. This study is most likely the one referred to in the TVNZ report. Paloma Migone, "Teens tuning in to God's new beat," <http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/6706471/Teens-tuning-in-to-Gods-new-beat> (30th August 2012). A 50% continuation rate is, I think, a positive statistic. In youth ministry conferences I heard as low as 1 in 7 will stay in the church. Professor Paul Morris's study, among university students indicates the very significant transition from a faith within youth group and life at home, to keeping the faith at university. However, the transition from University into a work setting is yet to be faced by these people.

³⁰ Roxburgh, Somervell (26th November 2010). Roxburgh commented on studies which backed this assertion up. This research was not able to be attained, however, Bryan Gilling's research discussed below builds on such studies, as does, Stephen Hunt. Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise. Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate publishing Ltd, 2004), 169

³¹ "Church Life Survey New Zealand," Question A7 HPC stats are a little higher than the national average: 5% and 3%. <http://clsnz.com/dp7/?q=content/reports>

attending worship from non-churched backgrounds is consistently less than five percent.³²

Only a small number of people ever begin coming to church from a non-church background. One place to account for this reality is to the effectiveness of evangelistic programmes over the years. Bryan Gilling's analysis of attenders at the Louis Palau mission in 1987 points toward a conclusion, that mass evangelism has historically not been an effective means of reaching un-churched people in New Zealand, objectively verifying my earlier observations. He concludes that: "Palau, seeking to evangelise and bring about the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity was actually wasting his time."³³ Mass evangelism is only one method of evangelism, but it has been a major way that the church has relied upon in the past to "reach" non-Christians.

More recently the Alpha programme has been used for evangelism. Alpha NZ have no objective data on how many become Christians through Alpha from a non-church background. However, Stephen Hunt has analysed figures in Britain, which confirmed his suspicions that Alpha was failing its primary aim of reaching the unconverted and un-churched. Holy Trinity Brompton, the central home of Alpha, had higher numbers, but over all, there were not a large number of people from non-churched backgrounds engaging in Alpha.³⁴ The effectiveness of other initiatives like Evangelism Explosion or Christianity Explained, operating on a smaller scale is even less able to be evaluated.

³² Kevin Ward, "Christendom, Clericalism, Church and Context: Finding Categories of Connection in a Culture without Christian Memory," *Stimulus* 10, no. 1 (2002): 54. This trend is valid for the US, Canada and Australia as well.

³³ Bryan D Gilling, "Convinced Christians Convinced Convinced Christians? Luis Palau and Mass Evangelism in New Zealand," in *In 'Rescue the Perishing': Comparative Perspectives on Evangelism and Revivalism*, ed. Douglas Pratt (Auckland: College Communications, 1989), 91-93. Gilling admits the weakness of the research because of a limited number of respondents, but his work builds on similar studies which came to similar conclusions. The benefits he saw in such events were to "function as almost a ritual initiation into religious adulthood particularly of previously socialised adolescents." And also they provide a good opportunity for the church to be buoyed by staging a city-wide event requiring cooperation across denominations. Also Steven Hunt refers to similar studies commenting on Billy Graham Crusades in Britain: 'In short, they provided a sense of belonging, identity and revival for those already in the faith, or brought back into the fold those who had gone astray.' Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise*, 169.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-171 & 185-7.

So, the Church is not maintaining itself through biological growth, and it appears to not be effective in reaching un-churched people to date.

Added to these thoughts on biological and evangelistic growth, we can add knowledge is low. Mayo argues that there is little residual knowledge of core Christian beliefs among Generation Y. While most hold to a broad spirituality, few have sufficient knowledge to have been able to seriously consider the claims of Christianity.³⁵

Also, the credibility of the church is low. Lewis and Wilkins point to a separation between many churches and their communities as a reason for the lack of fruitful engagement with the Gospel. The church has isolated itself and is seen as largely irrelevant in the public arena.³⁶ There is a backlash against fundamentalism in the media and within public tolerance. Without an alternative view to hold onto, all Christians can be aligned with fundamentalist extremists who act violently towards people who are different to them.³⁷ The public image of Christians is not helped when some churches present themselves as being legalistic or closed minded. This makes it easy for onlookers to conclude: "if that's what a Christian is, I don't want to be one!"³⁸

Added to, this plausibility is low. Within the western world Christian thought was once considered plausible in society. Duncan MacLaren and others have identified the 1960's as a turning point in the plausibility of Christian faith. Christianity is now seen largely as being implausible in the public arena.³⁹ He cites a range of factors in modernity which have contributed to this. Included among them are: issues of the mind, where faith has become a matter of private opinion, since human reasoning is elevated as the locus of truth over any sense of revelation and the rational scientific approach

³⁵ Mayo, *Ambiguous Evangelism*, 1-53.

³⁶ Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

³⁷ Muslims have this same issue as they can all be labelled Taliban.

³⁸ Other points of discussion which are commonly raised are opinions related to the Destiny Church and the abuses of the prosperity doctrine. Also some explorers of Christian faith have revealed a fear for them that if they become Christians they will become like "those evangelists" who force Christianity on people. They are scared they will become "an evangelical". Such Christians are viewed as sub-human.

³⁹ MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, 1-10.

determines what is real or not.⁴⁰ He comments on a secularising process in society, where a move is traced from rural communities with traditionally held beliefs, to large urban cities where people are separated from their traditions and exposed to many different beliefs. This has led to a pluralism of belief and a relativism of truth where retaining one belief system can be very difficult.⁴¹

With a pluralisation of plausibility structures in society, some beliefs gain power over others. Christian beliefs are no longer the powerful ones in society and so church members become cognitive deviants in relation to the dominant secular plausibility structures. The church has to make its voice heard among many voices. It no longer has a place of privilege to speak from.⁴² There is also the drive of pragmatism which places effectiveness ahead of truthfulness. Also consumerist pressure emphasises serving self, the placing the highest value on what pleases your concerns.

We see then that the challenge for a Christian faith which holds to doctrines that are revealed and counter to strong cultural forces is considerable. To explain falling church numbers we can look at the church assuming that if it could change its approach then masses of people would encounter Salvation. We can look to God and why God why is not saving more people.⁴³ And we can look at strong trends in society including, falling birth rates and increasing levels of disconnection from the church. As we hear how the respondents came to faith we will consider how the church might better engage in mission, what God is doing and how we respond individually and corporately to societal pressures. We move on now to define how key words are used in this study.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14-30. Issues of the mind.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31-53. Modernity: Catalysts and Carriers.

⁴² We see this with some of the current issues in society which emphasise the challenges to traditional beliefs and the diminished place of privilege of the church today. The proposed amendments to the Marriage Act to allow same sex couples to marry challenges traditional Christian values around heterosexual marriage. Also this is seen in the debate over Christian Religious Education in state schools. How can this be justified in a climate of multiple beliefs?

⁴³ God is not often the focus of critique. However, Scripture asserts that if the Son of Man be lifted up he would draw all people to himself (John 3:14). The Son was lifted up on the cross but all people are not being drawn. This is a crisis of faith similar to that of the early church who expected Christ to return in a generation. Should there be fist shaking laments instead of pleasant worship songs proclaiming the goodness of God to all people in worship?

Chapter 2

Definitions and Issues around Key Words

Communication is a mine field that we negotiate everyday. For communication to be successful the recipient of a message needs to grasp what the sender intended. This section is, therefore, devoted to clarifying the meanings of key words. This task is especially important because words like *evangelism* and *evangelical* are loaded terms. They are controversial and even offensive to some. We will make some running definitions and analyse their validity later. We also need to discuss issues surrounding these terms as far as they might be relevant to the research.

There are a number of theological terms to be defined. This study sits within the broad area of Christian mission. David Bosch explains that the mission of the church is a participation in the mission of God. He writes that mission “refers primarily to the *missio Dei* (God’s mission), that is, God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.”⁴⁴

Evangelism is an aspect of the mission of the church.

Mission includes evangelism as one of its essential dimensions. Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become living members of Christ’s earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

Bosch further defines evangelism as:

That dimension and activity of the church’s mission which seeks to offer every person, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly

⁴⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10. Also Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 25-29. John 13:35; 20:21; 1 John 4:7-21.

⁴⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10-11 & 409-11. For a fuller discussion on what evangelism is see: David Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-currents Today," in *The Study of Evangelism. Exploring a Missional Practice in the Church*, ed. Paul W Chilcote and Lacey C Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 8-17.

challenged by the explicit faith in Jesus Christ, with a view to embracing him as saviour, becoming a living member of his community, and being enlisted in his service of reconciliation, peace and justice on earth.⁴⁶

Evangelism focuses on a person's introduction to Christian faith. While it is true to speak of evangelisation as a lifelong process, in this study, evangelism is understood as the deliberate activity of the church which presents the gospel of Jesus Christ among those who are not yet Christians, giving them opportunity to receive him as saviour.⁴⁷

Bosch's definition: that evangelism seeks to "offer everyone, everywhere a valid opportunity" is crucial to this study because it calls us to examine the evangelistic practices of the Church. Is it sensitively and appropriately giving people from a non-Christian, western cultural background, valid opportunities to encounter the claims of Christ? Missionaries overseas understand that the Gospel is proclaimed in cultural settings in different ways to different people. Maybe this principle has not been adequately applied to western settings.

Evangelism is an essential dimension of the total activity of the church. "Evangelism may never be given a life of its own, in isolation from the rest of the life and ministry of the church."⁴⁸ To speak of evangelism as being essential and embedded in the total mission of the church is to assert that the church's activity in the world is not truly missional if it does not involve

⁴⁶ Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-currents Today," 7.

⁴⁷ For example Robert Warren comments: "Few Christians are ever fully evangelised. All our lives we need the power of the gospel to transform us." Robert Warren, *Being Human Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London Marshall Pickering, 1995), 133. Also in conversation with clinical psychologist Riaan van Schalkwyk M.A. *Clinical Psychology* (July 2011). The depth of God's grace can never be fully appreciated in every area of our lives. Some aspects of a person's life might need to be evangelised and re-evangelised several times.

⁴⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 412. Also M Booker and M Ireland, *Evangelism which way now? An evaluation of Alpha, Emmaus, Cell church and other contemporary strategies for evangelism*. (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 1-2. "integral to that mission is the calling of people to follow Jesus."

evangelism.⁴⁹ A truly missional church will be committed to and engaged in evangelism as an integral dimension of its ministry.⁵⁰

An evangelical in this context is simply one who is committed to the task of spreading the good news so that others can encounter it and enter a relationship with Christ. The word evangelical in this study does not primarily refer to a particular theological framework, by which some define themselves. Christians of all persuasions must be evangelical in the sense that all are bearers of the good news about Jesus.⁵¹ An Evangelist then is someone who has a specific calling and gifting to embody and articulate the gospel among those who, as yet don't believe, in ways which invites them to do so.⁵²

Having defined evangelism within the broad field of mission, two concepts are particularly important. We must be clear about how we use the words *conversion* and *gospel*. Conversion to Christ is the goal of evangelism. If we understand that: "Salvation is God's work and God's work alone," and evangelism is the activity of the church announcing and inviting people to participate in God's saving work, then conversion might be seen as the individual's response to these two activities. "Conversion is the human response to the saving work of God through Christ."⁵³

⁴⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: what it is, why it matters, how to become one* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 9-11. They give a history of the use of the term missional.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 27-45. Roxburgh and Boren explain eight things which the missional church is not and conclude that "Missional church is about an alternative imagination for being the church. It is about this transformation toward a church that is shaped by *mystery, memory, and mission.*"

⁵¹ John Hitchen, "The Gospel For Today's New Zealanders," in *New Zealand Made: Perspectives on Mission in Aotearoa*, ed. John Crawshaw & Wayne Kirkland (Wellington: Signpost Communications, 1994). 9. "Being evangelical should characterise the whole church regardless of whether we also call ourselves Liberal, Radical, Conservative, Charismatic, Pentecostal or Fundamentalist."

⁵² "I am not altogether happy with the name "evangelist"". It is "misleading because the word can mean so many things to different people. A fanatic with a one-track mind. A shallow, narrow-minded enthusiast, quite possibly on the make. A person obsessed with the Bible, a book written at least two millennia ago. An illiberal bore, out to change other people's opinions. An obscurantist with outdated views on absolute truth. And no doubt you can add to those impressions." Green, *Compelled by Joy*, 11-12.

⁵³ Smith, *Beginning well*, 16. Even this is simplistic as the motivation and ability to convert is the work of God. 'God converts. The Holy Spirit motivates and enables every aspect of the conversion of a person.' Paul Vink John Crawshaw, "Conversion: Reconsidering the Paradigm," in *New Zealand Made: Perspectives on Mission in Aotearoa*, ed. John Crawshaw and Wayne Kirkland (Wellington: Signpost Communications, 1994), 42.

What then is involved in a person's conversion? James Fowler defines conversion in terms of a person's contents of faith. Our faith orientations and our corresponding characters are shaped by three major elements. *Centres of value* that consciously or unconsciously have the greatest worth to us in giving our lives meaning, *images of power* that sustain us in the midst of life's contingencies and *master stories* "that we tell ourselves and by which we interpret and respond to the events that impinge on our lives."⁵⁴

Fowler writes:

Few things could be more important than serious reflection on how we form and commit ourselves to (and through) the contents of our faiths. Few things could be more important than serious reflection on what constitute worthy, life-giving and life-enhancing master stories and centres of value and power.⁵⁵

"Conversion has to do with changes in the contents of faiths." Fowler defines 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."⁵⁶

This definition appeals because it speaks of the transformation of a person's whole set of beliefs and values. Smith defines Christian conversion as "the act of believing in Jesus, choosing to follow Jesus and being united with Jesus as Lord and Saviour."⁵⁷ Christian conversion is not simply a person's decision to believe in Christ as an act of mental assent. Conversion changes the whole basis of what a person values and how they make sense of life. Smith emphasises the need to take seriously the possibility and the call to transformation in conversion. "Conversion is not an end, it is the bridge to the

⁵⁴ James W Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 276-77.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 281-2. This definition is not necessarily confined to a Christian conversion. I have a nephew who underwent a form of conversion which fits with this definition. He went to College to play rugby and cricket, but around year 10 he discovered the music department. All his allegiances changed including who his friends were, where he could be found at school, what his priorities were and what was meaningful to him.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Beginning well*, 16.

goal of our salvation, which is nothing less than transformation in to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 8:28-29)⁵⁸

Different terms could be used to describe a person coming to faith, like salvation, redemption, justification, sanctification. Andrew Kirk prefers the term regeneration as a moment of change with conversion being a process which has a beginning but is a continuous work. However, regeneration can also be understood as both a point in time and a life-long process.⁵⁹ For the purpose of this study we understand conversion as the point of turning, giving, or surrendering; when a person places their trust in Christ. In Biblical terms it is common to talk about repentance as a turning from and a turning to; a turning from sin and a turning to Christ.

In discussing what happened to Paul on the Damascus road, Bosch considers three possibilities. Alternation, a relatively limited form of change which actually develops out of one’s own past. Transformation, a radical change of perspective which does not require a rejection or negation of the past, or of previously held values, but nevertheless involving a new perception, a recognition of the past, in the language of Thomas Kuhn, “a paradigm shift”. Or conversion, a pendulum-like change in which there is a rupture between past and present, with the past portrayed in strongly negative terms. While he sees all three in evidence, he certainly considers Paul’s experience to be a conversion. The definition we are using sees transformation as a part of conversion. As we examine the interviews one of the things to note will be whether what happened is more like alternation or conversion.⁶⁰

Defining conversion as a moment focuses our attention on a point of commitment but it does not minimise the ongoing process.⁶¹ The Holy Spirit

⁵⁸ Ibid., 19-20. Vink & Crawshaw, "Conversion: Reconsidering the Paradigm," 43. Conversion is described as: Transformation of worldview and whole of life. Genuine conversion affects every corner and moment of life. And also as a change of allegiance: from cultural idols to the reign of Christ.

⁵⁹ Kirk, *What Is Mission?*, 68-70.

⁶⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 125-127. Also Ward, "Christendom, Clericalism, Church and Context," 56.

⁶¹ Vink & Crawshaw, "Conversion: Reconsidering the Paradigm," 42. "Conversion is a process which lasts through the whole of a person’s life. It begins long before the person is aware of anything as the

has been at work to bring a person to that point and, Smith comments: "Our whole life is in one sense the working out of the full meaning of our conversion. To live in truth is to act in a manner consistent with our conversion."⁶²

Nor does it negate the reality that some people are unaware of a point of conversion, but are none-the-less sure of their salvation. It is assumed however, that this would be more common for people who have grown up in an environment of Christian faith and it is anticipated that those who are raised in non-Christian environments will have a more definable moment in their lives when they became a Christian.⁶³

The word gospel is the last theological term to define. The gospel is the good news that there is salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The means of salvation and how the gospel has been packaged are issues for us to consider.

Commonly the gospel has been viewed narrowly from a limited reading of Paul's writings especially from the book of Romans. The classic gospel message, summarised as "the Four Spiritual Laws", draws heavily on one salvation metaphor - justification which comes from the law court. In this framework, the result of sin places people in a guilty state before God and so a person must admit their guilt and ask God for forgiveness. This is an appropriate approach for people living within Christendom, where there is a general acceptance that there is a God to whom all are accountable. However, the people in this study did not come from that world.

Evangelistic efforts which use this model have been critiqued as operating within a modernist worldview dominated by scientific reasoning and emphasising the human potential. This has resulted in a human centred view

Holy Spirit woos him/her. The process is often marked by seemingly significant and insignificant events, points of crisis or decision."

⁶² Smith, *Beginning well*, 10.

⁶³ Mike Fleischmann found that 11.4% of people who became Christians from a non-churched background could not identify a point at which they became a Christian. Fleischmann, "How Outsiders Find Faith," 81.

of conversion, a reductionist view of what it involves and a static closed way of viewing it.⁶⁴ It can lead to a faulty thinking that belief in Christ means accepting a series of propositional truths.

The Gospel is commonly understood today in terms of the Kingdom of God. Jesus came proclaiming the nearness of that Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:18-19). Abraham asserts:

whatever the gospel is, it centres on the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. Hence, the gospel is not first and foremost about a network of moral injunctions, nor about this or that kind of religious experience, nor about the arrival of the church, nor about some scheme of political liberation, nor about some magic formula to gain health and wealth, nor about a quick and easy way to find celestial fire-insurance. It is constituted by those extraordinary events in and through Jesus of Nazareth, through which God acted in history by his Holy Spirit to establish his rule in the world.⁶⁵

A broad range of terms describe the impact of the presence of the Kingdom in Jesus including, good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind and release to captives. It is described in terms of, eternal life, commencing a journey, entering the kingdom, and being saved (Mark 10:17-31).⁶⁶

The way Jesus announced the kingdom was responsive to the people he met. To Peter, James and John he said “follow me”, to Nicodemus he said “you must be born again”, to the woman who touched his cloak “your faith has saved you” and to the crippled man lowered through the roof “your sins are forgiven.” He described the kingdom as a treasure in a field and a precious pearl. He told stories about the nature of God as a shepherd who seeks out

⁶⁴ Vink & Crawshaw, "Conversion: Reconsidering the Paradigm," 33-4. Also Hitchen, "The Gospel For Today's New Zealanders," 10. "We are prone to reduce the breadth, depth and the diversity of the content and meaning of the gospel... The gospel New Zealanders need today is the one which is true to the biblical breadth, depth and diversity of meaning and impact, not an emasculated, watered down, modern substitute."

⁶⁵ William J Abraham, "A Theology of Evangelism: the Heart of the Matter," in *The Study of Evangelism. Exploring a Missional Practice in the Church*, ed. Paul W Chilcote and Lacey C Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 23. Also Kirk, *What Is Mission?*, 29-30. On the Kingdom of God. For the relationship of the church and the Kingdom, 30-37.

⁶⁶ Hitchen, "The Gospel For Today's New Zealanders," 10-12.

one lost sheep, a woman who searches for one lost coin and a father receiving his runaway son home with joy.

After the Ascension, access to the Kingdom came through the presence of the risen Christ in the form of his Spirit.⁶⁷ The early church described the salvation which they experienced with a broad range of images including righteousness/justification, redemption/ransom, reconciliation/peacemaking, priest/sacrifice, conflict/victory, new birth/new family, cleansing/renewal and discipleship/pilgrimage.⁶⁸

A further issue concerns the gospel for the rich. The setting for this study is within suburbs which are predominantly affluent. While scripture emphasises the responsibility for God's people towards the poor it is not accurate to assert that God has a bias towards the poor because this implies that God prefers the poor over the rich. Certainly the implications of the gospel for the rich are different to those of the poor, but it is nonsense to infer that God loves poor people more than rich ones.⁶⁹ We will note how conversion impacts the attitudes of participants to wealth.

It is particularly important to keep these discussions on evangelism, conversion and the gospel in mind for our analysis later. There is more to discuss about the gospel and words which are used in relation to it. Issues around concepts of sin, eternal life and images of salvation will be discussed in the reflections on the interviews. At this stage it is sufficient to note that the gospel is rich and diverse.

⁶⁷ Abraham, "A Theology of Evangelism," 23. "The claim of the church is that God has come to us uniquely to establish his rule in and through Jesus Christ; what began there by the work of the Holy Spirit continues in the world today through the work of that same Spirit; in God's own time, that work will be brought to a fitting consummation. This is the heart of the gospel."

⁶⁸ Hitchen, "The Gospel For Today's New Zealanders," 12-18.

⁶⁹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom. The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Michigan: Brazos, 2007), 83-86. The context of Jesus' evangelism was on one hand: wealth, comfort and power, and on the other hand, poverty, suffering, powerlessness and marginality. For the poor, invitation into the reign of God was good news, for the rich they needed to be convinced that conversion into such a reign was good news because of the subversive nature of the gospel. So Stone sees different approaches in Jesus to people in different situations: a different gospel for the rich and the poor.

Chapter 3

The Parameters of the Study and a Justification for the Chosen Research Method

Having defined and discussed key terms we now justify the parameters used to limit this study and the chosen research method. The research seeks to hear the stories of those who have become Christians from *non-Christian* backgrounds as *adults*.

Firstly, we define adulthood. The process of human maturation is complex. People mature at different rates. With that awareness and for the sake of this study age twenty five was chosen as a marker point. It is common to look to the maturation of the brain as an indicator. Through childhood and the teenage years neurological pathways are forming and re-forming in the brain especially in the pre-frontal cortex of the frontal lobe which “allows us to prioritize thoughts, imagine, think in the abstract, anticipate consequences, plan, and control impulses.” At some stage these pathways settle in place. “The evidence now is strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early twenties.”⁷⁰

As well as neurological development during the teenage years, there is also behavioural development. A person might “act out” in different ways to test their identity. They may argue a point for the purpose of assessing what they believe. Gradually the patterns of their lives begin to take shape with some consistency. Purely biological and developmental views, might suggest that if a person has not become a Christian by the time these neurological pathways are set, and their identity established then it is unlikely they ever will.

⁷⁰ Adam Ortiz, "Adolescence, Brain Development and Legal Culpability." American Bar Association, January 2004.
http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publishing/criminal_justice_section_newsletter/crim_just_juvjus_Adolescence.authcheckdam.pdf. (7th September 2012) Also this point made in conversation with Clinical Psychologist Riaan van Schalkwyk (July 2011).

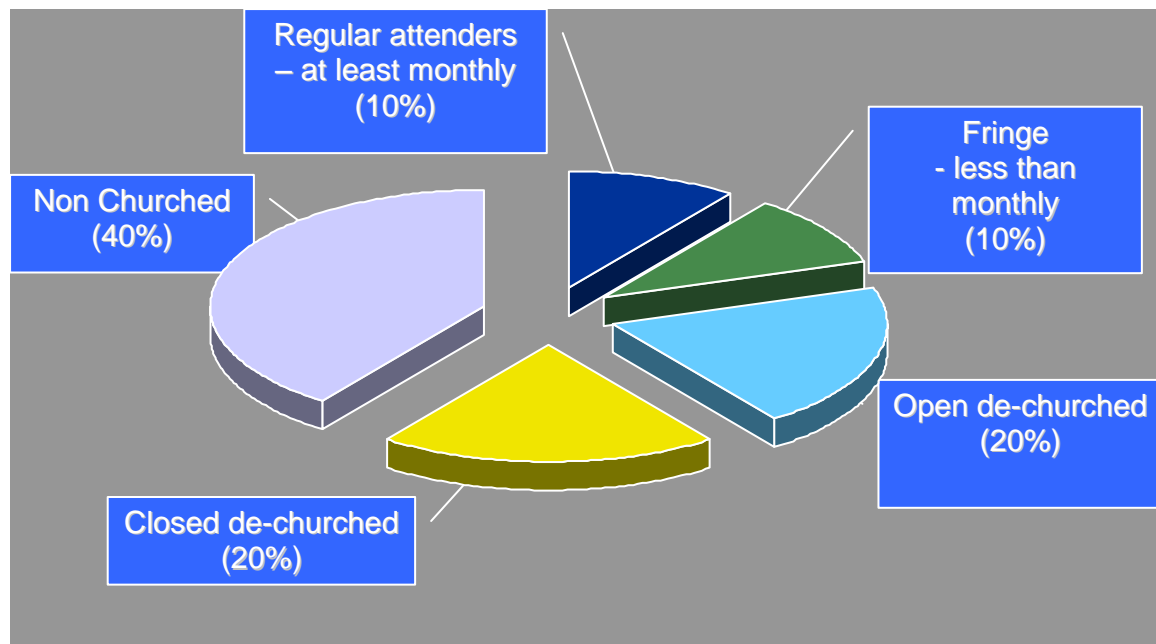
Cognitively a person usually goes through a very black and white phase in their lives during their teens and early twenties. By their mid-twenties they possess a much more developed ability to reflect on their lives and articulate the meaning of crucial moments for them. That kind of reflective ability was necessary for this study.

Secondly we define non-Christian. The intention was to find people who had minimal connection with Christian thinking in their formative years. They would probably have had Bible in Schools and they might have had a Christian grandparent, but Christian faith was not a consistent part of their upbringing. It was important for this study that participants did not consider there to have been a significant positive Christian influence as they formed their belief about the world.

It is helpful to speak of having a “back to”. After the Christchurch earthquake some expressed hope that there would be an upsurge of people coming “back to” Christianity. However, the people who fit into this study are ones with no – “back to”. They are not prodigals who chose to leave home for a distant country (Luke 15:11-32). They have not walked away from faith because they never had it in the first place.

An assessment of English society in relation to Christianity estimates that church affiliation looks like this:⁷¹

⁷¹ Archbishop’s Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, 37-40. New Zealand reference Kevin Ward, e mail (30th November 2011)



The picture given is one of a large proportion of people who are disconnected or only thinly connected with the church. New Zealand data points to a slightly higher regular attendance, and to a higher number who attend over Christmas and Easter.⁷² Peter Lineham's assessment is that the "fringe" is getting smaller⁷³

George Lings speaks of an eventual time-bomb, in terms of the upcoming generations' exposure to Christianity. The church has relied upon people returning to the church as adults after a time away, however fewer and fewer people have been involved in church in the first place and so have no default to revert to.⁷⁴

Bob Mayo prefers the term pre-non-Christian. His description is that a non-Christian is someone who has some knowledge of Christianity and is either hostile, apathetic, or in disagreement with it. A pre-non-Christian has little or

⁷² Ward, "Christendom, Clericalism, Church and Context," 52.

⁷³ Peter Lineham, "Analysing Church Life Survey Material," Massey University, Albany Campus Computer Lab. (30th August 2012). He is most likely thinking of those in Lings' graph who are fringe attenders or open-de-churched.

⁷⁴ Archbishop's Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, 40-1. "Inviting people back to church as we currently know it may be an effective missionary strategy for reaching up to (perhaps) one third of the population who are de-churched. But it is misconceived to assume that this represents a coherent mission approach for the majority of the population for whom church as we know it is peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant."

no knowledge or understanding of Christianity. They are not hostile or in disagreement, but ignorant. “This lack of exposure means that often people have not found out enough about Christianity to be either put off or drawn towards it. No one is going to be curious about the pink elephant in the next-door town if they don’t know that there is a pink elephant to be curious about.”⁷⁵ He asserts that the reality of pre-non-Christians is not yet catered for in the Church’s thinking.

Other parameters were placed on the study to limit the number of variables and to select people who would not look out of place attending HPC. People were to have originated from a British/European culture. It was not important whether they were first or fifth generation Kiwi providing they were from that cultural background. This amounts to fifty-six percent of the Howick Ward population (more than 50,000 people) which is a definable group for mission purposes.

This group is considered difficult to reach with the Gospel. Gordon Miller writes: “Indeed it is one of the toughest groups in the western world to bring to Christ... The big group to evangelise is still European Kiwis.”⁷⁶ That is sufficient reason in itself for this cultural group to be the focus of this study, but there is another issue to consider.

The study assumes that people from different cultures will come to Christ in different ways. Close to one third of people in the Howick area come from Asian backgrounds.⁷⁷ Significant cultural differences exist in the way Asians understand themselves and their place in their families to those from a British

⁷⁵ Mayo, *Ambiguous Evangelism*, 6. Their study is based on research among Generation Y. Their assessment might be a bit more extreme than for Gen X or Baby Boomers, but it describes well the growing environment that Christianity exists in within western society.

⁷⁶ Miller, *Growing Great Kiwi Churches*, 12. “Go on a preaching trip to some developing countries and thousands respond, preach your heart out amidst a Pakeha/European population for a year and you may hardly get a response.”

⁷⁷ 56.2% European 31.8% Asian "Howick Ward Staistics,"

<http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/SiteCollectionDocuments/HowickWardLocalBoard.pdf>. Also for smaller demographic areas see <http://mashblock.co.nz/area-unit/howick-central> (24th Sept 2012).

background. Therefore, one would expect their faith stories to be significantly different.⁷⁸

In addition, some have Christianity ingrained in their culture including South Africans, and Pacifica peoples. These grow up in cultures where there is a widespread acceptance of Christianity's place within society. Their decisions are made in relation to acceptance or rejection of Christian faith. I wanted people without this frame of reference.⁷⁹

Howick Ward has a higher proportion of people with tertiary training, living in their own homes and employed in careers than Auckland averages.⁸⁰ For various reasons, a number are undertaking university studies as adults. Although lower in average than other areas, Howick has its share of relationship break-ups as well. While not specifically targeted it was anticipated that the people interviewed would reflect a spread of these characteristics.⁸¹

Lastly the participants needed to have become Christians in the last ten years in order to hear stories which were fresh and new. While there needed to be some distance from their conversion to allow for some reflection on it, I considered that people who were fairly close to it would better describe it freely without cliché or excessive "Christianese" which can come from years of immersion in the Christian community. It was also an attempt to reflect on conversions which have occurred in people's lives during a postmodern timeframe, amidst an increasingly post-Christian environment.

⁷⁸ To research this and provide comparison with the research in this study would be another interesting and rewarding project.

⁷⁹ I trust that this explanation averts any suspicion of colonialism or racism. It is in no way to be inferred that this study has been chosen because of a belief that white westerners have a greater handle on truth than those of other cultures and that the spread of the gospel needs to come from them.

⁸⁰ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 44-45. Strobel makes a list of a typical un-churched person in the US which includes higher than average academic qualifications and income levels which resembles many people in Howick. The difference though is that the definition of un-churched which he based his study on was people who had not been in church for 6 months. Most of them had previous church experience, whereas I wanted people who basically had never been involved in a church.

⁸¹ Mike Crowl, "Howick Statistics" (P.C.A.N.Z. National Mission Office, 2008).

Now we look at issues surrounding the research method used and why it was best suited to the study. “Interviewers – including of course faith interviewers – often only get what they look for.”⁸² Aware of this I was able to minimise that risk.

Firstly, I contacted ministers whom I considered could suggest people who fitted the criteria.⁸³ Other trusted individuals were asked if they could recommend anyone. I accept the bias. These were people who I was comfortable sharing my work with and who I trusted to recommend suitable participants. They were from churches which I believed could yield fruitful results.⁸⁴ If I knew of a potential participant I asked someone close to them to ask them about it. I steered clear of people in my own sphere of influence to avoid conflicts of interest.⁸⁵ Initial contacts yielded four respondents. From there, I re-tried some avenues and widened the net to others including the Alpha office. I had to persevere to get ten interviews which tells a story in itself.⁸⁶

Although containing bias, it was a practical approach. Asking leaders of churches with similar demographics was logical as it was most likely to gain people who were typical of those living in the Howick area. Certainly the danger of being blinded to seeing a truth because I expected a particular story

⁸² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 279.

⁸³ Other possible ways might have been to utilise social networking on the internet, or to put up advertising on public notice boards, or through local newspapers. Going through known and trusted people was safer and more easily controlled. Finney’s study in Britain utilised denominational figures on professions of faith but this did not necessarily give an understanding of who were new to the faith or who were returning to it. John Finney, *Finding Faith Today* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), 1-10.

⁸⁴ I did not utilise the local ministers’ network (over 50 churches) because I was not confident across all the churches that church leaders would recommend suitable people. This I feared would lead to too much sifting of people which could have been awkward to those who volunteer to be interviewed only to be told they don’t fit. Asking churches to put adverts in their church notices was likewise discarded as a method of locating people.

⁸⁵ See ethics documents Appendix 1.

⁸⁶ E-mailing colleagues, while an efficient method, had varied results. Some got straight back to me, others did not reply. No assessment can be made as to whether they did not reply because they had no one to refer. Others replied to say they had no one who fitted the criteria. Phone calls, or personal conversations, though time consuming were most effective for explaining the research, but even so they often led nowhere. I thought that once I had talked to a few people they would be able to recommend others; this did not prove to be the case.

to emerge from the type of church they attended was real, but the way in which the interviews were carried out minimised this risk.

The research method chosen was an open, narrative style interview.⁸⁷ It was essential that my own agenda did not impinge on the narratives. The purest way to guarantee this was to simply ask people to tell their stories in their own words. Smith's comments support this: "When we take experience seriously we highlight what actually does happen, rather than insist in what should happen."⁸⁸

There were real advantages to the open interview technique even though it was time consuming. Clearly they enjoyed recalling how they came to faith. It did enable the participants to tell their stories in their own words and they were able to give their own interpretations to the meanings of events themselves. Space was given as people formulated their thoughts, or in some cases gathered their emotions. A questionnaire would have been too directive. It would have skewed responses with too much of my bias.⁸⁹

A question sheet was prepared, as a basis for the interviews but they were not directly used.⁹⁰ From the first interview I realised that most of them were answered naturally. Some interviews appeared to have gaps in their stories compared to pre-conceived expectations. However, when probed, the confirmation often came back that it wasn't mentioned because it wasn't important to their experience. I decided to let the silence speak.⁹¹ Once

⁸⁷ Loraine Blaxter Christina Hughes Malcolm Tight, *How to Research*, 3rd Edition ed. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2006), 172-176 describes issues surrounding interview methods including the pros and cons of recording interviews, as opposed to questionnaires discussed, 179-182.

⁸⁸ Smith, *Beginning well*, 18.

⁸⁹ Judith Bell, *Doing your Research Project: A Guide for First Time Researchers in Education, Health and Social Science*, 4th ed. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2005), 166-7. Warns of bias in interviews. Finney's study was considerably larger 511 participants answered a 22 page questionnaire. The size of the sample and the detail it required made a questionnaire the most practical method. It meant that direct answers were given to specific questions and so it became a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research. Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 1-10.

⁹⁰ See Appendix 2

⁹¹ See chapter 9 for a discussion on what was not said.

finished, questions were asked about key aspects of their story asking them to clarify some part of it or to expand on crucial moments.⁹²

Interviews were recorded which meant I could give participants my full attention. They were carried out at a suitable place of the participant's choice. Brief notes were taken as reminders of points to come back to after they had completed their story. Making full transcripts was not practical, but the recordings were listened to more than once and a full series of notes taken. Virtual transcripts of crucial sections were made.⁹³

This is qualitative not quantitative research and so no hypothesis could be formed. A hypothesis is a statement of an expected outcome which can be proven or disproven. But a study on human experience with only ten interviews cannot prove anything in a concrete way. It was better to explore a question to which a number of answers could be assessed.⁹⁴ What follows does not weight instances in terms of concrete numbers. Instead it speaks in general terms of what was important to the people as they told their stories. One person's experience might identify a really important aspect of coming to faith. It is not less significant just because it has only been mentioned once.

⁹² I am very grateful for the timely guidance towards this open narrative interview approach from experienced researchers in the humanities field Dr Liz Smythe & Dr Vivienne Adair at this point in the process.

⁹³ Bell, *Doing your Research Project*, 164-167. On recording and transcripts.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-4.

Chapter 5

Anticipated results.

Before describing and analysing content in the stories, the articulation of anticipated results reveals my expectations. Far from dictating the analysis of the data, this gives a framework for assessing it. The anticipated results will be a base from which actual data can be compared and contrasted. This also gives scope to identify other factors which were not anticipated.

It is assumed that positive relational factors will be highly significant. These might include the influence of a good friend or a spouse. As these are identified we will enquire further as to the nature of the influence of key relationships.

Personal factors could be internal perceptions or external circumstances out of their control. Internal factors could include feelings of purposelessness, emptiness, or lostness, despite having “tried it all”. It might include guilt, real or perceived, over past behaviour. Guilt feelings could be directed toward God because they sensed that they had resisted God. External factors could include illness, bereavement, a relationship break-up, redundancy or work issues. These internal or external factors might have led to a personal crisis which set them on a journey to faith.

Spiritual experiences might have influenced participants. They might have had experiences through others exercising spiritual gifts like words of knowledge, prophecies or healing.⁹⁵ Separate from the church’s activities, someone could have had a direct intervention by God in their lives; a vision or some personal “word” from God.⁹⁶ They may have had a profound encounter where they experienced God’s love. Circumstantial events, in their context,

⁹⁵ Rick Richardson, *Reimagining evangelism : inviting friends on a spiritual journey* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2006), 31-47. Speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism including operating in the Gifts of the Spirit.

⁹⁶ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 49-50 & 93-99. Only 3% rated a major experience like a dream or vision as being the primary influence. However, many spoke of “some sort of feeling which had a touch of the divine about it.”

could be interpreted as significant. Also, in terms of general revelation it is possible they encountered God through observing or interacting with creation (Ps 19:1-2; Rom 1:20).

Considering eternal issues the fear of damnation or a desire to be sure of eternal life could motivate a search for God. This is where the classic Evangelism Explosion questions may be relevant.⁹⁷

Lee Strobel argues: ““Apologetics,” or using evidence and reasoning to defend the faith is critically important in penetrating the scepticism of many secular people today.”⁹⁸ Intellectual factors are considered as to whether they were convinced by rational argument of the reasonableness of Christianity. Factual arguments for such things as the reliability of the Bible or evidence for the actual death and resurrection of Christ could be important. The logic of Christianity in explaining basic worldview questions could be pivotal leading to the conclusion that other belief systems did not answer their questions. Books, talks, or research over the internet may have contributed.

Concerning the ministry of the church Brian Smith asserts: “Why would a person be drawn to Christ? Because of the attractive power of the Christian community.”⁹⁹ There are a number of ways in which the Christian community might be a positive influence in evangelism. Pastorally the caring nature of church people could be influential. John Saxbee, speaks about the evangelistic aspect of pastoral care. “...pastoral care is an essential part of the good news in Christ and evangelism cannot be truly evangelistic without a pastoral dimension.”¹⁰⁰ Worship services may impact. Community events like

⁹⁷The E.E questions are: If you were to die tonight do you think you would go to heaven? If you were to die tonight and you were asked by Jesus: why should I let you into my heaven? How would you answer?

⁹⁸ Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 42. Strobel argues: “This is especially true for non-believers who are in professions that deal with facts and figures such as engineering, science, journalism, medicine and law.”

⁹⁹ Brian Smith, "Christianity: learning a second language," in *New Zealand Made: Perspectives on Mission in Aotearoa*, ed. John Crawshaw and Wayne Kirkland (Wellington: Signpost Communications, 1994), 53.

¹⁰⁰ Saxbee, *Liberal Evangelism*, 57-61.

ANZAC day services or memorial services such as after the Christchurch Earthquake are popular.¹⁰¹

The missional activity of the church might include some form of “love your neighbour” scheme or other response to human need or injustice.¹⁰² Contact with the church through weddings, funerals and baptisms could soften a person to the church’s message.¹⁰³ Maybe they looked at how Christians lived and were drawn to something which they “had”.

We will consider any impact personal witnessing of Christians had. Given the above analysis there is not a great expectation around evangelistic programmes like mass evangelism, Alpha or Evangelism Explosion. To be considered also are programmes targeted at particular life stages such as Mainly Music.

In addition to these seven factors, it is anticipated that people become Christians over a period of time. The Engel’s scale outlines a process whereby people go from uninterested and uninformed, to a point where they have sufficient knowledge and a sense of their need for God to commit to Christ. What evidence will we see of this process?¹⁰⁴ In terms of the implausibility factors already discussed, we will also consider how the implausible became plausible.

I anticipate that there will be a series of interconnected influences. A key task in evaluating the data will be to identify, not only what comes up most often but also what appears to be the most significant aspects.

¹⁰¹ MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, 65-73. MacLaren speaks of: latent, vicarious and civic religion in western society.

¹⁰² Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* argues that appropriate bridges built into communities by the way of community initiatives will result in a flow of people coming to Christ.

¹⁰³ Some activity which is considered missional might not necessarily evangelical. People might be very good at living the message, but unable to give an answer verbally for their faith. Is witness of life enough?

¹⁰⁴ James F Engel and William A Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (Downers Grove Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 100-101. See Appendix 4 for the Engel’s Scale as shown on pg 101.

Chapter 5

Formative Influences and pre-Christian Experiences ¹⁰⁵

Before reflecting on and analysing the interviews we need to hear something of the participants' stories. We will do this in three sections. Firstly, formative influences and pre-Christian experiences, secondly, how they came to faith and thirdly, what effect their faith has had in their lives. ¹⁰⁶

Conversion is a complex process. We must allow for the complexity of the actual experience. Accounts have been grouped together around common experiences however the desire is to let the stories tell themselves.

I did not find anyone with no Christian influence in their formative years, but some had very little. One had a Christian teacher who was a good male role model and a Bible in Schools teacher who taught her that God loved her and that the way to God was through Jesus, but other than that she had no significant influence.¹⁰⁷ Another, whose parents were a Catholic and a Protestant decided not to bring their children up with anything. His father read to him from the Bible half a dozen times and they went to one or two Christmas services, but that was all.

Some went with friends or siblings to Sunday School for a time or went to church occasionally when their parents were going. A number had grandparents who were Christians. Some had experiences of youth groups or youth camps.

Even those with more church contact were quite clear that, at the time, it meant nothing to them. In their formative years none of the participants engaged with Christianity in ways which constituted an on-going commitment of faith. None of them had a sense of "back to" when they came to faith.

¹⁰⁵ For a description of the participants see Appendix 3

¹⁰⁶ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*. This is the basic structure which Finney used to write up his research.

¹⁰⁷ Although the correct term is Religious Instruction, people identify more with the term "Bible in Schools," so this will be used throughout.

Parental influence was varied. Some parents had firm beliefs against God, being cynical about faith or critical of hypocrisy in the church. Accordingly their children grew up with those types of objections to overcome. Some parents lived lives based on values which broadly flowed from Christian beliefs, even though they did not attend church. Some were open to allow their children to make up their own minds and so would let them have Bible in Schools or go to Christian events so they could be fully informed. One participant's mother would pray with him at night and they would say the Lord's Prayer together.

Two men have Christian wives. They did not see them as the major influence in their coming to faith. One felt resentful when his wife was taking their children to church and teaching Sunday School. The other made the commitment to support his wife in her faith. When they moved to a new place he would go with her to support her. However he comments: "When I did go, there was nothing in the message which drew me to become a Christian. In fact I was of the opinion that this ain't gonna happen!"¹⁰⁸

Any involvement with church was either neutral or negative. On the negative side, one attended a school in England with chapel services in Latin. When kneeling for prayer they would get disciplined if their bottoms touched the floor. Another went along to church with his family until he was seven or eight years old, but he cannot remember any talk of a relationship with God in that time. For one it was about ritual: singing hymns and drinking out of a cup. These early experiences were sometimes viewed as: "what Christians did", or "for other people."

One person had three experiences of church worth noting. When she was about nine she went to Sunday School with a friend for a little while because she wanted to be with her and because the friend's family made her feel included. When they moved away she tried going to Sunday School on her

¹⁰⁸ Although transcripts were not made, in depth notes were taken. Instances where narratives are quoted are true to what they have said and how they have said it.

own, but she recalls: “being a child at church without a family doesn’t work. Nobody acknowledges you, no one speaks to you. Until you walk through the Sunday School door you are invisible. I stopped going.”

When about fourteen, she attended a concert in the city where there was a lot of excitement and good music. She remembers having some encounters with people and going to a little room on the side, where she thinks they prayed. Afterwards she was followed up with phone calls from youth leaders, but soon she ignored their calls. She stopped going to youth group because she felt like she was going to be chased or pressured. She felt like something was being demanded of her which she didn’t properly understand.

Some years later she took her son to a church’s holiday programme. When she went in to drop him off she had a sense of being a “bad person”. As a solo mother who had been into drugs and alcohol, she knew she had done things which were considered to be wrong in society and especially by those in the church. But also, no one engaged her in conversation. This reinforced a sense of not being welcome and brought up the earlier memories of being ignored in church.

In terms evangelistic efforts, one went to a night of Alpha and ‘found it awful.’ He comments: “I didn’t relate to it. It presumes you want to get in the swimming pool. I am in the changing rooms thinking about whether I want to put my togs on.” One stayed with an overly zealous believer while doing his apprenticeship.¹⁰⁹ At the time this “bible basher’s” efforts had a negative effect, although he wondered later if those efforts had planted a seed in him. A couple made commitments at camps but these quickly faded because the environment at home and with their friends was not conducive to the commitment growing.¹¹⁰

Some had significant plausibility issues to be overcome. One relates: “I remember standing in the staff room, probably about four months before I had

¹⁰⁹ Encouraging him to burn all his rock albums which he loved.

¹¹⁰ Along with the 85/18 statistic, in youth ministry circles often went the assertion that 2/3rds came to Christ at camps.

my first encounter, saying that I thought that people who go to church are basically people who have no life.” Another said: “If you had asked me to line up all the world religions and choose one, Christianity would have been at the bottom... I probably would have chosen any other religion.”

The one with the English school experience reports: “from that background I saw no purpose to religion - didn’t understand what faith was.” He went on to be very successful academically, in his sport and career. From a worldly perspective he had no need for God.

Another, after being interested in her grandmother’s faith, found that the science class knocked any curiosity. Christian faith was reduced to being a myth as opposed to science which was considered to be real. She felt this strongly enough to be against reference to God in the National Anthem.

Perceptions of the church were raised with comments like:

I had heard so many negative things from out in the world about Christians: “oh they’re so boring, if you go to church you’re going to be pressured - there’s all these rules” - that’s what I heard. So I didn’t want to come. I am not going to give up my drinking... That’s, I think what stopped me. I was frightened to give my life up... I felt like I didn’t deserve to come. I felt unworthy ... and I thought, they are not going to want me there. I thought: I have an autistic child; they won’t want my child there. I felt I might be judged because I am an unmarried mother: there was this whole social stigma around what church was.

A number had spiritual experiences before coming to Christ. We follow one person’s story from the time of her marriage break up:

...not a good day, but what happened was that I had this undeniable sense of being picked up and held. This was a defining moment in my life. As much as it was incredibly painful I felt like I had an angel wrapped around me and I knew I was safe and I knew everything would be ok. ... I felt like I had this grace around me.

Some months later she had a couple of what she called: “quite unusual experiences for a non-Christian.” She was sent to Australia on a work trip when her second daughter was only five months old. When she got there she rang home to find her daughter was inconsolable. This was obviously deeply distressing, but then she tells how:

I heard voice in my head telling me that I needed to leave my job and start my own business and do something about this situation of powerlessness that employees have. "You can do something about it." I answered out loud. "Ok: I will." I wasn't a Christian, I didn't know who I was talking to, but it was that clear in my head.

A couple of months later her boss restructured the company which gave her the opportunity to resign. She remembers being on Takapuna beach: 'I looked up at the sky and I said: "you and me" because it was such a step of faith. I had started to have conversations with someone who I didn't even know. If you had asked me: did I believe in God? I would have said no, but this dialogue had started with - I don't know who.

Another talked of "dreams that happen." She comments: "I dreamed conversations which then happened in real life. I knew there was something bigger than me, because how can you have dreams about the future, unless there was something else going on that had an understanding, or knowledge, of the future?"

She also had this experience: When her son was two years old she was going through a really dark time, feeling unwanted and unloved. While sitting on the couch crying her son climbed up on her lap and said: "It's ok mummy, God loves you." She recounts: "where did that come from? He'd never encountered anything to do with God so... I wrote it off as a bit strange."

One said that when he had bad drug trips he would pray. On one occasion he had a trip where he encountered a satanic force, but he also had a sense of light and believed there was an angel with him. He relates: Through drugs and rock music

I was very aware of Satan and his influence: probably believed in Satan before I believed in God... I realise now that I spent a lot of time before I was a Christian praying. There was a certain amount of spiritualness there without even realising it. Like when things were going wrong, having a bad trip; there was always praying.

One believes she was protected through an attempt to "leave the planet". Others commented that they should not be alive today because of risky,

dangerous behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, associations with violent people and suicide attempts.

There is negligible evidence that any of the people set out on a purposeful or protracted search for God. One was opened to spirituality while on her OE in India which interested her in eastern religions. Another visited many religious sites overseas looking for a “material religion”, but that had no effect on him.

With hindsight most saw God at work in their lives before they came to Christ. Some articulated that they now see how God was always in their lives. Some made commitments which didn't last, others had a number of experiences which at the time they dismissed or considered irrelevant but they reflected that they might have been influential in preparing the way. Some had multiple opportunities to receive Christ, but others had none.

Chapter 6

How the Respondents came to Faith

Gordon Smith comments on the place of conversion narratives: “Some protest that an examination of personal experience is self-centred, but telling our conversion stories does just the opposite, for our own experience enables us to see and enter into the grand picture of God’s work.” It gives a lens through which we can see all of God’s merciful work and brings “an appreciation of the way God was attentive.”¹¹¹

We are gaining insight into an array of very personal stories. Some were cruising through life when it was almost as if God entered their lives uninvited. For others God became real for them when they called out for help. We see the compassion of a God who knows people’s lives and just how to get through to them. Every account is important so I include the crucial moments of each.

One person, with the awareness from her Bible in Schools teacher that there was a God who loved everyone and that Jesus was the way to God, had no impacting Christian influence in her life for eighteen years. Then, she reports: “God talked to me one day.” She was in an awful place of work. She asked herself: “what am I going to do?” and recalls:

Words came into my head, almost like someone was talking behind me. It said, “_____ you don’t need to do this.” I walked out, talked to my boss and told him I wasn’t coming back. I thought wow, this was really powerful. I could tell the voice was in my head, but it was almost a look behind me to see if someone was speaking. And then I thought: “that was God talking to me” and I had goose-bumps. I thought: “that could not come from me, it couldn’t have come from anywhere else; it just had to be God.”

That night she told her husband she was going to church on Sunday. She contacted a Christian aunty who suggested an appropriate service to go to. There she met a group of people who she related to and later Alpha was

¹¹¹ Smith, *Beginning well*, 53-54.

helpful for filling in the gaps, but it was that one experience which turned her life around – when she was not even searching for God.

Another went scuba diving on a family holiday in Fiji but he had terrible difficulty equalising and so could not descend. He reports: “I don’t know why but I prayed. At that moment, within seconds, I dropped to the bottom” and he was able to enjoy the dive. He interpreted this as a wakeup call. In the months prior to this, he had been going to church every third weekend and feeling terribly guilty for “all the sins” he had been committing in between. That experience in which he believes someone heard him in his frustration, led him to conclude that he could not keep living a double life. Following this he described a period of months where he would respond to the altar call each Sunday, carry on sinning through the week, then return to respond again the next Sunday. It was about six months before he believed he had actually become a Christian.¹¹²

One had three major moments which began faith. As a mother with two young children she became exhausted. Her life spiralled into darkness and a time of non-functioning. At that low point she prayed. She said: “No human could reach me, only another existence could help.” That night she and her children slept well giving her the rest she needed to cope. Later, her parents called to help which was seen as providence. Her assessment of that experience was, “God became real.”

A number of years later she was in the classroom teaching. She was present for a Bible in Schools class. She saw a simple faith in the children who didn’t need to know all the answers and realised: “I need this child like faith. I don’t need to know it all.” She went to the Bible in Schools teacher in tears and with a pounding heart. The teacher quickly wrote down a prayer to ask Jesus into her heart and told her to pray it at home. She did so, three times. The third time she really meant it. She reports: “at that moment, everything

¹¹² This instance is one from one who was aged 19 at the time. It is one related to the maturation process described earlier where a person is establishing who they are and what they will stand for. This story is also possibly the one which is closest to coming from a Christian framework of understanding. It provides a comparison with others.

changed. God was, 'in here, not out there.'" She realised how big God was; her thinking turned.

After another length of time she sensed a nudging from God to begin going to church. She wanted to talk to someone about what had been going on spiritually and she contacted a counsellor who had helped her earlier when it was so hard with her children. She realised that the counsellor was a Christian and through her was encouraged to go to church.

Another person describes a very internal process. He was always good at his work and took pride in being in control, but a crisis came when his competency was questioned. This conflict caused a lot of stress as he struggled to think how to get through it. He felt totally out of control and he began to question bigger life issues wondering: what is my life all about? This caused him to take stock of his life. He owned up to the truth that he was not at peace with himself and he saw himself as an angry person.

This totally absorbed him. One day, after a fall out at work, he was sitting on his bed, not knowing where to turn. He picked up his my wife's Bible, opened it and read a passage about how God knows you and cares for you. This touched him deeply.¹¹³ He recalls: "it met me where I was at, I just happened to open it to that place. So I said: 'Ok God, I'll give this a go.'" For three weeks he privately read scripture and listened to his wife's Christian CD's in car. He reports: "It felt quite different, but I still hadn't made a commitment to God. I started going to church again with my wife. It was communion, and I took communion, and that was it for me. My wife nearly fell out of her seat, because I never took it. Taking communion was the act which cemented it for me." It meant accepting the person of Jesus where in the past he had struggled with worshipping a person. He summarises: "when I picked up the bible there was no thought process: 'oh I know where to turn'... No, I turned to the place I would have turned to last. A last resort: I've exhausted all other things... Literally the Bible happened to be in the right place at the right time."

¹¹³ By the description I think it was Matthew 6:25-34 consider the lilies of the fields.

These accounts describe the activity of God which was largely independent of human help. For three people invitation was a catalyst, but still by far the major emphasis was on the activity of God. One man, emerging from five years out of work because of debilitating depression, was beginning to come to terms with the reality that when his four year old went to school he would need to get a job. A neighbour invited him to go to Alpha with her husband who had also been recently out of work. He knew he needed something because he had been sitting around the house all that time, so he said yes. He really liked Alpha, relating to Nicky Gumbel and the way he explained things. From the first week he began to have a bit of faith. The Holy Spirit day, was influential. There he formally gave his heart to Jesus. Afterwards he describes that: "I had my belief to myself. I didn't take it any further." A few weeks later the host of the Alpha programme invited him to church and his story progresses from there.

A work colleague's invitation was influential. The woman who had begun having conversations with "someone" sensed one day to ring a man who she had worked with some time ago. A little while later, he rang her back and asked her to church. Out of politeness she agreed, thinking: "I'll get in and get out untouched." She didn't consider herself "at risk". She went to church and describes her experience like this: "the Spirit of God filled that place and I started crying and crying (it was in the worship music). My brain was trying to tell me don't go there, you're being ridiculous. I could not explain it."

After about five weeks at church she came to a point of surrender: She recounts:

I got to the point: I don't understand it, my brain can't understand it, but I'm in the presence of God and God you've got me and there's nothing I can do. It was an experience that was so powerful. It was a knowing: a truth. There wasn't even any thought, it was like being at the edge of the Grand Canyon and going, "oh my god," I am so tiny and you are massive... I felt like I almost disappeared in the presence of this unbelievable grandeur. So it would have been the definition of insanity to argue: I cannot argue with this. Its too big. So I gave my life to him. Its beyond saying - it was the best thing I ever did.

A third invite proved influential when a friend from a solo mother's group invited her to come to church. After repeated invites she relented. She also found herself in tears, but for a different reason. She reports:

I am down in the dumps, I have nothing to lose, so I came along and I really liked it. I cried a lot that first time, even for the first five to ten times. But I began to feel something. I began to feel, like, cleansed. I felt like a weight on me when I used to sing in worship - like a spirit. I felt there was something. Then I began to pray, and things started to happen. I would ask for things and my prayer was being answered. And then I realised there might be something up there, that God might be real.

She cried because she felt like she didn't deserve to be there. She thought she might be judged, but instead she felt welcome.

Two narratives involve more intensive human involvement with clergy. One woman's partner said that if they wanted kids then he wanted to be married. This sent her down a pathway leading to faith. They organised a celebrant, but that fell through. A work colleague suggested that her father was a minister and he could marry them. Coincidentally, at the same time she received a string of random chain e-mails from non-Christians about faith assuring her that everything would be alright. So, with the offer of a Christian minister and chain e-mails about God she thought: "ok who is this God person anyway?"

She knew Alpha had "something to do with this God stuff", so she went looking for an Alpha programme. She rang a local church which did Alpha only to find out that they had just completed one and were unlikely to do another one for some time. The minister however, took the opportunity to invite her for a coffee. They talked about why she wanted Alpha and he gave her a book by Bill Hybels called "The God you are looking for", with instructions to read a chapter a day. She recalls: "each day I would have questions and each night I would read the answers in that book." When she was ready to give the book back it was time for "another coffee". She told the minister: "It was almost like this God guy said to this Bill Hybels that _____ is going to be reading this book one day and she'll need it, in this order, so she'll

get it. It was mind-blowing to think that this God person knew who I was and knew what I would need.”

The minister encouraged her into reading the Bible and her journey progressed from there. Church attendance began in evening services, and not long before she was married she was baptised. The point of commitment came about because of the pastor’s willingness to sit down and have conversations, the book from Hybels which answered the questions so well, and reading through the gospels. She summarises: “for me it was how those things came together, like fitting a jigsaw puzzle together.”

The other is a protracted story involving the successful businessman. He became friends with his wife’s vicar because they had children of similar ages and so they got to know each other socially. The vicar made repeated invitations for them to have lunch together. Eventually he agreed and this lunch meeting became a regular occurrence continuing for three or more years. They talked about the things in life which really mattered like how to raise their children.

Then two things happened. A difficult job situation destroyed any faith he had in the capitalist system: it had been eroding for some time. Also the vicar began a group called PIGS. (People Interested in God). This group allowed people to talk about their doubts about God in an open manner. It evoked rich discussion and allowed heretical statements. The vicar didn’t have a structure: he wanted to understand what the people’s doubts were. The topic which interested him was the history of the Bible. This made him think: “maybe there is more to this than meets the eye?”

Knowing he was a reader the vicar gave him a number of books and somewhere along the line he began to feel a discomfort with his own position. Then he read Bob Buford’s book: Half Time. This has the question: how do you want to play the second half of life? He got stuck on one page which has the question: what goes in the box? The single most important thing for the rest of your life is what you put “in the box”. He found it compelling and also

the counter-factual was now not compelling. For him this was the commercial world. So, after a struggle he put the cross in the box.

He thought “what a smart arse you are, you’ve made the hardest decision of your life.” However, he found it to be the easy thing to do. Now he had a new mirror to look into to and he had to examine every aspect of his life. This was the hardest thing. He summarises: “I did it, didn’t question it, it felt the right thing to do in the circumstances. Did I have all the answers theologically? No.”

Lastly there is an account which indirectly involves the influence of a group of people over a period of time. A binge drinking alcoholic and heavy drug user got a job with a company owned by Christians. He was one of only a few there who were not Christians. He noticed that under pressure they were a lot calmer than other people he knew. They did not openly evangelise him, though some were praying for him. Even though he was good at his job, they were gracious with him as he repeatedly missed Mondays due to hangovers. During the recession the boss asked a man from church to come and pray for the business and all the employees. The man from the church spoke encouraging words to each of the workers and prayed for God’s blessing on the business. At the end it was suggested that the church man could return to pray for people individually. He found his hand going up. He didn’t really know why, or for what, thinking it might be like a bit of counselling.

About a year before this his doctor has told him he would not survive the age of forty if he carried on as he was, so he had tried to sort his life out. He had given up drugs, but the alcohol abuse continued. A little before the man from church came he had been sitting on his bed at home with a cask of wine. He could see no hope of change and in desperation had cried out something like: “God if you are there – help.”

So, when he accepted the offer of prayer, he thought: “well I have tried everything else, so why not?” The account in his own words:

He briefly told me about Jesus Christ and what he had done on the cross and that I could be forgiven for what I have done, and would I

like to accept him into my life? I didn't need no coaxing... without hesitation - yes. I prayed right there with my eyes open: said that special prayer of giving your life to Jesus. I remember driving home in the car and feeling different. Something had changed.

One month later he stopped drinking and within a month of that he could be in a room full of people with alcohol and quite happily dink only lemonade.

One thing which stands out for me is integrity. Repeatedly I heard how their integrity forced them to face what was going on honestly and openly. To ignore it would have meant being dishonest with themselves which was something they were not prepared to do.

Some accounts follow predictable lines. They prayed something like the "sinners prayer". But others had no description a prayer of commitment at all. It was almost like something shifted inside them and the course of their lives changed. Some almost could not help but give their lives to Jesus.

What stands out is how instant, definite and defining the point of commitment was. With hindsight, God had often been at work over a long period of time, but then sometimes a single encounter was enough to turn their lives around. A cynic might dismiss much here as subjective and coincidental but they did not interpret it as such. Gordon Smith states: "religious experience can be properly interpreted only by the person who has the experience."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Beginning well*, 18.

Chapter 7

The Effect of Coming to Faith – Early Steps

Now we flesh out how more than one summarised their conversion: “it changes everything.”

Smith comments:

Narrative, particularly conversion narrative, is a central means by which we understand human life in general and our own lives in particular. We know ourselves when we know how God has worked in particular ways in our lives. Our narrative is then a narrative of God’s gracious work in our particular circumstances. Our conversion narrative helps us know who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.¹¹⁵

Although this study is about the process of coming to faith, it is not inappropriate to talk about the effect which coming to faith has had. If it has been a genuine conversion, as Fowler defines it, then it will have affected the attitudes, aspirations and activities of those interviewed. Also, it is unclear at what exact point some became Christians and so we need to extend into their stories to see how their faith began to grow.

True conversion is transformative. “The goal of our conversion is a transformed humanity. We seek to be what we were created to be – fully human, transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Through conversion, the Spirit of Christ enables us to be like himself, that we might be fully ourselves.”

¹¹⁶ Some people’s lives changed dramatically, for others the change is more internal, but nonetheless it is defining a new reality for them. Two people are involved in theological study, another reads widely guided by a spiritual adviser. Coming to Christ has led to career changes for some, new personal relationships for others and a new joy in living.

Smith summarises this transformation in as being with God, with others and personally within. These three are interrelated and we explore some of the dynamics in what follows.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 52-3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

In relation to differences in their relating to God,¹¹⁷ a number spoke of a very natural relationship through prayer. They talk to God and God talks to them. They are open about their needs to God and God provides. They love being in the presence of God through worship, in nature, on walks or runs. They showed a high degree of devotion to Christ and an enthusiastic gratefulness for all that had been done for them.

The sacraments were defining for some. Taking communion has already been mentioned. For one her baptism was an acknowledgement of all the factors which had gone on in her life bringing her to that point of commitment. Another found her baptism quite an overwhelming experience which really helped to confirm that she was on the right track.

Attendance at worship was both a positive and a negative experience. Some spoke of the importance of good preaching.¹¹⁸ It was important for teaching them what to do with their new faith and for inspiring them on a weekly basis. This gave them a framework to process what was happening for them. Within that structure, some spoke of periods of repentance. One spent a week consciously recalling and confessing his sins until he got to the point where, knowing everything was forgiven (whether specifically confessed or not), he was ready to move on. Others spoke of the music worship which inspired them and connected them with God. Another, who began her church life attending a café service found a place where she met people who supported her.

Some talked about how weird church was for them. Having experienced hymns, reading out of a book, and formality in worship as a child, to start attending a service with a rock band and people dancing and waving their arms about was pleasantly strange. But for one, attendance took her right

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 26. "Transformed humanity, finds joy, strength and life through a profound fellowship, or communion with God. To be transformed is to know the love of God and to love God in response." I speak of a *difference* in relationship because some spoke in terms of how God had always been there, even before they made any defining response.

¹¹⁸ My experience is that new believers tend to listen more attentively; it is the long term Christians who are more likely to look bored.

back to experiences of church being for “other people”. She didn’t know her way around the hymn book, she didn’t understand the Bible. She brought her children along, but didn’t get a lot out of it for herself. A night service was more helpful because it was less formal and it had more contemporary music. Another said that after seven years she was just beginning to “get” some of the Christian jargon.

It was difficult for some women attending church on their own. Some struggled to know where they fitted and felt that others were unsure of how to engage with them. A couple had experiences of legalism which made them feel excluded. One volunteered to help with distributing communion, but as a woman without a husband at church, was ignored.

The place of Alpha should be noted here. We saw how one person became a Christian through Alpha; however it was more commonly helpful for people as a means to grow their faith. It did this in two ways. It filled in the gaps giving that framework for understanding their faith.¹¹⁹ It also gave them experiences of God which stamped a seal on all that had led to that point for them.¹²⁰ Especially powerful was the ministry of the Holy Spirit. One spoke of having a strong sense that God was healing him in his brain after twenty years of alcohol and drug abuse.¹²¹ Another, wanting to start a family but knowing she had a medical condition which was going to make this unlikely, was prayed for on the Holy Spirit weekend and now has four children of her own.

Christian faith didn’t necessarily make life easier. A couple of instances of demonic attack were mentioned. One of these came the night after the Holy Spirit prayer time at Alpha. In both of these instances the people learned firsthand of their authority in Christ. When, almost instinctively, they challenged these forces, in the name of Jesus, the attack instantly subsided. One described how, prior to this, he had questioned the wisdom of becoming a Christian, but this experience sealed for him that God was with him. In

¹¹⁹ One person did a Christianity 101 course through her church which had a similar purpose.

¹²⁰ This is possibly an experience of the spiritual reality described in Eph 1:13 and 2 Cor 1:22 of being “sealed” by the Holy Spirit - also Romans 8: 16.

¹²¹ I sensed that this healing was also an ongoing healing process for him as well.

regard to Satan he said: “He had lost a close friend; I had been in darkness for 33 years.” Others spoke of challenges in their lives which could be attributed to a spiritual battle.

We see how coming to Christ has affected relationships with others.¹²² A major difference was that it gave them an increased heart for others. This affected family relationships. In terms of marriage relationships, the effect of Christ has led to a healing and reshaping which is enabling new relationships to form and existing relationships to be stronger. Two are engaged to be married to Christian men. They are experiencing building a relationship with men whose lives are very different from those they had known in the past. Another spoke of God working in his life to prepare the way so he could be a good husband. One spoke of being easier to live with in the family and another of how much stronger her marriage was especially now that her husband had also become a Christian. One now loves telling her children about Jesus.

Conversion has resulted in some significant relational challenges. Some spoke of how family just don’t “get them”. Also family members can feel threatened by a person’s new found faith. While once they would go along with a family’s dysfunction, now they are enabled to stand apart from it. At least one person has experienced that this has led to antagonism and aggression from family members. One person’s new faith perspective led her to ethically challenge a family member, at the risk of damaging that relationship.¹²³

Transformative growth, resulting in love for others, has led to involvement in service, ministry and mission. Some expressed a passion for evangelism

¹²² Smith, *Beginning well*, 26-7. “To be transformed involves being able to experience the love of others, to have the mature capacity to live in mutual love and submission with others, a capacity to live in community.”

¹²³ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 20. “The conversion for which evangelism hopes may not necessarily make us better citizens, more productive workers, or more loyal family members; neither is it always likely to make us more well-adjusted psychologically.” He counters the thought that the gospel makes all things better, reminding that the gospel may turn father against son. After conversion, a person might become harder to live with not easier: they might find it more difficult to live with themselves as well. They may gain peace with God and a share of the world’s enmity.

themselves; one has maybe been given that as a spiritual gift. One is involved in planting a new church. Some became involved in prayer ministries which have taken them on short term overseas missions or into prison ministry. Two people's lives involve significant contribution to mission involving children. One is involved with the Prison Fellowship Angel Tree appeal.¹²⁴ Another is significantly involved with World Vision's Micro-enterprise scheme which affects more than two million children.

A number of people have been led into various forms of teaching ministry. One is now a passionate Bible in Schools teacher. Another changed track at university from a personally focused degree in engineering to a teaching degree which has led him to a place of influence among teenagers. Others quickly found themselves teaching on prayer or training people for the Evangelism Explosion programme. One was offered a job teaching carpentry to people who have failed in the education system. Not only has coming to Christ helped him back into the work force but, in a short period of time, he is now engaging with young people helping them to achieve and to make sense of their lives as well.

Finally, faith in Christ is transformative for individual's personal lives.¹²⁵ Some talked of a sense of euphoria for a time after making their commitment to Christ. Internally some spoke of being more at peace with themselves and more able to deal with stress. Changes in priorities are seen. One spoke of how she used to live for the future but how now she had the joy of living in the moment which included enjoying just being with her children, as they did childish things.

¹²⁴ They organise churches to buy Christmas presents for the children of people who are in prison. This has developed into camps for these children which are co-organized by Prison Fellowship, Scripture Union and Presbyterian Support Services. He is also a part of CViC which trains people to champion community projects in congregations.

¹²⁵ Smith, *Beginning well*, 27. "Conversion effects personal integrity, quality of speech, finances, and sexuality. It also means we come to terms with our own identity, we know who we are and who we are called to be. Humility is nothing more than living in truth. It also involves emotional maturity, a capacity to live honestly from the heart with emotional depth expressing appropriate emotion in the appropriate context – is a critical indicator of spiritual transformation."

Clearly there have been financial implications as a result of the changes in priorities. One said: “giving money away was easy, giving of your time and energy was more of a test.” He now works three days a week to keep in touch with the business world, pay the bills and make an impact there. The other two working days he devotes to voluntarily serving others. One is not really interested in IT any more for its own sake; rather he is interested in things which help the underprivileged which has negative financial implications. Another has given up teaching for part-time church administration and is pursuing ministry training. One spoke of discovering the joy of giving finding her business had money to give away to support Christian ministries. One was led to go to and pay for an item which he had stolen. Some will be better off in the long run; as in the person who was unable to work because of depression but now is holding down a full time job. Others are not spending money on drugs and alcohol as they once did.¹²⁶

It would not be accurate to speak of this transformation as being complete. One spoke of having depression after becoming a Christian. One spoke of a decrease in her medication for depression, but it has not gone away completely. Some spoke of things which changed relatively easily, others still have issues they struggle with. The newer Christians did not seem to have the whole framework in place. They are still refining what is a truly Christian spirituality rather than a general one. Also in some there was possibly an amount of consumer religion, where God was viewed as one who was there to make their lives a success.

Transformation must be viewed eschatologically. It will not be complete until Christ's returns. What people have now is a “down payment” so we must not overstate the possibilities of grace in the present. Conversion *begins* a new “walk” with a new ethic. “Conversion is both the beginning of the process of personal transformation and the act which makes transformation possible.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 84. This lift in wealth was said to be an effect of the English revival following the evangelistic work of Wesley and Whitfield.

¹²⁷ Smith, *Beginning well*, 28.

However, relating back to the discussion on the maturation process, it is clear that these early adult processes do not prevent change in later life. Transformation of the mind and of behaviour is possible.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ I find this to be incredibly hopeful, for individuals, families, communities and nations.

Chapter 8

Reflections on the interviews 1

God and People

We now move from description to analysis, reflecting on what was said and relating it back to the definitions and anticipated results.

God's work!

Considering plausibility issues, for at least one there appeared to be no real sense of opposition to God. God had just not really featured in her life up until that time. Others had significant obstacles to overcome. The change from implausibility to plausibility happened in a variety of ways and in some cases quite quickly. Plausibility was established by reasoned argument in some cases through books and receiving answers to questions which built a case for faith. Honest, open discussion treated people with respect. For others the unspoken witness of Christians was influential. However, the outstanding factor in establishing credibility for most was the activity of God. This is worthy of careful analysis.

Before beginning this research I considered suggesting that relational factors would be the major influence in drawing people to Christ. I expected that genuine, loving relationships with Christians which gave them an experience of the gospel would be most influential. But, while people were used, relationships were not the major influence.¹²⁹

The sheer amount of direct and independent activity of God was outstanding.¹³⁰ Regularly it was more of an internal process which God used

¹²⁹ This compared to Fleischmann, "How Outsiders Find Faith," 81. "What made the real difference with the unchurched were personal relationships. The majority who find Christ, look back and say that it was a friend who influenced them toward faith." Also Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 36-47. Finney lists family and friends as being the first two most influential factors leading to faith.

¹³⁰ No one made any comment which would suggest that general revelation, like the beauty of creation had any effect in leading them to Christ.

than a social one. Some came to Christ almost without human help; as in those who called out to God for help, or who heard a voice which they attributed to God or who experienced the transcendence of God. No one led such people to Christ. A high degree of circumstantial activity was attributed to God, like being given the right book at just the right time. God used people at crucial points, like the counsellor, or Bible in Schools teachers. Even so, it was more about God acting independently than through socialisation.

This might be described as an intervention, attributed to being from God, which triggered faith. This led to a point where they almost could not say no. Any barriers had been taken away and it seemed like it was almost an inevitable step to take in the light of what God was doing. Where, as one described it the factual evidence was compelling and the counter-evidence unimpressive. As another said “it would have been the definition of insanity to argue.”

This evidence of spiritual activity has been researched over a significant period of time. Kevin Ward refers to this.

In Britain, research by David Hay at Cambridge University on the spirituality of non-church goers found in 1987 that 48% admitted to a form of religious spiritual experience. In 2000 he found it had increased to 76%.¹³¹ Australian researchers, after analysing a wide variety of social science data, state that the research makes clear “that many of those who are not attending are nonetheless religious, oriented to God, open to those aspects of life which are beyond the material, beyond and within the immediate.”¹³²

This evidence for the work of God is a relief because we see that truly salvation is God’s work, not the responsibility of individuals. However, it poses a conundrum at two levels. It provokes a re-working of what personal theology causes this to be surprising. It also raises really good questions about the role of the church in mission. We will look at the second of these later but now we look at the theological challenges.

¹³¹ Kevin Ward, e-mail (30th November 2012) citing D. Hay & K. Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who Don’t Go to Church* (Cambridge: University, 2000)

¹³² Kevin Ward, e-mail (30th November 2012) citing P. Hughes, C. Thompson, R. Pryor, G. Bouma, *Believe it or Not: Australian Spirituality in the 90s* (Surrey Hills: CRA, 1995), 1.

The assessment that primarily we have been observing the independent activity of God challenges missional and ecclesiological thinking. It questions an understanding of incarnational theology which holds that, as Jesus came in the flesh to demonstrate what God was like, so too the church has been sent into the world to show people what God is like by pointing them to Jesus. As Jesus came to a particular group of people, proclaiming the nearness of the Kingdom of God, local churches are to embody a kingdom lifestyle among particular groups of people, demonstrating the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Incarnational theology underpins missional thinking today. Frost and Hirsch argue that "...the planting of new, culturally diverse missional communities is the best way forward for the church that views itself in a missional context... The church should define itself in terms of its mission – to take the gospel to and incarnate the gospel within a specific cultural context."¹³³ They argue that the future shape of the church should have: a high value on communal life, more open leadership structures, and the contribution of all the people of God.¹³⁴ Without disagreeing with this argument, it does seem as though this emphasises too heavily what the church has to do so that it can be affective in doing God's work.

There seems to be an assumption that God only works in and through the church and so God's work is enhanced when the church positions herself properly in a community and gets its gathered life together. However, we have seen that a number of people from non-churched backgrounds came to faith in Christ, largely through the work of God's Spirit, apart from the missional activity of the church. None of the participants were drawn into churches which have incarnated a particular people group for the purpose of mission.¹³⁵ Without knowing all of the churches the participants attend, they

¹³³ Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Massachusetts: Hendricksen Publishers, 2003), ix-xi.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁵ The exception here is possibly Bible in Schools which is an incarnational activity. One church leader I contacted who ministers within a church which was possibly the most deliberate about incarnational mission, engaging deeply with the community, was unable to provide me with any names of people who had become Christians from a non-churched background in their church.

predominantly appear to be ones which are more attractional than missional.

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The assertion that God is at work apart from the church also diverges from G Smith, who argues that an experience is always mediated by a community governed and sustained by the Scriptures.¹³⁷ It also questions Leslie Newbigin's famous assertion.

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.¹³⁸

The popular phrase, "God has no hands and feet but ours," is simply un-true from the evidence of those interviewed. Engel and Dryness explain an alternative view: "God is calling out his people, the elect, for the benefit of all people, and in missions we are invited to share in this great work. Indeed, anyone involved in missions can testify how often they feel like spectators watching God work in peoples' lives."¹³⁹

The sociological understanding of belong, believe, behave is also challenged. It was expected that a sense of belonging would be influential as a person came to believe. For some this was the case, but for a number it was a lesser factor or not a factor at all. Belonging is important as people enter the community of believers, but it is not necessarily influential in the process of coming to faith. The understanding that "faith is both socially transmitted and socially maintained" explains a good part of what goes on for people growing up in a strong church environment, but at best, only partly explains what went on for those interviewed.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ My observation is that many of the early emergent churches were attractive for Christians who were disgruntled, disillusioned or had been hurt by the contemporary church and were looking for alternatives. They have some effect at drawing in such people who have maybe stopped going to church, which is a valid ministry, but this also limits their missional ability to those who are non-churched. It was typical of them also to not last very long. Will the missional church be any different?

¹³⁷ Smith, *Beginning well*, 16. "Conversion is the fruit of an encounter with the risen Christ himself, as witnessed to and experienced within a Christian community."

¹³⁸ Leslie Newbigin quoted by Brian Smith in: Smith, "Christianity: learning a second language," 54.

¹³⁹ Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 38-9.

¹⁴⁰ Kevin Ward, "Is New Zealand's Future Churchless," *Stimulus* 12, no. 2 (May 2004): 6.

This leads to a greater appreciation of the concept of the *missio Dei*.¹⁴¹ We truly see that Christians don't do the work of God, they participate in it. God is at work acting to save and, with considerable grace, involves people in these purposes.

It reveals how Christian thinking has been extensively influenced by modernity. In Medieval times the activity of God was seen as an explanation for many things. However, typified by Descartes maxim "I think: therefore I am," humanistic rationalism gloried in the human reasoning elevating the powers of the mind to the highest place.¹⁴² Based on the scientific method, if it could not be rationally explained then it was not real. Therefore there was no place for supernatural intervention. It seems as though this reasoning has been deeply influential in secularising the church's thinking.¹⁴³

Modernity has shaped the church's approach to evangelism. As a result the emphasis has been on the point of a rational decision as opposed to the God who calls.¹⁴⁴ Evangelism seems to have so over emphasised the need for a human response that salvation has become something which people get themselves by their choice of Christ.¹⁴⁵ At its extreme, God can only act in response to human initiatives: like evangelistic efforts or a sinner's prayer.¹⁴⁶

This clarifies the earlier discussion about a narrow view of salvation. The focus of the gospel on guilt before God because of sin blinds us from seeing

¹⁴¹ I believed it was true in my mind, but felt disconnected from it in practice. I also thought that the concept *missio Dei* could potentially erode a Christian's sense of responsibility. Christians could conclude that as mission is God's work, if God wants people saved then God will do it. This is reminiscent of the church leader's words to William Carey before he set out to be a Missionary in India that if God wanted those heathen saved then God could do it himself.

¹⁴² Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 57-61. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Michigan Eerdmans, 1986), 23-26.

¹⁴³ Crawshaw and Vink, "Conversion: Reconsidering the Paradigm," 36. A secularistic, scientific worldview dominates thinking resulting in a human centred understanding of conversion. 36-40 discuss the impact of modern thinking on evangelism.

¹⁴⁴ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 133. 131-170 give an in depth assessment of the effect of modernity on Evangelism.

¹⁴⁵ Evangelism is prone to being Arminian, but is this a further step towards Pelagianism? This would be more of a Masters in Theology study to undertake.

¹⁴⁶ Green, *Compelled by Joy*, 115-121. "It is one thing to replace God with reason which is what happened when modernism replaced Christendom. It is a very different matter to replace reason, when reason fails." 119.

the possibility of God being involved in a person's life leading up to the point of their commitment. Sin has separated them from God. God cannot be involved until they enter the sphere of Christian witness where God is working. There is no possibility of God acting separately from those bringing the gospel.¹⁴⁷ This also smacks of colonialism. The Christian has the truth and is there to give it to the uninitiated.

However, the actual message of scripture, epitomised by the saving death of Jesus, is of Immanuel - God with us. "God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:8). The call of Jesus to believe is not so much about accepting a set of propositions as it was about an invitation into a relationship.

A form of apologetics which is trapped in rationalism is confined to trying to prove that God is the best God, and so choosing salvation through Christ is the best decision you can make. Also a pragmatic approach emphasises how Christian faith will help a person's life. The 'gospel has too often been reduced to something analogous to a consumer product that can be mass marketed to demonstrate competitive superiority over alternative belief systems.'¹⁴⁸

Modernity has then shaped the thinking of Christians to expect certain things to happen in the process of coming to Christ which concentrates on the human over the divine. But considering the observable activity of God in conversion, leads us to think again about the methods we use in evangelism. While God uses the efforts of the church in evangelism and even sometimes through its programmes, we must see that God's workings are broader than any of them and not constrained by them.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 199-203. Reports how Muslims have had visions of light which have led them to Christ.

¹⁴⁸ Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 69. Engel and Dryness explain how missions have succumbed to strategic marketing (67-74) including the comment: "Evangelism was reduced to *the act of presenting the plan of salvation.*" (italics theirs)

Supremely we see conversion is God's work. A sense of desperation can drive evangelistic zeal.¹⁴⁹ Maybe this betrays a lack of trust in God. The realisation that God is at work can raise our level of faith and thus reduce the pressure we feel to push evangelism which can do more harm than good.

The conclusion is that, through whatever means God uses, God is the primary Evangelist.¹⁵⁰ God is active in reaching out to people – even Westerners. This causes us to amend our previous definition that evangelism is the activity of the church to a position that the church's evangelism goes hand in hand with, or even follows the outreach of God towards people. Rick Richardson comments: "The Holy Spirit is the first and primary witness. We are junior partners called to collaborate."¹⁵¹

The importance of people.

While the impact of God's work was a major observation, relational factors were certainly evident and worthy of examination. We cannot ignore the early influence of grandparents, friends, Bible in Schools teachers and youth camp organisers in "planting a seed" which later grew. People like the Bible in Schools teacher who gave the relief teacher a prayer to pray might have no idea what impact they have had.

We see the power of invitation. One accepted an invite to Alpha, others to come to church. One of those invitations came, over a sustained period of time, from a trusted relationship through a support group. Other instances seem to be more, one off invitations. Although a respected person made the invitation there is no indication of a deeply personal relationship.

¹⁴⁹ Brian D McLaren, *A new Kind of Christian (Book 1): The tale of two friends on a spiritual journey* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001), 148. McLaren expresses this tension in evangelicals and how it can be counter-productive to evangelism.

¹⁵⁰ Green, *Compelled by Joy*, 203. I can see why terms like: *missio Dei* and *missional church* are favoured. These are benign terms which do not have the connotations which go along with "evangelist" and "evangelical".

¹⁵¹ Richardson, *Reimagining evangelism*, 47. "God's Spirit seems to love to meet seekers and sceptics where they are and to reach out his hand to minister, even miraculously, whenever they ask. And we get to collaborate with the Holy Spirit."

The Alpha environment is very relational and the host of the programme was influential in bridging the gap from Alpha to church attendance.¹⁵² There was the silent witness of workmates and the relationships of two wives. They did not nag or pester, they did not judge, or get overtly evangelistic although they were praying, and they were there in support.

Worthy of special focus are the two instances which involved ordained clergy because of the way they went about it.¹⁵³ The minister, who was approached about Alpha, had the sense to think that the enquiry hadn't come out of nothing. His response was thoughtful and interactive. He took time to listen to what was prompting this enquiry and then gave her a book to read. This treated her with dignity and it left her open to other conversations.

The vicar was influential over quite a time through a significant relationship. This began with a friendship which was based around common interests developing into regular conversations over lunch. The vicar was persistent, inviting him to church and Alpha but the friendship was strong enough that even though those things were unhelpful, the relationship was not damaged. Through this thoughtful engagement the vicar discerned the right approach. He used his theological knowledge wisely and so he knew what books to give him and what factual information would build the credibility of Christianity for him. The "PIGS" group was well timed and was the right approach because it allowed for robust discussion and for "heretical ideas" to be voiced.¹⁵⁴

There are significant things here to return to when we make some conclusions about the church in mission.

¹⁵² Some non-churched people can find Alpha helpful, but then struggle to cross the bridge into church services which have such a different way of communicating and relating.

¹⁵³ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 51-59. 17% the main factor and 43% a significant supporting factor in these ones coming to faith.

¹⁵⁴ The participant commented that this was the only time in which this priest ran PIGS.

Chapter 9

Reflections on the Interviews 2 Conversion and Salvation themes

Conversion

We continue comparing the discussion on the issues surrounding this research with the actual information collected. Looking again at Fowler's definition that conversion has to do with changes in the contents of faiths. It is "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."¹⁵⁵

Images of value and power have shifted from reliance on self to reliance on God. One relied on always being in control, others on their rational minds. One had tried everything to get healthy, for another drugs and alcohol were a way of self-medicating so he could cope with life. But they have moved from these dependencies to trusting in Christ. There was a clear shift from one life to another; a putting off of the old and a putting on of the new (2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9-12). They now saw ultimate value and power to be with God. Their lives took on a whole new master story. Now they were walking with God, God's ways were primary. They looked to the church to reshape their thinking on what had ultimate meaning for their lives and for how they should live.

It is accurate to describe coming to faith as conversion for these participants. There was a definite change of worlds for them. Conversion... 'is not primarily a matter of deciding in favour of certain beliefs or having certain experiences. It is rather a change of worlds, participation in a new worship, and a journeying toward a new city.'¹⁵⁶ It has been radical change. Their

¹⁵⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 281-2.

¹⁵⁶ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 21.

perspectives on life, priorities, habits and personal relationships have all been transformed.

It has not primarily been alternation: a relatively limited form of change which develops out of one's own past. The young man who had been struggling with a full commitment of faith before his scuba diving experience might be closest to alternation. But even for him it meant a break with the past by changing relationships and habits. He changed flats, which took him away from a party scene, joined a Life Group which gave him new relationships,¹⁵⁷ and he submitted to the teaching of his church, reshaping his life accordingly. His career path, changed from engineering to teaching.

While clearly there was discontinuity with what had gone on before, we also need to note continuity. This for me is summed up in the phrase: 'God saves what God has made' and in the thought that nothing is wasted.¹⁵⁸ Their conversion was not the beginning of God's involvement in their lives. The way some described how God was involved at points throughout their lives seems like what went on for them was: an awakening, an acceptance, a coming to terms with, or a surrendering to a reality that God was in their lives.

Early life experiences were influential in shaping their Christian lives. The one involved in World Vision, had worked in the Sudan where the children had left a lasting impression on him. Another spoke of having a learning difficulty which made his childhood education difficult. This is a motivating factor for him as he now serves in ways which help children have a good start in life. The one who was impacted by her Bible in Schools teacher loves teaching it herself. Personal integrity meant that they could not ignore what was going on and this integrity as a personal attribute remains.

Those who came to Christ in middle-age are people who are not naive or untouched by life's dilemmas. They have gone through hard times of questioning. They became Christians in stages three or four of Fowler's

¹⁵⁷ These are the home groups of the Life Church.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Beginning well*, 29.

stages of faith. This has not meant for them a reversion into early stages of faith, to a black and white phase, or a point of believing what the group believes. God has taken them from where they were, in the life stage they were in and built from there.¹⁵⁹

“At conversion grace is bestowed on a life that is already there. ... We must not speak of conversion as so radical a change that we either neglect or, worse, deny the previous existence of a person. ... And no life is so wasted that there is no possibility of change or transformation.”¹⁶⁰

Conversion was both a short and a protracted process. It was impressive to hear how quickly the actual point of commitment came about for some people.¹⁶¹ It was as instant as: “I heard a voice” – “I decided to go to church,” or from reading his wife’s Bible to taking communion - just three weeks. There seems to have been a tipping point at which their lives were turned to God. These periods were typically all consuming and they became life defining. Finney calls this

a “crystallising process”. A lot is going on in their lives: times of searching, sometimes confusion. All this leads to a crystallising event: being asked to church or an evangelistic meeting: It might be a conversation or a sentence which “gels” for a person. This “crystallising event” leads to a clear sense of things having begun to coalesce and what had been fragmented becoming whole.¹⁶²

In Duncan MacLaren’s terms a “plausibility shelter” was built quite quickly at that point.¹⁶³ In terms of the Engel’s scale, most of the people moved from a state of disinterest to openness towards God in a short period of time. The crucial moment might have been one prior to the point of commitment in Engel’s scheme. They might not have understood intellectually all that

¹⁵⁹Some of the stories of people who have had long periods of drug and alcohol abuse might demonstrate a move into stage two as they have to learn so much about living a stable life which has been so foreign to them.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Beginning well*, 29.

¹⁶¹ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 25. Identifies an average time of four years in the process of becoming a Christian.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶³ MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, 46. “The pluralisation of plausibility structures makes it more appropriate, in my view, to speak of ‘plausibility shelters’ rather than ‘structures’”.

salvation meant to make a rational decision, but their lives were set in a direction toward Christ.¹⁶⁴

However it is also worth noting the protracted nature of God's involvement in their lives. Some saw that seeds had been sown. Even the off-putting "Bible basher" was seen as getting into one's head. Some saw repeated opportunities to respond to Christ. For one, considering how many chances she might get in her life and what the alternative might be for her if she didn't take this opportunity was defining. It would then be appropriate to speak of these experiences as being influential marker points on the way to commitment to Christ.

Finney comments: "Our understanding of this "process" and the "event" is crucial to evangelism."¹⁶⁵ We must not expect that all will come to faith through a long protracted process. Someone can be turned to Christ in an instant. However, clearly there is not a full understanding for someone at this point, and so it is also true to say that coming to Christ takes a lifetime.

So, considering conversion we can say that it contained elements of continuity and discontinuity with their past lives and that it was both an instant and a protracted event involving a moment of crisis and a process of time.

Learning from what was not said.

Words which were not used were significant. In terms of their description of how they came to faith, there was almost a complete lack of Christian jargon.

¹⁶⁶ The word salvation was hardly used. There was hardly any discernible

¹⁶⁴ Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 100-101. Even though they are severely critical about how modernity has skewed the church's view of world missions, it seems as though the Engel's scale still reflects a modernistic view of a linear process of salvation.

¹⁶⁵ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 30.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-21. Finney encountered the same kind of response, even with people who had gone through Confirmation or Baptism classes. He notes that people generally talked about it in terms of a relationship with God. "Theological statements which explain the nature of faith appeared to have little impact on the way in which people describe what has happened to them".

reference to sin.¹⁶⁷ Words like justified, sanctified, redeemed or reconciled were not used.

One spoke of “praying the prayer” another of praying to “receive Christ”, and a couple spoke of responding to “calls” within church services, so there might have been some similarity in these instances to the “Four Spiritual Laws” approach. But none of them described a conscious sense of guilt, either psychological or of an acceptance of culpability before God. None spoke of a conscious sense that they needed forgiveness. Mostly they did not come through that formal, structured decision process.¹⁶⁸

There was no mention of eternal life, or damnation. None came to Christ as a guarantee of eternal life or as a safe-guard against hell. Neither was there a concern over the direction of the world, of terrorist attacks, or earthquakes which prompted a search for God. What impacted these people was entirely related to their personal lives and their immediate experiences of life. This helps to define the place of approaches like Evangelism Explosion, which focus on the basis of a person’s belief that they will go to heaven. It only applies if there is a Christian framework to begin with, one which accepts that there is a God who has ultimate authority over all people.

Even though the concept of sin was not referred to as significant in the build up to their conversion, it is worth reflecting on how sin is understood and the impact of Christendom on that view. In many people’s minds sinner equals a bad person in the eyes of the public. To be told they were a sinner, and for them to equate that with them being like a murderer or rapist would not have been helpful. Those who lived law abiding lives would not have accepted this view. For those who knew they had been bad people in society’s eyes it would just have reinforced what they already knew.

¹⁶⁷ Here I exclude the experience of the participant who came to faith age 19 after having been at a number of Christian camps and having started attending a church because I consider his account to be too much within a Christian framework. His description was of a struggle with his sinfulness.

¹⁶⁸ Brian D McLaren, *More Ready than you Realise: the Power of Everyday Conversations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 151-2. “... Paul never shared “the Four Spiritual Laws,” John never invited anyone forward and say a sinner’s prayer so they could have a born again experience, Peter never explained the four or five simple “steps to peace with God,” ... So much of what we think of as evangelism is really a modern invention.”

It is more helpful to think of a person's state of sin, than their sinful behaviour. Being in a state of sin might be understood as an orientation which is turned away from God, or a life which is self directed (Isaiah 53:6). "Sin is man's determination to manage by himself."¹⁶⁹ Robert Warren explains that the roots of sin are pride and unbelief. "Pride and unbelief reject the call to live as creature before the Creator. Its heart is a denial of the reality of God as the centre of existence and all that is, and the rejection of what it means to be human. Sin is acting out of character as those made in God's image."¹⁷⁰ This explains an understanding of sin which, until confronted with the reality of God in their lives, the participants remained unaware of or unconcerned about. Without an alternative you run your life by your own truth.

This is helpful for an understanding of repentance. While two men spoke of periods of time repenting of their sins *after* their hearts were turned to Christ, repentance in terms of confessing sin and asking for forgiveness was not consciously something they engaged in as they came to faith. Repentance did not involve coming before God as a guilty person deserving the death penalty and a reception of Christ as substitute. If there is no concept in a person's life that they stand guilty before a God who holds ultimate authority over their lives then there will be no sense of guilt for them. None of them described it in any way like the penal substitution understanding of the atonement which is prevalent in a theological understanding of salvation.

However it would be appropriate to describe repentance for these ones as a turning from one life to another; from a sinful state where God had no place, to a place where God was central and in control. Theology develops in the tension between our understanding of scripture and our experiences of life.¹⁷¹ Viewing of repentance as turning from one life to another could be a more accurate understanding of what Jesus meant in Mark 1:15 than one overlaid with a Pauline construction born out of law court imagery.

¹⁶⁹ Rudolf Bultmann quoted in: Warren, *Being Human Being Church*, 129.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *Beginning well*, 19.

Biblical images of salvation

The interviews do spark some reflection on Scripture. In the light of the visible activity of God images of the new covenant come to mind where God acts to cause people to be willing to follow as in Ezekiel's prophecy: "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*" (Ezekiel 36: 26-27 also Jeremiah 31:31-34).

We see prevenient grace. God is the God of the first move. God so loved, that He gave (John 3:16 also Romans 5:8). "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).¹⁷² The parable of the treasure in the field comes to mind. Maybe the man was not even looking for treasure, he just came upon it. But when he found it, he went and sold all he had to get it (Matt 13:44).¹⁷³ God is then one who hides treasure in places where people will find it. Some weren't engaged in a discernible search for God, when they stumbled on a treasure which was too good to pass up – the treasure of the kingdom.

Considering accounts in the book of Acts, some of the narratives are like a Damascus road experience (Acts 9: 1-19). While not deliberately out to persecute Christ, their lives were were heading in one direction, when an encounter with God changed everything. The account of Phillip meeting the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40) and Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10) connect. In both of these cases God was at work and followers of Christ were used to join in that work at a significant point in their journey.

Predictably journey imagery was used. It is important though to recall how those who spoke in journey imagery didn't tend to describe their conversion as the beginning of their journey. God had acted throughout their lives, even before they were aware of him, and even through non-Christians in some

¹⁷² Also the parable of the lost sheep Luke 15:1-7

¹⁷³ As opposed to Matthew 13:45, the pearl of great price, where the merchant is engaged in a deliberate quest.

instances. We can see this was true for Paul as well. Although he counted all that he had prior to coming to Christ as a loss compared to knowing Christ (Phil 3:4-8), God's hand was leading him to the point of his eventual service to God. As a Jew, the Pharisaic upbringing which drove him to persecute Christians gave him knowledge which was immediately used in evangelising Jews. His Roman citizenship gave him the ability to move easily through the Empire and within the realms of Greek thinking. Paul's reflection: "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1Corinthians 15:10) is a highly relevant comment. God saves what God has made!

Lastly, it is clear that God is not biased against the rich. Some of the people interviewed are wealthy. Others, with changes to their lifestyles following their conversion, have the potential to increase their wealth. The point of the story of the rich ruler is that neither rich nor poor, powerful or powerless, religious or irreligious, law keepers nor law breakers can enter the Kingdom of Heaven on their own merit. The salvation of anyone is entirely a work of God (Luke 18:18-34). Camels do go through the eye of a needle - when God is involved!

Chapter 10

Implications for the Church in Mission.

We must be realistic about what a piece of research such as this can achieve. Gordon Smith, after outlining the conversions of four people from history comments: “though we certainly cannot read too much into these four conversion narratives, the four described might not be all that atypical.”¹⁷⁴ A small sample cannot explain the whole, but it can describe a portion of the whole which is real and so it can speak to the whole. As in the analogy of four blind people being asked to describe a different part of an elephant, the description is accurate but not complete. This is the attitude we need to have towards this study. It has not given a complete picture of all the ways in which adults come to faith. However, what it reveals informs the church about the areas which can be seen.

Seeing that God’s work is not confined within the church, we turn to consider the church’s role in mission. The church as an alluring presence or as the light of the world did not come through strongly.¹⁷⁵ Neither was the activity of the church making the world a better place influential in drawing people to Christ.¹⁷⁶

However, in the light of the activity of God, churches need to be communities which are sensitive to what God is doing (John 5:17, 19-20; 14:12). God takes the initiative and involves people in this work, on his timetable not on ours. The challenge is to discern where God is at work and what the church is being led to do as a collaborator.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Smith, *Beginning well*, 76.

¹⁷⁵ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 21. Evangelism “is not primarily a matter of translating our beliefs about the world into categories that people will find acceptable. It is a matter of being present in the world in a distinctive way such that the alluring and “useless” beauty of holiness can be touched, tasted and tried.” The church can be a living witness of the reality of grace and truth. It can be a forgiving community, and it can be a community which stands up for justice. Matt 5:14.

¹⁷⁶ As in: “you are the salt of the earth.” Matthew 5:13.

¹⁷⁷ Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 89-90.

How might this happen? Christians must be engaged with people who are not involved in the church in ways which are open to discover this activity of God. Rather than having the gospel neatly packaged, Christians can be enquirers: asking what God is doing in a person's life and looking for what has already happened. Taking Saxbee's image of listening to two tunes at once, an appropriate gospel response can be discovered in the space between a person's experience and our understanding of scripture.

All people can be seen as being on a spiritual journey. Christians might be like tour guides pointing the way to Christ.¹⁷⁸ Biblically speaking we are making disciples. We can treat everyone as people who are becoming disciples, whether they display any Christian faith or not. There is also the sense that all are side by side on a journey which will culminate with the return of Christ. All are discovering the way together.¹⁷⁹

Bob Mayo talks about making people curious. He advocates the use of understatement which leaves people thinking, and wanting to talk again.¹⁸⁰ This encourages patience and trust that God is working in a person's life. Evangelical fervour can push for results, but "evangelism is ultimately an activity of the Holy Spirit and is not subject to our own calculus of effectiveness and 'return of investment'."¹⁸¹

Added to this the church can endeavour to provide wells rather than fences. A well is a place animals come to freely. A fence defines who is in and who is out. A focus on a "Four Spiritual Laws" approach to sharing the gospel makes a clear line of who is in and who is out and it provides fences to climb over. In mathematical terms we speak of a centred set, focussed on Christ, rather than a bounded set, focussed on the criteria for being in or out.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 15-26. Tour guides not travelling sales people!

¹⁷⁹ Engel & Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 98-99. Personally it has been a most rewarding to observe, both believers and not yet believers contributing to God's work in various groups. Sometimes the insight from a non-believer was the most profoundly helpful.

¹⁸⁰ Mayo, *Ambiguous Evangelism*, 85-88.

¹⁸¹ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 21.

¹⁸² Sheila Pritchard. Wells and Fences: The Risk of Spiritual Growth, 25-32. Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 139-141 & 158-159. Richardson makes an important point that as Jesus is on the move

As a person's faith takes shape the church might be seen as a scaffolder. Christians can help make sense of what is going on for people, providing a framework and supporting them as they construct their plausibility shelter. Abraham writes: "Evangelism needs to be expanded to include the early phases of Christian initiation. The gospel must be handed over in such a way that those who receive it may be able to own it for themselves in a substantial way and have some sense of what they are embracing." He advocates a catechesis process, like that of early church history, centred on initiation into the kingdom of God.¹⁸³ This is particularly important in a pre-Christian environment where there is a form of spirituality but little accurate knowledge about Christianity.

Brian Smith speaks of the process of becoming a Christian as learning a new language. Christianity is like a different culture and language is crucial to culture. Language is learnt in community and with it also the cultural expectations around behaviour are transmitted.¹⁸⁴ The influence of the culture of the churches which the participants attend came through. One person went to a church which teaches weekly on tithes – and offerings. Sometimes, after giving she didn't have enough money to feed her family. Elsewhere she encountered a worshipping community where she felt that something for the food bank was an acceptable offering.

In the community of faith we learn the language of faith. This communal language enables us to make sense of our lives and gives definition to the Spirit's work. This language outlines an authentic and life transforming response to God.

Conversion requires that we embrace this language. It involves not only trusting in Jesus but also trusting in the community which mediates Jesus to us through the language of faith. Conversion is largely an

the centre is not fixed. People not only need to be moving towards Jesus, they also need to be moving in the direction he is going in.

¹⁸³ Abraham, "A Theology of Evangelism," 30.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, "Christianity: learning a second language," 47-55. Although Brian Smith goes too far in limiting the activity of God to within the church, still his point is valid for the discipleship process. Gordon Smith elaborates on the role of the church as educator. Smith, *Beginning well*, 33-49.

experience of learning and appropriating a faith language, a language that is sustained by a particular religious community.¹⁸⁵

Mayo refers to the work of Michael Polanyi that everyone has an underpinning narrative that shapes how they interpret life. For anything to be understood it needs to be appreciated in its context. People can't understand unless they have a framework to fit their experiences into. Most participants came to Christ with a limited understanding of Christianity. The work of the church is then vital in providing a context for belief.¹⁸⁶ Alpha might be most effective in contributing to this process rather than in evangelism.¹⁸⁷

Taking seriously the internal nature of conversion we can be aware that this language learning can still happen in relative isolation from in depth relationships. Some people do not learn socially. A person attending a large church, can attend worship on their own, and gain their framework from the sermon, the worship music and the general experience they have. If they don't join a small group they might never build strong relationships with the people they worship with.¹⁸⁸

Two things are worth considering in regard to the church in the public space. Brian Smith speaks of a role for the church as an apologist in a different way to a modernist approach which argues for the reasonableness of Christianity. People will want factual answers, but not packaged in a way which tries to prove the Christianity's superiority. The apologetics spoken of here involves speaking up for the faith in the face of misunderstanding and criticism. When little is known about Christian faith in the community and what is known is

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *Beginning well*, 41-2. However he goes too far when he asserts that, we cannot become converted unless we become a part of a faith community. This clearly puts limitations on God's work.

¹⁸⁶ Mayo, *Ambiguous Evangelism*, 7-8. Chapter 3 language of choice (54-69) unpacks this. "There has to be a shared understanding of what the words mean." 61.

¹⁸⁷ Booker & Ireland, *Evangelism which way now?*, 22-27. Discuss theological bias and limitations of the curriculum of Alpha. Certainly it is a tool which gives some of the framework. A strength of Alpha for formation is in the discussion when broader understandings can be discussed.

¹⁸⁸ This could have been the case for at least one of the participants. Also, people can gain a great deal of their framework from the internet or reading books. One new Christian, not in this study, has learnt a lot about being a Christian parent through internet blog-sites. *Ibid.*, 58-60. Booker and Ireland suggest ways to interact evangelistically with people by giving them sites to visit on the internet.

often negative, this kind of response through various forms of media is important in removing obstacles to faith for people.¹⁸⁹

In addition the narratives call for Theology to be reinstated alongside the disciplines of Medicine, Psychology and Sociology. Western approaches to the caring professions need to take seriously the possibility of the intervention of God in human lives alongside the understanding of the western person which these disciplines provide. We must not be careless, or naïve, but we have seen the power of God to deeply change a person and to affect whole families. As a result of coming to Christ one person's depression medication has been reduced, another has given up alcohol, and another, when depression threatens gains help through the prayer of people at church. The gospel has holistic effects on people's lives. All disciplines need to work together.

We need to note the importance of crises and transitions.¹⁹⁰ The point of coming to faith, for these people, came about through either a crisis or a transitional time in their lives. Some were related to suicide attempts, depression and drug abuse; others to traumatic work experiences, relational issues and the struggles of raising young children. Some were crises around half-time issues.

Not all were points of crisis. Some came at transitional times like wanting to know what this "God stuff" was all about before getting married by a minister. "I prayed and was able to scuba dive" was about a transition to adulthood as described earlier. It came at a time when he was defining who he was and how he would live.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, "Christianity: learning a second language," 53. Smith speaks of the Apologist Aristides who described Christians to the Emperor Hadrian: "They love one another. They never fail to help widows, they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to a man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home and are happy, as though he was a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense but brothers instead through the Spirit of God."

¹⁹⁰ Fleischmann, "How Outsiders Find Faith," 82.

So, while Christians need to be continuously present in people's lives, we can be alert to the significance of crisis points and transitional times as periods when the bigger questions about life might be being asked or when a gracious God might intervene. Caring believers were significant at this point, to support them and to point them in the right direction.

The Role of the Minister in Evangelism.

The findings challenge a reconsideration of the role of ordained people in evangelism. The expectation is often that ministers are responsible for the nurture of those in the church. The "laity" are primarily the ones engaging in witness among the un-churched. However, linked to calling and gifting, there could be a deliberate role for some ministers in engaging with people who are not in the church. Ministers devote their lives to thinking about and articulating the faith. Maybe this puts them in a unique place to be able to help people process what is going on for them giving it some framework.¹⁹¹ When questioned about engagement with non-churched people Brian McLaren put out the challenge that ministers look to decrease their time working in the church by about ten hours a week. Those hours could then be used among the un-churched.¹⁹²

Evangelistic strategies

With the exception of the man who came to faith through Alpha traditional evangelistic programmes were either irrelevant or unhelpful. They simply do not figure in some stories. They were unhelpful to some because they expected people to be at a particular point when they weren't.¹⁹³ As anticipated, mass evangelism didn't figure in most stories and in one case

¹⁹¹ Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, 51-59. This is in contrast to Fleischmann who sees regular church people as best situated to reach non-churched people. Fleischmann, "How Outsiders Find Faith," 81.

¹⁹² Brian D McLaren, (Eden Chapel, 13th October 2009). Church members might then need to take more of a role in conducting worship, pastoral care and the nurture of believers. Maybe within a missional church network, ministers could serve groups of churches where, among other things, one is given responsibility for leading their missional initiatives?

¹⁹³ Another study could be to compare their stories with 10 people who have become Christians through Alpha or EE.

was actually unhelpful. Missional activities, like love your neighbour type schemes, were not mentioned.

However, spiritual conversations which were open and flexible were helpful. They treated the individual with respect. They took time to listen to where the person was at and they suggested things which might be helpful to them. While Christians were open about their faith, lines in the sand were not drawn to force a decision.

The approach of the PIGS group epitomises this attitude. Instead of starting with a church's agenda, this concept starts with where they are at. It treats their thoughts as valuable and their objections as real. Mark Ireland identifies a difficulty for churches in attracting people to evangelism courses like Alpha. This can be because of the set curriculum; "published resources begin with the agenda of the evangelist – the good news as revealed in Jesus Christ – rather than with the agenda of the tentative enquirer." He suggests meeting with enquirers, either individually or in small groups, on their own territory in an open-ended informal way where they can help to set the agenda and pose difficult questions. Such small groups require a lot of leaders, but they can be a vital step before someone is ready to attend a structured course, or as a discipleship process in itself.¹⁹⁴

We have noted the place of invitation. When it is God's timing, some people will be open to an invitation to attend worship or a teaching programme. Connected to the place of invitation goes open availability. Some people were influential simply because they were there and at the right time they were able to point them further on the journey.

In terms of worship services, we can be hopeful that the Holy Spirit is doing more than we think. We can have a long term vision that God has been working up to when they begin attending and will continue to do so afterwards. However, we need to be realistic about the worship service.

¹⁹⁴ Ireland, *Evangelism which way now?*, 60. Since reading this I have been a part of two such groups which have been influential in forming my thinking for reflections on the church's approach.

While we cannot manufacture the presence of God with good lighting, sound, graphics and relevant speakers, we do need to be mindful of some basics. In every worship service we can have in mind that there are people who do not know the overarching narrative of scripture. References like “of course we all know the story of Jonah,” create a sense of insiders and outsiders, as does using lots of Christian jargon without explanation. The use of Data Projectors to project the words of songs and scripture references has minimised the awkwardness around trying to find the number in the hymn book or the right place in the Bible.

So, from this study, we can conclude that the church’s approach needs to be flexible and responsive. Brian McLaren speaks of evangelism as a dance which is movement in response to a song which is heard - the song being the work of God in a person’s life.¹⁹⁵ John Saxbee writes of this evangelism responsiveness. Rather than starting with the gospel as we would want to present it, the approach is to start with where people are at and then work to see how the gospel connects with their lives.¹⁹⁶ Jim Currin adds a third story – my story: “Connecting the three stories of ‘their story,’ ‘my story,’ and ‘God’s story’ is an art and an exciting adventure.”¹⁹⁷

All these descriptions speak about an approach which is interactive. It is not a case of simply delivering a set of truths to people and asking them to make a response. It gives openness for a two way conversation. There is that sense of pilgrimage, because in listening and responding, all those involved in the conversation are shaped and changed. Newbigin, summarising Polyani writes that all knowing involves the personal participation of the knower and that it always involves the risk of being wrong. “The Church must always understand itself to be on pilgrimage, *in via*. It takes the tradition with which it is entrusted as the guide for the exploration of new realities, and the exploration of new realities in turn modifies and emends the tradition.”¹⁹⁸ In this our theology is challenged, it stretches and grows in the interaction.

¹⁹⁵ McLaren, *More Ready than you Realise*, 13-18.

¹⁹⁶ Saxbee, *Liberal Evangelism*, 40-55. Flexible response, Responding flexibly, 56-105.

¹⁹⁷ Jim Currin, *The 360 degree Gospel of Jesus* (Cambridge Grove Books Limited, 2011), 18. I would add fourth ingredient to the mix; the church’s story.

¹⁹⁸ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 51-53.

Sharing the gospel in an interactive, flexible way, is then best entered into by one who is mature in their faith and settled in their identity in Christ. This equates to Fowler's stages 4-5 where a person has developed a faith where they know what they believe in relation to the world around them. They are comfortable with ambiguity and paradox. They are not threatened by another person's worldview but can interact in a way which is attentive to them. They can share what they believe without trying to convince the person of the rightness of their position.¹⁹⁹

Nigel Wright argues that evangelical people should be generous. He is concerned to redeem the word 'liberal': "In so far as being liberal denotes a generous attitude, a willingness to let others be, a hostility to oppression and an openness to others and their beliefs."²⁰⁰ Wright summarises a generous approach. Our dealings with people should be on the ground of a common humanity. "Goodness is goodness and truth is truth, wherever we may find them." We should interact with people on the basis of our common questions rather than our differing answers; as people who are struggling to make sense of their existence together. Christian convictions should be held firmly, but with due modesty and self-criticism. And there should be an appreciation of the value of living on boundaries. Our knowledge of God is developed in boundary situations where we know ourselves to be questioned and even threatened. This place is necessary for challenging "old bigotries and granting new insight into the significance of the Gospel which has been given to us and yet which we are far from exhausting."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ While these comments are maybe not direct implications from the narratives, they are directly related to the process which has gone on for me during this research. It has given me these approaches to be challenged by. My theology has been tested and my faith questioned. This formation process is I believe a significant, motivating factor behind the Master in Ministry.

²⁰⁰ Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1996), 2.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 120, 129-131.

Chapter 11

Conclusions

Weighing the question

This research set out to test the question: are there common factors which can be observed in the ways adults come to Christian faith from non-Christian backgrounds in the 21st Century? If so, then how might they be described and how might they inform the church's mission? If not, then what might that say about the work of God and about the church's evangelistic efforts?

The question has already been addressed in many ways in our reflections on the interviews and conclusions for the church in mission so now we need to draw these conclusions together. The answer was always going to be "yes" and "no". Yes in that we are all human beings together. We all go through various transitions in life. Everyone faces the same kinds of issues as to who we are and where we stand in relation to God. However, God is a God of infinite creativity. All are unique creations and everyone's experience of life is different, so the answer is also no. Everyone's experience is individual to them.²⁰²

We have seen that there was a high degree of the activity of the Holy Spirit as each one came to faith. "Only the Holy Spirit is the sole defining influence that enables a person to come to faith." However, Gordon Smith goes on to say: "And the Spirit's witness and enabling are mediated through any number of persons: parents, peers, religious leaders, devotional leaders and sometimes even those who do not profess faith in Christ."²⁰³ We have seen that this is only partly true. The Spirit's witness is not always mediated

²⁰² This study has been critical of how much evangelistic efforts have been influenced by the thinking and approach of modernity. However, even this question is overrun with modernity because it seeks to categorise and systematise. "In our search for *magic strategy keys*, we are all to willing to ignore that people come to faith in Christ through a uniquely personal decision process that takes place over time and is an outcome of multiple influences." Engel and Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 70.

²⁰³ Smith, *Beginning well*, 76- 77.

through people. God cannot be limited like that. Some people had minimal influence from other people in their coming to faith.

We also have seen that times of crisis or transition were common factors. This can heighten our sensitivities towards people at such times, but we cannot be predictive or mechanistic about it.

However, the most common factor is in the differences in the stories. One was persuaded over a long period of time through a fairly rational process; another needed to have her rational processes overridden by a series of spiritual encounters so she couldn't argue with God. Some had more involvement with people, while for others it was a solitary and inward journey. Some involved quite dramatic miracles and encounters with demonic forces; for others it was a quieter shift in the direction of their lives.

The conclusion is then that, while we can see some common threads, we must not attempt to categorise or systematise the work of God in people's lives. We must not have a fixed pathway in mind as we interact with people on their journey. Few will come to faith through "the Four Spiritual Laws", although if it is appropriate to share a straightforward explanation like that with a person then we must be prepared for that. Not everyone is going to be socialised into the faith, but realising the importance for people of learning the language of faith through a community, we will be keen to introduce people to a body of believers in the process.

In taking seriously each conversion narrative we have seen "that each person is a story of God's grace. While there are parallels between us and we can compare our stories and celebrate the common elements, each person's conversion narrative is unique."²⁰⁴

Avoiding systematising the work of God fits with the diversity of the gospel expressed earlier. Jesus treated everyone differently, varying his approach depending on their needs. To one it was 'you must be born again', to another

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 17

it was 'your sins are forgiven' and another it was 'your faith has saved (healed) you.' This also rings true with the description of the work of the Holy Spirit described in the book of Acts which was varied and personal.

Brian McLaren sums it up well: "In the postmodern world we may find ourselves returning to a situation more like that of the bible itself where people come to faith in unique and non-formulaic ways, each one's path and story unlike any other. As C S Lewis once said, "Encore!" is the one prayer God doesn't seem to like to answer."²⁰⁵

We cannot abandon evangelistic efforts in the belief that this is God's work. We can be collaborators in the *missio Dei* under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Instead of following formulas along pre-prescribed lines, Christians are to engage actively, flexibly and responsively with people, not knowing where it will lead, or what impact it will have. We are to consider each person as a precious creation of God so that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. We are to do our part but most importantly we are to trust God! We must trust that God has been at work in a person's life and that God will continue to do so – even without us.

In adopting a flexible approach to evangelism we have seen a role for Christians in supporting people in what God is doing in their lives, including the importance of timely invitation and the role of the church as a scaffolder assisting with building a framework to give meaning to what is happening in their lives.

There is a challenge here to live in the mystery. Each narrative is worth celebrating but what has been covered raises some deep theological issues. We are left to ponder why this does not happen more frequently.²⁰⁶ Maybe it is happening more frequently than we are aware, but the church might be so isolated or caught up in its expectations of how God operates that it rarely connects with what God is doing in the wider community. The church cannot

²⁰⁵ McLaren, *More Ready than you Realise*, 151.

²⁰⁶ Theologically this raises the issue of double predestination.

manipulate the work of God, but how might it be more useful to us as a junior partner? These continue to be matters of on-going reflection.

Beyond that this research draws a response of increased trust that God is at work. Evangelistic engagement must be content to do what is appropriate at the time and trust God to take it on from there. Christians don't have to "lead them to Christ" or "get them over the line." God is capable of doing that.

To be able to relax, trusting that God is at work, requires a mature faith. There needs to be assurance about personal belief and an acceptance of where others are at, without having to force the moment, or insert an agenda. This maturity combined with a passionate belief in the goodness of God for all people puts Christians in a place where they can be used by God, as God wills.

This guides a non-anxious approach to prayer. Intercession for others to come to know Christ can be faith-filled, that God is active and doing more than we ask. Prayer can be focussed on listening to gain a better sense of what God is doing.

This study raises hope. Rightly we have seen that Jesus Christ, not the church, is the hope of the world. Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, is transforming the lives of those who once did not know him. The possibility of salvation is not limited to those who grow up with a Christian framework. In the here and now, this brings great hope. Hope for individuals that change is possible; hope which extends to families, communities and cultures.

The final response is one of thanksgiving. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever (Ps 118:1).

Appendix 1

Ethics Documents

25th May 2012

Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21st Century

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. Please read this information sheet carefully. The study aims to investigate whether trends can be seen in the ways adults become Christians from non-Christian backgrounds in typical settings to those in the suburbs around Howick Presbyterian Church.

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for the Master of Ministry qualification through Otago University.

The study will consider people who fit within the following parameters.

- Adults who have become Christians in the last ten years without having had significant exposure to Christian faith in their formative years.
- People aged in their mid 20's and upwards.
- A balance of men and women will be sought.

Although there is significant ethnic diversity in South East Auckland, the study is being narrowed culturally to those people whose families originated from a British or European background. It is assumed that people of different cultural backgrounds might come to faith in different ways. Adults living in this area of Auckland are typically from a higher than average socio-economic background. There also tends to be a higher than average representation of people who have completed tertiary level study. The research will be seeking people typical of these factors as well.

Basic information gathered through e-mail to ascertain the suitability of each participant for the research will be treated with respect. Reasonable precautions will be taken to protect and destroy data gathered by e-mail once it is no longer needed. However, the security of electronically transmitted information cannot be guaranteed.

The research method is interview based. You will be asked to tell your story of how you came to Christian faith. The interview will be audio recorded so that the researcher can refer back to it as the answers of different participants are compared. Interviews will most likely take about an hour to be completed. These will be conducted in a place that is mutually acceptable and at a time when there are unlikely to be any interruptions.

In order to avoid conflicts of interest participants are being sought from outside the researcher's own local church. Normal expectations of confidentiality will apply.

The basic question to be explored in the interview is a broad one. You will be asked to explain how you came to Christian faith? You will be given freedom to answer that question in whatever way you choose. Follow up questions seeking clarification or expansion of your account are likely to be asked. The project will therefore involve

an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops.

Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you may decline to answer any particular question(s) and also you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

The information will be used for the purpose of assessing whether, in one portion of New Zealand Society, trends can be seen in the way adults come to Christian faith. Data collected will only be handled by the researcher and will not be made available to anyone other than the researcher and his academic supervisors. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the Otago library but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity. Likewise, if the researcher is asked to present his findings in a seminar to peers, the anonymity of all participants will be protected.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only the researcher will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

To reiterate, you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind. You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind. You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

If you have any questions about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Kevin Finlay
Howick Presbyterian Church

Ph 09 5354403

or Rev Dr Kevin Ward
Knox Centre for Ministry
and Leadership
Ph 03 473 0786

Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21st Century

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage.
3. Any questionnaire data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data [*audio-recordings*] on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.
4. Although the main question for the interview has been given in advance, this question will lead to others aimed to clarify or expand on what has been shared. The project will therefore involve an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions that will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. Every effort will be made to conduct the interview at a suitable time in an appropriate place. Any potential conflict of interest between researcher and participant will be discussed beforehand.
7. The results of the project may be published and made available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.
8. I understand that reasonable precautions have been taken to protect data transmitted by email but that the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.

..... (print name)

I agree to take part in this project.

..... (Signature)

..... (Date)

Appendix 2

List of Questions

Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21st Century

Masters in Ministry
Research Project

The question to be tested is: are there common factors which can be observed in the way adults come to Christian faith from non-Christian backgrounds in the 21st Century?

A big general question to start with: Would you please describe to me how you came to Christian faith?

Before

What exposure did they have to Christian faith as a child/teenager? Was that a helpful influence towards your coming to faith?

How would they describe their basic belief system before they came to believe in Christ?

Have they identified/ described what made them begin to explore Christian faith?
External or internal factors?

Were there any obstacles to faith which had to be overcome along the way?
How have these been described?

During

Roughly how long did it take from the time they began exploring Christian faith, before they made a commitment to Christ or came to realise they were a Christian?

Can they identify a time when they specifically made a commitment to Christ?
Was it a sudden experience, which could be dated, or more of a gradual process?

What led them to this point of commitment? Was there a pivotal/life defining moment event which led them there?

How have they described their experience of actually becoming a Christian?

What were positive/ beneficial contributors in the process of becoming a Christian?

What things were a challenge or might have had a negative effect on the process?

Can they describe what influence relationships had on their coming to faith? In what context was their relationship with them? What was it about them, which was helpful?

After

Are there observable salvation themes which were important for the participant in the process of coming to faith?

What difference has becoming a Christian made to their life?
What does being a Christian mean for them now?

What do they understand a Christian to be?

Appendix 3

An overview of the participants

10 interviews were carried out (5 men and 5 women).

The lengths of time they had been Christians ranged from 1 to 9 years.

Eight were born in New Zealand, one in Britain, and one in South Africa (English speaking).

Their ages ranged from 28 to 58.

The ages when they became Christians were from 19-52?

The women interviewed fitted the criteria the best. To get the number of men I had to stretch the parameters a little.

The church's they attend

1 Anglican

2 Elim

2 Life Church (an independent Pentecostal church)

1 Wesleyan Methodist

3 Presbyterian (this represents the fact that this is my own denomination and my contacts are most closely there).

1 River church (an independent Pentecostal church)

Two were involved in H.P.C. – one was in the process of leaving the area and so I was no longer going to be her minister, and the other offered to contribute when she was told by another member of the church what I was doing. Four were referred to me by people they knew who were involved other churches. The other four were referred by people in their own denomination.

One had begun her church life at a Presbyterian congregation but had moved to a more Pentecostal church. One went to a non-denominational charismatic church for a number of years before moving to an Anglican church. Another began with the Presbyterian, moved to Life church and has now returned to a Presbyterian church.

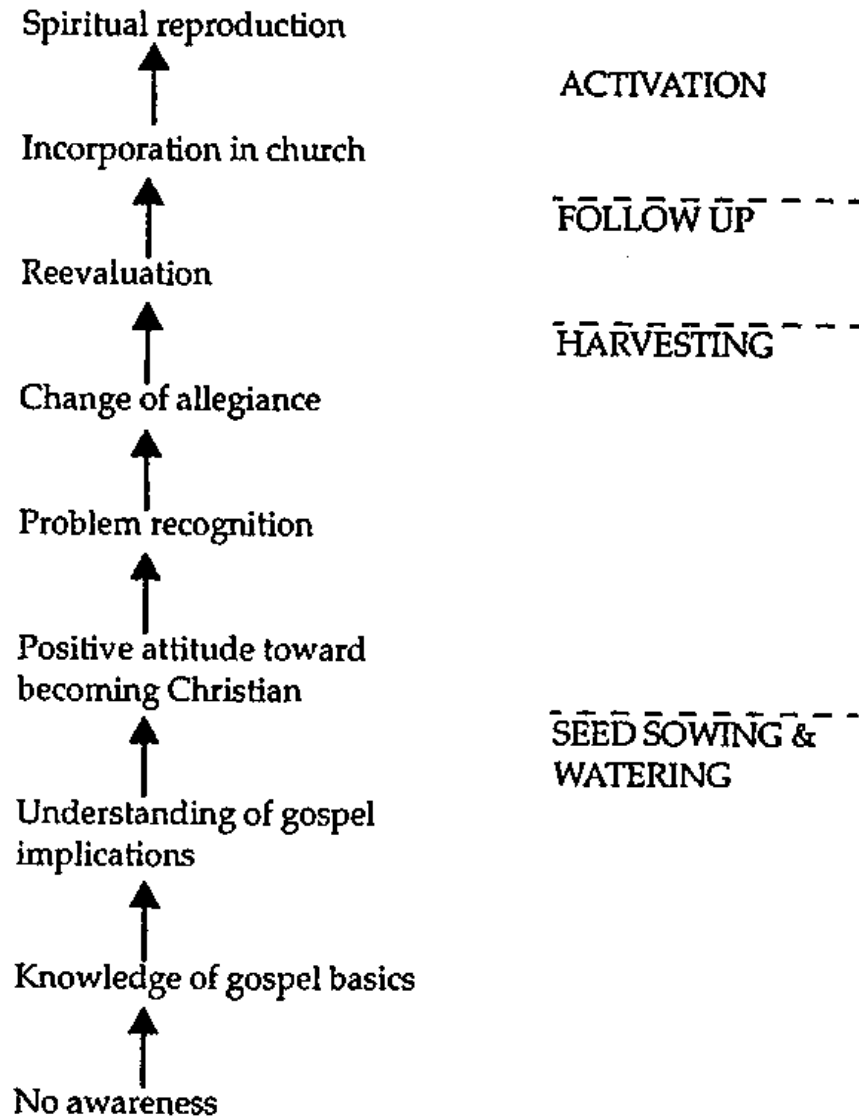
Two are single parents (engaged to new men), eight are married.

Educationally, one has a masters degree, five others have degrees, and two have apprenticeship type qualifications. One is a full time student, two are studying part time (one for her second degree).

Work they are involved with varies including parenting full time, doing IT Work, being a business consultant, teaching, being self employed and studying.

Appendix 4

The Engels's Scale



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