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## Young people and the Baptist church: Staying and leaving

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# **Young people and the Baptist church: Staying and leaving**

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
**Master of Social Science**

**Timothy Mullen**

Edith Cowan University  
School of Arts and Humanities

2020

## *Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to understand and compare the young people's experiences of the church between those who attended church at the time of the study, and those who were no longer attending church at the time of the study. The study was conducted to understand more about the experiences that lead young people to leave the church, and the experiences that motivate young people to stay. A literature review, and a phenomenological study was conducted into this experience. 15 young people aged 19 – 29 were interviewed using open-ended questions. It was found through the literature review that relationships were the key aspect of staying or leaving. Positive relationships (including with the leadership) motivated young people to engage with church, and negative relationships motivated young people to disengage. It was found that many described a change in culture to be a cause, but this was found to be based on little evidence or poor research. The phenomenology conducted in this study found that relationships were important for the participants in this study, as was small group Bible studies. This study found a contrasting perspective between descriptions and experiences of spirituality, and those of religion, as well as contrasting correlations between spirituality and church. Participants reflected on staying despite having negative experiences, and leaving despite having positive experiences, because there were other reasons that held more weight in their decision than relationships alone. Those who had left the church reflected on how this affected them, and there were both positive, neutral and negative effects for those who left the church. The study concludes by demonstrating the application to youth work including: the importance of incorporating spirituality in youth work services, incorporating spiritual perspectives in youth work training, and recommending that faith-based youth ministries adopt a youth work model.

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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- III. or contain any defamatory material.

Signed  Tim Mullen, 30 May 2019

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

There has been evidence to suggest that in the past decade, the number of young people in Australia attending church has decreased. As shown by comparisons of census results from past decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010, 2013, 2017), less Australian young people are identifying as religious, and in particular, Christian (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010, 2013, 2017), a term which could be considered too broad; however, no available statistics go further into specific detail. Statistically speaking, young people have the highest deconversion rates from Christianity particularly those over the age of 18. Deconversion as a concept was described by Fazzino (2014:251), where “individuals reject their beliefs, cease participation, and have no foreseeable plans to re-convert.” In other words, cease to believe and participate. This research project will attempt to understand this phenomenon of young people leaving the church, in particular, how young people experience church – both those who have left and those who continue to attend. This phenomenon is of interest to me since I was raised in a Baptist church and Church of Christ background, and I consider myself a current and regular attender of church. I have observed people leaving and staying in church; and as a result, have frequently wondered how the experiences of church differ between those who have stayed and those who have left. What experiences lead young people to disengage from church? What experiences lead young people to remain engaged?

This is an important question because of the social implications. Changes in religious beliefs and attendance of church might affect overall social dynamics, for example, that the church takes less of a central place in social interactions than it once did, as discussed by Palmer and Gallagher (2007). Changes in attendance of church might lead to changes in the sites of social interactions for those individuals, changes to their religious and spiritual beliefs, and changes to their sense of identity and purpose, and perhaps result in emotional

distress for the leaver. Such changes may be relevant to a wide variety of individuals and groups including educational settings, but most relevant for youth groups, youth ministries and secular youth centres. Understanding of experiences of church may help youth workers and pastors understand the reasons behind young people's decisions, and better relate to and support young people who have had negative experiences of religious groups. The results of this study may be of interest to churches in how they conduct services, interact with their congregants, how they discuss contentious issues, and how they work with young people. The results may contribute to an overall knowledge in the discipline of the sociology of religion, group dynamics, including how people experience church, religion, and spirituality. The study may also contribute to an understanding of what causes groups to remain stable or change, how people experience groups they choose to remain in or leave. All such knowledge is relevant to work amongst communities, young people, social policy development, and community development.

This study is also important because the current research found on the topic, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, has many deficiencies. There appeared to be very little research done in West Australia, few studies that focussed on the experience of church, and no research that compared the experiences of those who have left the church with those who continue to attend. Little research has been done among those aged 15 – 18 years of age, but studies focused on the surrounding age groups were studied. The purposes of this study, therefore, are to understand the experiences of those who have left the church, the experiences of those who have stayed in the church: their experiences of church itself, religion, and spirituality. This study will focus on those who have left from or currently attend a Baptist church in Western Australia.

## Definitions

This project refers to many concepts which have not been entirely explicitly defined in the literature, which I will define in this chapter. For example, what it means to **leave church** was discussed in two of the articles found, Need and Graaf (1996) and Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011). Need and Graaf described leaving the church in terms of a formal revocation of membership – a formal disassociation. This is not helpful in the context of this study, given that membership of Baptist churches is not a common practice except in the context of governance of the church. Kinnaman and Hawkins categorised their definition of leaving the church into Nomad, Prodigal and Exile. The Nomad still considers themselves a Christian, but no longer attends a church. The Prodigal no longer considers themselves a Christian, and no longer attends church. The Exile is still engaged with the Christian faith, however, is “torn” between church and non-church domains. These categories are helpful since those who no longer attend church may hold varying degrees of belief regarding Christianity, however, the language used does appear to privilege those who currently attend Church through subtle references to negative Biblical figures. Some participants in this research project would fit into Kinnaman and Hawkins’ categories: some left the church *and* the faith, some did not go anymore because of situational reasons and would be willing to return, others had left the church but remained committed to their faith. Church leaders interviewed in this study also reflected on the definition and described that if they hadn’t seen someone for more than two months, and that individual had informed others that they were no longer going serve in church ministries, or heard that individual was attending another church, then they would consider it that they had left the church. Of course, this means that some who leaves one church might attend a different church. In reflection on these definitions, my definition will be: ceasing to participate in any church services or events, which includes those who continue to identify as Christian and those who have converted to

another religion or atheism. However, some participants self-identified that they have not ‘left’ the church, and as such the term, however, they will be kept in this ‘leaver’ category because they have ceased attendance for the time being. Of course this definition does not imply that those who have left the church will never re-engage with the church.

**Active/ regular participation** was not often defined in the literature either. How often is considered regular, what does active imply? Hughes (2013) reviewed the National church Life Survey conducted in Australian churches, which defined regular as attending church at least once a month, however, the kind of participation was not expanded upon. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) define regular in similar terms – once a month attendance to “Sunday School” or a religious teen program. As discussed above, Need and Graaf (1996) define regular participation in terms of formal membership of the church, which was described as the culmination of Bible training and confirmation of children. This in particular does not reflect Baptist churches, where training and confirmation does not occur, and as mentioned earlier, membership in Baptist churches refers to governance. During a focus group conducted as part of this project, participants defined regular as weekly attendance to church services, and active as participating in services, bible studies, church events, and “serving” in the church. Some participants during individual interviews did not count their attendance of Bible studies as church participation, and one participant considered their attendance as infrequent, since they attended a church service twice in four months. As a result, I have chosen to describe regular participation as attendance to a church-related event, that involves some form of religious instruction, at least once per fortnight. For example, Sunday School, youth groups, and/or church services. I have defined active participation as being involved in the running of the event in some form, for example, being involved in ‘serving’ (helping) with the running of the church event.

The concept of **‘Young people’** has been referred to many times so far, however, it is necessary to give a definition to this age group. Hughes (2013, 2015) discussed the 18 – 29 age group, describing that they have the lowest attendance of church in Australia as compared with other age groups, and also have the highest ‘drop-out’ rate. This ‘drop-out’ aspect refers to those who chose to stop participating in church; and this age group is when the majority stop attending. Fazzino (2014) referred to the “under 30’s” as having the lowest identification with religion in the United States of America, however, no one under the age of 18 was interviewed in Fazzino’s study. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) also agree with this regarding the USA, explaining that teenagers were found to be the most active in church, but once they reached 18 they were the least active age group. Youth Policy (2014) defines ‘youth’ as 12 – 24, and the ABS separates the age group 15 – 34 as young people. I have decided on the 15 – 29 age group, for the reason that 29 years was a common age limit in the research and because the 15 – 18 years age group was not frequently researched. There is a chance that a great deal of data is missing due to this gap.

**Youth work** and **youth ministry** must be distinguished, due to this research having potential implications for both concepts. Because of these distinctions, those who work in a youth work context will be referred to **youth workers**, and those who work in a youth ministry context will be referred to as **youth leaders**. I will define youth ministry as that which encompasses the vast myriad of programs directed towards young people within churches. Based upon a reading of Klick, Hertweck (2015), this study, and reflection upon my own experiences of multiple Baptist and Church of Christ youth ministries, it is difficult to extract what youth ministry does. Youth ministry according to Klick (who describes a Methodist tradition) appears to be a curriculum based social event focused on teaching young people the tenants of the Christian faith; but according to Hertweck youth ministry follows a typical church service format but is for young people only. My experiences, and the

descriptions by participants in this study, reflect a spectrum between Klick's and Hertweck's descriptions. However, it is clear from all descriptions referenced that youth ministries have the common goal of growing young people spiritually; more specifically, guiding young people to adopt the teachings of Christianity and/or convert to Christianity. This might be measured in new conversions to Christianity, or young Christians continuing in their faith, and therefore, the needs of the young person are defined by the church or youth ministry rather than by the young person. This is the first obvious distinction with youth work, since youth work's apparent goal is to empower the young person to act on needs typically identified as needs by the young person (Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia [YACWA], 2014), and enabling young people to learn skills in self-reflection and self-critique (Bright, 2015, as cited in Bright, Thompson, Hart and Hayden, 2018). From the descriptions laid out by Hertweck and by Klick, it appears that the leaders and pastors of youth ministries are typically the directors and mandators of the conversation (e.g. through a curriculum) and the service; however, the youth work service and conversation is typically directed and mandated by the young person (Green, 2008; Bessant, Sercombe and Watts, 1998 as cited in Cooper, 2018, YACWA, 2014) and the young person's independence is advocated for (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2013, as cited in Cooper, 2018). Youth work is defined as an inclusive, anti-oppressive practice (YACWA, 2014, Bright, 2015, as cited in Bright, Thompson, Hart & Hayden, 2018), whereas youth ministry typically is assertive of Christian teachings and views.

There are some crossovers between the two concepts, since both appear to be characteristically (but not in every instance) relational (Daughtry, 2011, Klick, 2016) – a place of belonging for the young person, and both place the interests of the young person as the primary priority (YACWA, 2014), and the holistic nature of youth work (Bessant, Sercombe and Watts, 1998, as cited in Cooper, 2018; Green, 2008; Bright et al., 2018) means

there could be some overlap in the topics of discussion such as spirituality. However, these commonalities could be defined differently in each context. In the youth work sector, spirituality may be perceived as a negative influence because of the fear of proselytization and religious manipulation – using the young person’s state of vulnerability to encourage conversion to a particular belief system (Green, 2008). Green (2006, 2008) argues that spirituality is related to the core identity of the person, since it is related to values, beliefs, emotions, making sense of the world, aspirations, and existential questions. If this is the case, youth work might also incorporate spirituality in discussions where appropriate, in an open and exploratory manner (Green, 2006, 2008).

**Religion** was rarely defined in articles that researched church attendance, research articles by Kasselstrand (2015) and Senter and Caldwell (2002) explicate their definition of religion in their research, and Drumm et al. (2013) relays their participants’ experiential descriptions of religion. Kasselstrand defines religion as belief in the supernatural from which organisations and practices are formed. Kasselstrand does not allow for non-theistic religions, describing religious practice without a belief in God as secular and not religious – a non-inclusive definition, considering Buddhism is non-theistic. Senter and Caldwell describe a formal participation in shared practices and beliefs which are explicitly taught. Drumm et al. describe religion as understanding God through the descriptions and experiences of others (i.e. the clergy). Further reviews of texts regarding religion and the sociology of religion were conducted in order to gain a broad perspective. Furseth and Repstad (2006) found it difficult to create an all-inclusive and non-ethnocentric definition without including aspects that religious people would not define as religious. Furseth and Repstad choose to describe religion using dimensions, rather than a definition. These definitions include the dimensions of beliefs, of practices, of experiences (i.e. of the supernatural, sacred, or the divine), of agreed truths, and of consequences (how the religion effects the individual). This is similar,

according to Furseth and Repstad, to Durkheim's description that religion divides life into the sacred and the profane, and prescribes a set of rites. Scott and Marshall (2009) define religion in terms of beliefs, symbols, practices, the sacred, and community. Sacred is used in place of God or supernatural, for inclusion of Buddhism. Singleton (2019) claims that all religions contain transcendence in some form, as well as religious activities, teachings, the sacred and a social dimension. Elkins, Hedstrom, Leaf and Saunders (1988) define religion in terms of beliefs and actions. These definitions and descriptions have commonalities: an agreed upon belief system (which teaches about 'truths' and about behaviours), shared practices, all related to the sacred. Since this research is purely angled towards those who identify (or identified) with the Christian religion, my definition is as follows: a religion is a set of beliefs, accepted truths, and practices regarding humanity's relationship to the supernatural, in this case, God.

**Spirituality** was discussed in a number of journal articles and texts. Furseth and Repstad (2006) claim that spirituality as a word is used more broadly than religion. They define spirituality as searching for meaning, interpreting existence, without necessitating a religious framework. Tacey (2010) describes spirituality as listening to the 'inner voice', and as the root – not the fruit – of religion. Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn (2006) in their study of the wellbeing of young people include spirituality as an aspect, describing it as something intangible, personal, and something that provides perspective and a sense of belonging to something bigger; note that religious spirituality is not integrated in this definition. Fazzino (2014) describes non-religious spirituality as being unique to that individual, and personal. Elkins et al. (1988) refer to the Latin origin of the word Spirit, which means "breath of life". They describe an awareness of the transcendent, and valuing self, others, nature and life itself. Spirituality, therefore according to their definition, affects how a person experiences life, how they choose to live, can exist within or without religion, and include a deity or be

non-theistic. Senter and Caldwell (2002) describe spirituality as an awareness of the transcendent, and valuing oneself, other life (human, non-human life), and the “Ultimate” (which is not further defined). Later on, they refer to spirituality as connecting with God and an ‘inner knowing’. Smiljanic (2008), in reference to why spirituality should be involved in research processes, describes spirituality as one’s relationship with oneself, including self-improvement. Smiljanic at first describes a connection to the higher power, but then refers to that higher power as something internal. For example, levels of consciousness, and looking at circumstances ‘through the spirit.’ McCrindle (2017) describes spirituality in terms of finding purpose and meaning, an inner journey, and a mixing of spiritual beliefs. Singleton (2019) describes spirituality as, “Any enduring experience or awareness of something greater than the self.” (p. 332). Singleton describes Spirituality as something that is diverse, internal and personal. Since many of these authors seem to agree that spirituality is unique and personal, it is difficult to create a definition. However, for the purpose of this research, spirituality was defined as a greater awareness of ‘something more’ than what is physically tangible, connecting with and expressing this ‘something.’

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Background

It is worth considering the background of religion in Australia. It is evident that some Australian people might consider Australia to be a Christian nation – one only need to type “Australia Christian Nation” into an internet search engine to discover a plethora of newspaper articles declaring this creed. Zimmerman (2014) claims Australia has a historical connection with Christianity, citing Lachlan Macquarie imposing church services on the new colony’s convicts, citing the preamble to the Australian constitution, and citing the act of reciting the Lord’s Prayer in parliament. However, Zimmerman does not acknowledge other perspectives, including the history of Indigenous people, or any other views on the topic. Randell-Moon (2008) examined Section 116, regarding the separation of church and state, which gives some insight into this discussion. According to Randell-Moon, “Section 116 approximates a secular separation of church and state by protecting religious freedom from government intervention and prohibiting the official establishment of any one religion by the Commonwealth.” (p 52). According to Randell-Moon, the government can neither establish nor prohibit any one religion, and since not all Australian citizens share one religion, political decisions should not be based on religion. The Section includes clauses stating no law should be imposed for establishing a religion, imposing a religion, prohibiting a religion, or using religious tests as a determination for public offices (Randell-Moon, 2008). However, as Randell-Moon states, the Australian government favours Judeo-Christian values, as shown through the use of the Lord’s Prayer in parliament and the Bible in swearing into office. Possamai (2008), in a discussion of secularisation, claims that Christianity was used in early Australian colonial history as a means of maintaining order. He describes the changes after World War Two, when migration changed the balance of denominations in Australia; specifically an increase in Catholicism. He describes the difference between the United States

of America and Australia, stating that in America, religion is used as a marketing tactic by politicians and more, whereas religion in Australia is more private and ‘shy’. Possamai blames ‘tall-poppy syndrome’ for this shyness, meaning that those who try to elevate themselves are ‘cut down’ – including religious movements. Possamai pronounces that the Pentecostal party win of a seat in the Senate in 2004 means that religion is directly and overtly re-entering politics. All of these opinions by Zimmerman, Randell-Moon and Possamai are difficult to assess, and the events described are subject to interpretation. Therefore, it is difficult to make a claim that Australia is a Christian nation. Such perceptions are highly subjective.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics provides valuable insight into religious affiliations in Australia, and how these have changed over time. In 1966, around 86% of the Australian population identified as Christian, dropping to 73% twenty years later, and again to 61% in 2011, and finally down to 52% in the most recent 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010, 2017b). The change has not been even across denominations, the most significant drop being among Anglican, whose identifiers have decreased by 11 percentage points from 1986 (24%) to 2016 (13%) (ABS, 2010, 2017b). Those identifying as Catholic have decreased from 26% in 1986 to 22% in 2016 (ABS, 2006, 2017b). Baptists have had statistical change between 1986 and 2016, from 1.3% in 1986 to 1.5% in 2016, a surprising 15% increase to the Baptist population (ABS 2010, 2017a). “Other Christian” decreased from 8.4% of the population to 8.2% (ABS, 2017b). On the other side, those who identify as having ‘no religion’ increased significantly, from 0.8% in 1966, to 15% in 2001, and to 30% in 2016 (ABS, 2017b, 2013). Roughly nine percent of respondents to the 2011 and the 2016 census did not answer the religion question, which could indicate that more do not identify with a religion – however, this is impossible to qualify. The age group to report the most identification with no religion was young people (39% in 2016), which has

increased by 17.8 percentage points since 2001 (ABS, 2013). According to Hughes (2013), young people's identification with Christianity decreased by nine percentage points between 1996 and 2006. Hughes found that young people were underrepresented in churches, where they represented 25% of the total population, but only 8% of church population, and only 10% of high school aged students attend church. These statistics are very telling, Australian's identification with religion, and with Christianity has decreased. However, as said by Francis (2008), and Singleton (2019), statistics of religious affiliation only show what people identify as, they do not explain or predict the level of engagement, activity, or other religious indicators that Australians have with Christianity and churches.

The McCrindle report (McCrindle Research, 2017) attempted to understand this second element of engagement. The report researched 1,024 population representative Australians, and then held focus groups among 26 non-Christians. It was found that of the Christians surveyed, 15% attend church 'regularly', defined as once a month or more, and 7% described themselves as 'active' in their church, 22% attended church less than once in a year. The report also researched non-Christian's attitudes towards Christianity. Of those surveyed, 25% gave responses interpreted by McCrindle as being 'cold' to Christianity, using phrases such as being reserved, opposed, disinterested to Christianity. McCrindle found, through focus groups, the reason some had issues with Christianity including the church's stance on homosexuality, perceptions of church abuse, and perceived judgement from the church. However, 15% of those surveyed were considered to be 'warm' to Christianity, incorporating either the ethics or values into their own spirituality. McCrindle found that 14% of those surveyed considered themselves spiritual, but not religious. This is interesting to note, as Possamai (2008) also echoed the sentiment that the decrease in religious affiliation and church attendance does not mean Australian people are less spiritual.

There is a potential that Australian people are identifying less with a religion, but still identifying with their own version of spirituality. Perhaps there is a change in Australian people's relationship with religion and church, which would have impact on churches, youth work, policy and government. Young people who are reconsidering their beliefs, or have recently redefined their beliefs, may be experiencing cognitive dissonance, identity crises, grief in the loss of communities, or trauma in response to negative experiences. It is important to understand therefore, how Australian young people experience church: both those who leave, and those who continue attending. This study, therefore, sought to describe this phenomenon of the church, including the decline of young people's attendance of church.

### **Religion and Society: theories**

Many sociological theories and theorists relevant to the sociology of religion were discussed by Haralambos and Holborn (1995) and Furseth and Repstad (2006), both modern and traditional, such as Functionalism, Marxism, Stark and Bainbridge, Symbolic Interactionism, Bourdieu, Foucault, Parsons, Habermas, Luhman, Goffman, Berger and Luckman, Giddens, and Bauman. Furseth and Repstad describe how there are common elements between all these perspectives: the existence of the individual within social structures and in relation to interaction with others; the sociocultural construction of knowledge; and the use of religion as a method of power and control. How identity is developed is not agreed among the different social theories. Furseth and Repstad assert that it is useful to utilise a multi-theoretical approach for research, however, given the tensions that a multi-theoretical approach would have to work within and the brevity of this research a mono-theoretical approach was chosen. Some theories, such as functionalism were not chosen for being overly optimistic about religion and its contributions to social stability and social integration (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995, Furseth and Repstad, 2006). Such

approaches would not be willing to acknowledge the exclusivity and destabilising effects some might experience from religion. Other approaches were overly pessimistic about religion, such as Marxism, which were incomplete in understanding positive religious and spiritual experiences, even though they are helpful for understanding power imbalances and efforts for control within religious settings (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995, Furseth and Repstad, 2006). Instead, Symbolic Interactionism was chosen as a framework.

Symbolic interactionism, based on the ideas of George Herbert Mead, described the identity development of individuals within social situations (Furseth & Repstad, 2006). Mead discussed the idea that non-verbal and verbal communications are symbols of interaction, as well as one's self-concept developing through an internalisation of the perceived views of others (Furseth & Repstad, 2006). The individual takes a role of the 'other' to themselves, telling themselves what others think of them and how to act in response (Furseth & Repstad, 2006). For example, when a person waves at another person, this is a symbol of interaction between the two: the person being waved at perceives this gesture as a symbol of welcoming communication, and then might choose to respond through saying, "hello." The second person then internalises this hello as a symbol of the 'other' person wanting to communicate more. This is described as role assumption by Mead, and religion is described as a process of role assumption, whereby the 'other' is God, and through religious instruction the individual internalises the beliefs about God's perception of them and acts accordingly (Furseth & Repstad, 2006). The symbols of interaction could include a person closing their eyes for prayer (the closing of eyes signals to others that they are about to pray, and prayer is a symbol of a connection to God), singing songs of worship, listening to a Pastor preach a sermons and so forth. The individual's identity, therefore, develops in the context of the religious community – as they interact with one another, the individual internalises how they perceive the views of God and others about themselves (Furseth & Repstad, 2006). This

theory is helpful to understand the micro social interactions, which are relevant to a study of experiences of church.

## **Literature review methodology**

In order to assess how this research will contribute to the available knowledge, it is first necessary to assess what is already available. A literature review was conducted into the way individuals experience church. Research was conducted using the following terms: ‘young people and church’, ‘religion and youth’, ‘why young people leave the church’, ‘religion church leaving’, ‘church leaving phenomenological’, ‘religion youth church phenomenology Australia’. Databases such as Informit, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Online, JSTOR, ProQuest, Sage, Oxford Journals, Springer, and Google Scholar were used. Other sources were used, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and Relevant Magazine which was chosen for being a Christian magazine targeted towards young adults and for discussing issues of culture relevant to their target group. Web blogs, books, and journal articles were found on these databases, spanning from 1995 to 2016. This is a fairly large timeframe, because changes in societal relations with religion were noticed as early as 1996 (e.g. Need and de Graaf, 1996). Christianity and the church were chosen as a focus (to the exclusion of all religion) for the sake of depth of data. The research terms were used in order to find relevant articles about what causes people to leave the church, as well as young people specifically, and if there had been any phenomenological studies exploring young people’s experiences of church in Australia. The Australian context could be vastly different to, for example, the American context, and so Australian research was given priority. ‘Young people’ was a frequent key word because of the statistics showing that this age group has the lowest attendance. Hughes (2015) found that of the Australian young people he interviewed who attended church at least once a month when they were 11, by the time they were 18 – 29 years old 72% no longer attended and 46% no longer considered themselves Christian. He

concluded that the age bracket is a time of transition from study to careers, and to independence. This is an important finding in the literature, showing that the 18 – 29 age group is in need of further research.

### **Reasons for leaving: Cultural shifts**

Numerous authors attributed the change in young people's relationship with the church to a change in culture. Newland (2006), for example, described that religious people are often seen as less intelligent – an idea echoed by Furseth and Repstad (2006) – who found that religious are often associated with naivety and fanaticism. This could imply that some people might choose not to associate with religion for fear of being seen as less intelligent, fanatical or naïve. If it is true that religious people are seen this way, it could be the result of what Eckersley (2008) described, who claimed there was a movement in modern society towards individualism, progress and rationality, meaning the sociocultural pressure to go to church has been reduced. McCrindle's (2017) survey among the non-religious in Australia found they had a more evidence-based perspective on life, implying that religious belief is seen as not evidence-based. Shepherd (2010) believes that young people have more opportunities to follow something else and hold different values, not only the traditionally mainstream Judeo-Christian values. Mason (2010) found this also in his research among Australian high school students, who had what Mason defined as more relative perspectives of the concepts of right and wrong. Unfortunately, most of these discussions on changes in culture tend to be more opinion based (bar Mason), and not evidence-based. These descriptions of cultural changes do appear to be reminiscent of Bauman's view of religion, who described postmodernism as causing young people to seek happiness and fulfilment through their self-created identity; consequently, religion takes a lesser place within society

because post-modern young people are supposedly not interested in seeking transcendence (Furseth and Repstad, 2006).

In the USA, the same ‘drop-off’ point for young people was found as that in Australia (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011, Hughes, 2013). It is important to note first that the USA and Australia have some significant cultural differences in relation to religion, exemplified by American presidents appealing to Christian values in their speeches – something which does not happen as significantly with Australian prime ministers (Possamai, 2008). The literature found that the current pull towards evolutionary perspectives on the origins of life is having an impact on young people in the USA (Fazzino, 2014, Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011). It was found that churches either avoided the subject, or answered questions poorly (Fazzino, 2014, Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011). Americans in general felt in conflict between their own beliefs and science: around 50% of the 3,000 Americans surveyed by Jones, Coz and Navarro-Rivera (2014) experienced this, and participants in Kinnaman and Hawkins’ research also felt this pull. Perhaps, since evolution is taught as the accepted scientific view on the origins of life in Australia as well, that this could be influencing Australians’ thoughts on the supernatural and on religion.

European writers referred frequently to secularisation, described by Martin (2005, as cited in Possamai, 2008) as, “the increasing autonomy of the various spheres of human activity.” This implies that in the process of secularisation, religion becomes less influential on other social systems and more privatised (Possamai, 2008), echoing the theories of Luhman, who described society as fragmented social systems (Furseth and Repstad, 2006). Religion, according to this view, has less of a voice in society as it becomes its own, less-influential, system. This description seems applicable to other parts of Europe too, for example, in Holland, Need and de Graaf (1996) concluded that secularisation was causing families to be less committed to church. In Sweden, Kasselstrand (2015) found that Swedes

have a tendency to belong to a church formally, but do not believe in any form of a higher power: 72% of the population are formal members of the church, but 57% of these believe in a supernatural power, such as a god. This is described by Kasselstrand as a secular religion. In Finland, Niemelä (2015) concluded that there exists little belief in God, and harshly described current generations as being more interested in their individuality and not in social 'rules'. Niemelä concluded that the young people perceive church values as incongruent with their own, and incongruent with the values of wider society (a thought also found in the USA by Kinnaman and Hawkins, 2011). In Ireland, Palmer and Gallagher (2007) assumed that the major causes of a disengagement with the church were the increase in private organisations offering services once offered solely by the church, young people's high regard for celebrities as role models rather than religious figures, and the perception of the church as irrelevant and unnecessary. It is interesting that Palmer and Gallagher cite these as the possible reasons for this change, not the public questionable actions of the church, such as the Magdalen homes where unmarried mothers were essentially forced into life-long slavery by the church (Smith 2007), the sexual abuse inquiry into the Catholic church's cover up of the abuse of children by more than 26 priests (Cooney, 2005), let alone the history of violent conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Regardless of the causes, it is clear that many European nations are moving away from religion and belief in God. Perhaps this movement to less belief in God and the impacts of the actions of churches is also causing less Australians to associate with Christianity.

Possamai (2008) attempted to answer this question of the impact of secularisation in Australia, discussing multiple perspectives on the concept. Possamai claimed, along a Luhman-style view of society, that religion is becoming less influential regarding other systems of society (such as on education, politics and welfare) and instead is becoming a separate system itself. Possamai described Australia as being 'shy' regarding religion, as

compared with USA, stating that religion in Australia is decentralised and pluralistic – given the diversity of Australian citizens. Possamai reacts against the view that the decentralisation of religion means religious association is on the decrease, despite statistics discussed earlier. Instead, echoing Bourdieu’s discussion of a vast ‘Field’ of options creating more competition (Furseth and Repstad, 2006), Possamai claims that this pluralism gives rise to competition, which increases the ‘vitality’ of religions. The many different religious groups in Australia, all competing to be the dominant voice, leads each religious group and sect to become more invigorated in their presentation of teachings – rather than assuming all listeners agree already. Such a description seems to reflect Luhman’s theory of religion and society also: as society becomes more fragmented into systems (and each has less influence on other systems), an increase in competition between those of a similar system (i.e. denominations and religions) causes leaders to attempt to have more influence and leads each to have more vitality in their attempt to gain followers.

Some authors described a trend towards spirituality without religion. Tacey (2010), for example, found that university students found meaning and healing from mental health difficulties, in non-religious spirituality. However, Tacey’s methodology is questionable, both calling the student’s spirituality authentic and manufactured, and using methodology with significant power relationships skews this data (Cooper, 2016). Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn (2006) described modern spirituality in Australia, whereby young people mix beliefs from different sources and find meaning, purpose, and being part of the grand scheme of things. McCrindle (2017) also found the same, finding some Australian people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious, mixing beliefs from major religions, and finding purpose, meaning, and an ‘inner journey’. Erricker (2001) found that the spiritual non-religious found belonging and identity in their spiritual beliefs, adding that this is something young people do not find in churches or with each other. Copel (2008), Drumm et al. (2013),

and Senter and Caldwell (2002) found that spirituality was essential to their research participants in overcoming and recovering from trauma, and for some participants this consisted of non-religious spirituality. While the participants may well have found healing and recovery through spirituality, no other factors were considered, and no research commented on any negative outcomes of spirituality. If indeed there is an increase in spirituality without religion, this would have interesting implications for religious institutions. It would also be interesting to compare how those who have had positive experiences of religion express spirituality, and those who have had negative experiences of religion express their spirituality.

Interestingly, this trend of changing affiliations with religion does not appear to be occurring in South Africa. In 2001, 75.5% of the South African population were affiliated with a Christian Church, while 11.7% identified as having no religion (Statistics South Africa [SSA], 2004). No Church could boast more than 10% of the population, possibly because of the large diversity of churches, with Zionist churches being the highest at 9.7% and Dutch Reformed second at 8.6%, and Baptists represented only 1.1% of the population (SSA, 2004). In the 2011 census, the specific churches South Africans attended was not asked about, however, affiliation with Christianity increased to 86%, and with no religion down to 5.5% (Schoeman, 2013). This is interesting to note a stark contrast against Australia and other nations discussed earlier. The impact of the church on South Africa was discussed by Pillay (2017), who found church to be both negative and transformative. The early South African Church used their power to empower the white population and impoverish black and coloured individuals: through 'reformed theology' Apartheid was justified (Pillay, 2017). As time went on, the Christian Council of South Africa protested apartheid, using the liberation theology to address socio-economic and political injustices. These are interesting factors to

note, for when considering many participants interviewed in this study were from a South African background.

### **Reasons for leaving: Church dynamics**

Some authors commented frequently on the dynamics of relationships in the church that caused people to leave, in particular, Loewen (2015) and Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011). The article written by Loewen is merely a summary of a Canadian panel discussion regarding why young people are leaving churches, but offers opinions that are reinforced by other literature. Kinnaman and Hawkins and Loewen both theorised that some young adults feel that churches are overprotective of traditions which are irrelevant to them and feel an inability to define or shape how their churches practise. Lack of opportunity to be involved, own and define how the churches operate drove some young people away, according to Loewen, Kinnaman and Hawkins, and Riley (2014). Kinnaman and Hawkins argue that many churches are uncompromising: fearing of pop culture, they keep separate from and demonise anything outside the church, and therefore would not take risks. Such churches are too afraid to release control over 'how things should be', so young people are not free to affect the dynamics. Therefore, they argue, many young people leave to look for these risks and opportunities for influence outside the church. Some African American churches, according to Riley (2014), have the issue of a traditional authoritarian style of church which was viewed by the author as no longer relevant to the young adults of today. Palmer and Gallagher (2007) found that many of their non-church-attending participants saw the church as old-fashioned, not keeping with the times; those who continued to attend, mainly did so out of habit and avoidance of guilt.

Similarly, Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) and Loewen (2015) commented on the lack of opportunities for hands-on involvement in social justice issues. The young people

concerned longed for the chance to do something of purpose, but again, due to the churches' overprotectiveness, such was not available for them. Some young adults, according to Kinnaman and Hawkins conclude that church is shallow: they tend to focus purely on making youth services big and exciting but lack the depth that these young adults long for. Churches which have such a focus, Kinnaman and Hawkins say, seek quantity over quality: seeking great numbers of people attending their events, rather than 'discipleship' of each individual. Discipleship is a word used often in Christian circles referring to the process (usually one-to-one) of mentoring and teaching young people and/or new Christians how to live their lives according to the doctrines of the faith (Oxford University Press, 2019). This issue in churches is also discussed by Marshall and Payne (2009), who describe the focus on church events, traditions and structures as being a 'trellis', and the work of discipleship as being 'watering' and 'fertilising' the 'vine'. Churches, Marshall and Payne argue, tend to do a lot of work on maintaining the 'trellis'; through programs, events, administration, etc., but very little work in tending to the vine; i.e. quality interpersonal discipleship. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Francis and Craig (2006) in the United Kingdom, among 10,000 children aged 8 – 14 who attended seven Christian denominations of church, it was found that 26% felt bored by what happened in their church, and 22% did not feel interested. The authors found a correlation between the age of the participants and their general attitude towards their church: the older participants were far less positive, and there were significantly less participants in the older portion of their sample. The authors draw the conclusion that boredom is causing churches to lose young people, and this could be explained by other studies about many young people seeing their church's teaching as shallow and old-fashioned.

Some writers commented on churches not allowing discussion of important topics. Participants in Kinnaman and Hawkins' (2011) research found that churches did not allow a space for young people to express any doubts they felt or ask questions, especially those

regarding science and evolution. This was also echoed in the study conducted by Fazzino (2014), and the panel discussion in Loewen (2015). Kinnaman and Hawkins found that 35% of young adults in his research view Christians as too 'know-it-all', 20% view Christians as denying the complexity of difficult questions through giving answers that were too simple, 25% view Christianity as being against science. This last fact was also found in other research which found that only 1% of the churches researched had entered into discussions about science (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011). Kinnaman and Hawkins stated that the current antagonism between church and science is pushing young people into an "either-or" scenario: either church, or science. Given the perceived lack of opportunity for them to discuss their questions, this makes sense why young people look for answers elsewhere.

The final group of issues discussed in the literature regards relationships and connections in churches. Hypocrisy, rejection, judgement, and exclusivity were some words frequently used in the literature of experiences of those who have left church (Such as in Riley, 2014, Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011, and Fazzino, 2014, Wright et al., 2015). Riley (2014) found that within some African American churches, young adults were leaving because of their dissatisfaction with the hypocrisy of leaders: they taught their congregants to be generous in giving to the church but spent exorbitant amounts of money on themselves. Fazzino (2014) also discussed hypocrisy as a driving force away from church, for example when churches condemned gossip, but allowed its' members to gossip under the guise of sharing prayer requests. Relevant Magazine (Relevant, n.d.) reviewed Twitter for the hashtag, #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear, and found that many women had experienced hypocrisy in their churches regarding issues of the roles of women in church, sexuality, notions of acceptable dress, and submissiveness, these women appeared to feel an obvious inequality between men and women in their churches. Fazzino (2014) also found that some young adults had left church because of rejection or exclusion based on lifestyle choices, while

others when confronted by a paradigm shift in their belief system, felt the loss of community and experienced exclusion from the religious community. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) also discussed this exclusivity: recounting a story of a young person who was in an inter-faith relationship, and her experience of judgement and exclusion from the people at her church, ultimately causing her to leave church altogether. Wright et al. (2015) conducted an experiment, sending the same expression of interest letter to 3,120 churches in USA signed with names that could represent persons of different racial groups. Wright et al. conclude that churches replied less to names which were less 'white' sounding and would respond with less warmth. Hence, if one puts aside the issues in methodology in that research, as will be discussed later, we can conclude that churches have an issue of homophily: only accepting those who are the same as themselves. Drumm et al. (2013) and Copel (2008) found that some sufferers of domestic violence (called Intimate Partner Violence by the authors) in America who went to their clergy for emotional and spiritual support instead received judgement, oppression, blame, and dismissiveness. Such women left their churches because of the treatment of the leaders who would claim to be against domestic violence but would do nothing to help victims.

## **Reasons for staying**

The literature available gives some suggestions for what causes young people to stay, some reporting on how churches are succeeding, others suggesting possible "solutions". A common thread of suggestions and successes was that of the influence of family, strong relationships and connections, including a sense of belonging. Francis and Craig (2006) found a correlation between their participant's attitude towards church in the United Kingdom, and how their family acts out their faith in the home. Families which talked about God at home and prayed regularly as a family at home had children who were more positive

towards their church. The importance of parent's influence on the attitudes of children is emphasised by Francis and Craig (2006). According to the McCrindle report (2017), almost half of those surveyed who McCrindle identified as 'committed' to Christianity were brought up in church. Interestingly, the influence of family was found by Iyadurai (2011) to be a factor in conversion from other religions to Christianity in India. Among multiple other factors (spiritual encounters such as visions and dreams, questioning of beliefs, life crises), the participants recalled experiencing much physical and emotional abuse from their families for showing an interest in Christianity prior to their conversion (Iyadurai, 2011). When they began to attend church communities, "The potential converts were impressed with the love and affection of the Christian community" (Iyadurai, 2011, p 514).

The need to have a sense of belonging was identified by the participants in Francis and Craig's (2006) study: those who had friends that they could talk about God with were more positive towards their church, and participants identified this as a need for themselves in church. Shepherd (2010) discussed the relationship between belonging and identity, how churches met this need and existed as a platform to find strength to face the everyday challenges of life. In Ireland, Palmer and Gallagher (2007) found that participants who continued to attend church felt that at the conclusion of each church service, they experienced a sense of community with the others who attended. In Powell, Mulder and Griffiths' (2016) study, the 1300 young people interviewed from 250 churches, deep relationships were the key of what caused them to stay. Houston (2015), in his dissertation research, found that age was also important for these relationships: the young adults sought peers who were in their age bracket for connection, as well as mentors who were in their parents' age bracket for mentoring. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) discussed this idea of mentoring as well, describing it as what young people need instead of impressive concert-style worship services. This is contradicted slightly by Francis and Craig (2006), who found that the participants

valued good music in their church; however, belonging was also identified by these same participants (as discussed earlier). Jennings (2008) conducted a case study on a Pentecostal church in Perth, where it was found that music was the key factor in creating “a space where God is experienced.” (p. 163-4). Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) suggest that young people gain a sense of belonging through discipleship. This discipleship, Kinnaman and Hawkins describe, would not merely consist of teaching doctrine and morality but also of a long-term relationship investment, where personal experiences would be shared and where talents and abilities are cultivated and nurtured. While Kinnaman and Hawkins did not base this on research, this idea of truly caring, is something that encouraged domestic violence survivors in the study by Senter & Caldwell (2002) to continue participation in church. These women received support and care from their clergy that enabled them to leave their abusive situation: a sense of belonging is clearly a reason they stayed in their churches. Perhaps a sense of belonging explains the reason why Francis (2008) found in the United Kingdom (after a study of 34,000 year 9 and 10 students) that an association with the church “significantly” correlates with lower suicidal ideation.

Youth identity formation is an important implication in this discussion. Best (2011) described how social environment has a large impact on the young person’s identity formation. This discussion has already shown that church is largely a social environment, and that a lot of the issues discussed so far are related to relationships. The issues of hypocrisy, judgement, exclusivity, and lack of depth of relationships are all related to social relationships and social standing. The reasons shown in the literature for young people staying such as, belonging, warmth of relationships, mentoring, discipleship, inclusivity, are also clearly social. Fazzino (2014) found that her research participants had to redefine their identity after converting away from Christianity. Hence, reasons for staying and reasons for leaving are impactful on youth identity, because they are related to a young person’s social

identity. Authors such as Eckersley et al (2006) and Eckersley (2008), described that young people are increasingly experiencing a lack of resilience, an increase in isolation, an increase in feeling deprived, lower psychological wellbeing, higher instances of suicide and dropping out from school. These claims were not substantiated by any relevant data, so it is difficult to qualify such statements. Eckersley (2008) goes on to state that there are many factors which are contributing to this, among which is the decrease in religious affiliation. Eckersley claims that there is a link between the lack of common vision, reduced social cohesion, and less hope among young people leading to the mentioned issues. Eckersley et al. (2006), states the opposite, and claims that the movement away from affiliation with the church has created more personal spiritual expressions, which they then claim brings greater wellbeing. It is not clear, therefore, whether a movement away from the church is producing positive or negative effects on young people. More research is necessary to understand what is happening.

A second theme common in the literature is the benefits of spirituality. Eckersley et al (2006) and Erricker (2001) both present the idea that spirituality provides a strong social network which informs identity. These two authors come from a different perspective of discussing spirituality without religion, they describe how belonging draws people. Erricker (2001) affirms this idea as well, describing spirituality as having a deep connection with identity, and offers transcendence: a sense of being part of something greater than oneself. The concept of a spiritual identity was also discussed by Shepherd (2010), as a social identity which enables the individual to face life struggles, make positive choices, and encourages them to enter situations where they will be a minority in their spiritual identity. Eckersley et al. (2006) also present the idea that spirituality is strongly connected with mental health. This connection is that for a person to have positive mental health they need meaning, belonging, and purpose; and they claim spirituality can offer all three. Unfortunately, the ideas presented by Eckersley et al., Erricker, and Shepherd, do not present any research basis for their ideas,

and so are questionable. However, McCrindle (2017), Senter and Caldwell (2002) and Drumm et al. (2013) did present some research. McCrindle confirmed the benefit of spirituality to mental health, finding in a survey of Australians that almost 40% of those who defined themselves as spiritual but not religious pointed to the importance of spirituality to their mental health. Senter and Caldwell and Drumm et al. argued that their participants were able to find strength to persevere through domestic violence and leave their partners because of their personal spirituality (prayer, feeling God's presence, hearing God's voice), as identified by the participants themselves. They relayed the participant's descriptions of supernatural experiences: describing an electric feeling that gave them joy and courage to do things they did not think they had the strength to do, an internal knowing that they could get through their situation, insightful revelations into their situation, spiritual practices (such as prayer) helped them cope with their situations, and attribution of surviving and exiting their abusive relationships to God's strength and sovereignty. Senter and Caldwell present how participants' spirituality was harmed by domestic violence, but no literature reviewed presented any possible harms of spirituality, so this could and the unsupported claims of the literature regarding spirituality be facets worth researching.

The third theme was focused on suggestions for change in the structure of churches. The division of denominations across churches was identified as an issue by Riley (2014), causing some young adults to be disillusioned with church. According to Riley, churches which united with other churches had more likelihood of young people staying. An example given in the text is of the Charlotte ONE gathering, where young adults from churches of multiple denominations in Charlotte, North Carolina, gather together for a joined service. The service is described as 'cool', deep, relevant, answering questions held by the attendees, and inviting the young people to contribute. These aspects, as argued by Riley (2014), cause young people to stay. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2015) stated that young people need sermons

which are relevant to their lives, including topics of discernment, doubt, science and sexuality. In regard to all these topics, Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) add that leaders must acknowledge their own moral failures and faults, to give others a sense of freedom to have faults. However, once again, these were statements made without research basis. It is not truly known if these things are what causes some young people to stay in church.

## **Methodologies**

Methodologies were at times an issue in some of the literature. The article written by Loewen (2015) did not show any research had occurred, it was merely a summary of opinions at a panel discussion. There may well have been research done by these professors on the panel, however, it was not described by the author. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) alluded to having done research, however, the methodology was also not described and therefore not up for scrutiny. The article by Fazzino (2014) seems to have some biases of methodology. The researcher was known personally to the participants and shared her own story of ‘deconversion’ (defined in Chapter 1) before asking questions of the participants. Being known to the participants and beginning with one’s own narrative could sway the data, but no account was made for this possible bias. Tacey (2010), made some contradictory conclusions based on the answers to his survey of his students: stating that their descriptions of their spirituality were an authentic experience, but later stating that they had invented their spirituality and therefore, it wasn’t authentic (Cooper, 2016). Tacey also did not account for the bias that could have been caused by surveying his students, who could have changed their answers in order to please their lecturer who taught them about spirituality (Cooper, 2016). Houston (2015), in his dissertation research only interviewed two people, and this can hardly be a sufficient sample to generate themes from. Wright et al. (2015), has an issue with methodology in that the research methods could have been somewhat biased as well. Emails

were sent to 3,120 churches, one letter per church, and each church received the email signed from either an African American name, a Hispanic name, an Asian name, or a Caucasian name. The churches were then judged based on whether they responded, and how warmly they responded. The issue with this methodology is that the way the churches response was interpreted as being a response to the type of name; not as being about that particular church's administrative skills. If every church received four emails, one from each of the racial groups chosen by Wright et al., then the responses could be compared more accurately.

## **Gaps**

The available literature clearly describes relationships as being key to church attendance, including themes of inclusion, belonging, freedom to contribute. However, it might not be the full picture of what causes people to disengage from churches. The majority of the research has also been conducted in America and Europe, very little was conducted in Australia apart from Hughes (2013) and McCrindle (2017). Considering, as discussed earlier, that Australia's history with religion could be vastly different from nations researched, this is a significant gap. Little research has also been conducted among 15 – 18-year-olds, which could yield either the same results, or different results. Additionally, many articles found were apparently not based on research, or poorly researched, so more research is required to find if the assumptions were correct. No studies discussed negative effects of spirituality, none compared the experiences of those who left the church with those who stayed, and studies showing the effects of deconversion or leaving the church were minimal. It is based on these gaps that the research discussed in this thesis was conducted.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### Conceptual Framework

This research aimed to understand the way young people experience church, comparing the experiences of those who have left the church with those who continue to attend. As presented in the previous chapter, there exists many gaps in the available literature, particularly that of quality phenomenological research in Australia, comparative studies of those who do not attend church with those who do, the effects of and expression of spirituality among young people and so forth. The research attempted to fill in some of those gaps, approaching with the following research question: “What meaning does religion and the church bring to young people? What is the experience of leaving a Baptist church? What is the experience of staying in Baptist church?” The Baptist denomination was chosen for reasons of being relevant to the researcher, and because where other denominations have shown marked statistical change over the last 30 years, Baptists have a remained relatively stable (while small) portion of the population (ABS, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2017a, 2017b). Additionally, if the sample is too diverse, it is too difficult to find the essence of the experience, the commonalities (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

This study utilised a phenomenological methodology of research, which is underpinned by a desire to understand experiences of a phenomenon, describe these experiences and find the ‘meaning’ component of them (van Manen, 1990, Giorgi, 2008). Phenomenology does not seek to generate a theory, but to understand and describe experiences – particularly how these experiences are perceived (Creswell, 2013, Padilla-Diaz, 2015). How phenomena are experienced is subjective, especially when viewed according to a social constructivist perspective, where reality itself is seen as is subjective. Social constructivism asserts that there are objects, an individual’s relationship with that object, formed by the individual’s social environment (Creswell, 2013, Schwandt, 2007, Keaton &

Bodie, 2011, Anderson & Baym, 2004). For example, the object may be a car accident, and the individual's experience of that event is influenced by what angle they witnessed the event, and previous experiences of car accidents. For a bystander who has experienced a near-death experience in a car accident, witnessing the event might be traumatic. Their previous experiences and point of view influenced their experience of the event. Experiences may not be relatable to everyone or may not be tangible at all: they may be only felt (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990; Giorgi, 2008). Schwandt (2007) describes two forms of phenomenology – extreme and weak. Within the extreme form, there is no 'reality', for all of reality is a social construct. Within the weak form, reality does exist, however, the way individuals understand, experience, categorise, and discuss reality is subjective. Because of this subjective description of life, a phenomenological study requires an element of 'epokhé' (from Greek: literally, 'doubt'), where the researcher suspends and doubts their own experiences, and treats the participant as the expert on that experience, so as to 'see' the event through their eyes (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Religion, viewed from a phenomenological approach, is a subjective experience: each person might experience the supernatural, spiritual experiences, spiritual expression, and their relationships with others vastly differently. For example, the concept of love might be considered by some to be an objective reality, but if you were to ask individuals how they know they are loved, the experiences could be varied especially across cultures. If people were to be researched regarding their experience of religion, each person would have unique experiences, motivations, behaviours, and perspectives on life (Ikehara, 1999, as cited in Palmer & Gallaher, 2007). There may well be common themes, but this could be a result of language used to describe an experience, rather than the experience being the same for each person. If, for example, everyone experienced church the same way then all would either leave or all would stay. A person's choice to either leave, or to stay, could be based on their

own experiences and decision-making. The literature spoke at length about experiences of hypocrisy and judgement, concepts which are subjective but very real to that person. It is for these reasons that phenomenology has been chosen as the methodology for this research.

## **Role of the Researcher**

Unlike other methods of research that employ tools, phenomenology employs the researcher as the instrument of research (Creswell, 2013). A typical phenomenology will use conversational interviews to explore the participant's experiences and the meaning of these experiences to the participant (van Manen, 1990). Open-ended questions are useful, in order to allow the participant to explore deeply their experiences, while the researcher guides the conversation to remain engaged with the research question and on topic (van Manen, 1990). As stated earlier, experiences are subjective, and so the researcher must not impose their own views onto the interview or onto interpretation of the data, using reflexivity to prevent such imposition (Polkinghorne, 1989). Researchers must declare all biases and own experiences (not necessarily within the interview) in order to remain reflexive and ensure research validity (van Manen, 1990, Creswell, 2013).

As the researcher, I am biased by my experiences of church. I am a Christian, I believe in God, and I have attended church for my entire life since I was raised in a Christian family. I have attended my current Baptist church for 15 years, with mostly positive experiences. I have had experiences of church that could coincide with experiences discussed in the literature, such as hypocrisy, judgement, conflict, social isolation. I have mostly experienced positive relationships, care, encouragement, helpful sermons, and discipleship. My involvement in Christian ministry consists of working as a chaplain in a public primary school and involvement in discipleship of other young people in my church. My experiences might mean that in my interpretation of the data, I might be defensive of my faith and

tradition, whether conscious or not. I have never left the church, however, I did spend nine months away from traditional church while working overseas, but returned to my Baptist church upon return to Perth – thus disadvantaging me from understanding these individuals' motivations. I also may know some of the participants personally, or through someone else, due to my involvement in church youth work from 2005 – 2015, my chaplaincy work, and my involvement over a number of years with the Sportsfest event (a Baptist youth sport camp). I am advantaged in that I understand the language used by participants, what participants actually mean when they choose certain words. I also may have experienced to a degree what the participant has experienced, which advantages me in being able to 'relate' to what they are describing. This is especially relevant, as different traditions Christianity might use similar language to describe different things, for example a Pentecostal person's use of the phrase "movement of the Holy Spirit" might imply something quite different to a Baptist use of the phrase. A Pentecostal might be referring to euphoria and displays of charismatic acts such as speaking in tongues, whereas a Baptist might be referring to a quieter 'inner voice' of conviction and guidance. Additionally, if the participant becomes aware of my religious affiliation, it may encourage them to open up more because they know I will understand, or they may adjust their answers so as to not offend me.

In order to address these biases, practices of reflexivity were used in the interview process, as well as in the interpretation process. Specifically, questioning my responses to make sure I maintained an unconditional positive regard towards the participant, and to ensure that I was treating them as the expert on the field of knowledge. When interpreting the data, I remained reflexive by continually asking myself if what I was interpreting was what the data said, or my own thoughts. In order to address the effect of my Christian identity on the interview process, I chose not to tell the participant of my affiliation. When participants

already knew of me, I stated that the process is not about getting them back to church but seeking an understanding of their experiences, so they need not mince their words.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenology should consist of 6 – 20 participants, who are sampled not at random but purposively (as described by Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In this study, 15 participants aged were interviewed, from two sample groups. The first sample group were those who (at the time of interview) attended a Baptist church regularly (equal to or more than once per month), and the second were those who once attended a Baptist church but do so no longer. Both groups were sampled from young people aged 15 – 29, living in Perth. This age was chosen, as according to the literature, it has the lowest participation with church with the mid-late 20's being described as the age of leaving church (see ABS, 2013; Hughes, 2008, 2013; Need & de Graaf, 1996; Niemelä, 2015, Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Eight participants from Sample 1 were interviewed. Firstly, churches were searched for on the Baptist Union website, and selected certain churches and visited their websites. Through the church website, the lead pastor, youth pastor or receptionist was emailed (whichever contact was posted on the website), and then a phone call was made to the church reception a week later to follow up. Information was given to the representative about the study, and the Pastor made contact (in a manner they decided) with their congregants to ask for interested individuals. Some churches felt uncomfortable with the process and chose not to assist with the research. Seven participants for Sample 2 were interviewed, which consisted of young people who used to attend a Baptist church but do not anymore. It was unnecessary for them to still identify as Christian, however, one participant's results were excluded due to the participant not fitting the sampling requirements since they have never attended a Baptist church. Initially, the same process of obtaining participants was used for

Sample 2 as with Sample 1, requesting if the Youth Pastors knew of anyone who has left the church that might be interested in being interviewed. I also contacted my network of YouthCARE Chaplains of Western Australia, to ask if they knew any interested individuals who fit the criteria. Follow up information was sent in an email regarding the study. Because these methods elicited few respondents, flyers were placed throughout Edith Cowan University School of Humanity and Arts, and a PowerPoint slide in a lecture presentation giving information about the study, as well as in the staff newsletter. There was no response for some time, and so it was deemed necessary to make contact, through personal contacts utilising social media, with individuals who I knew had left the church. Still, few responses were found. Sample 1 participants were then re-contacted and asked if they knew of anyone who might be interested in being interviewed for their experiences of leaving the church, many responses came from this.

The interviews were semi-structured, as advised by Padilla-Diaz (2015) and Creswell (2013), beginning with a restatement of the purpose of the research, emphasising the key research question. When initial contact was made with individuals, it was made clear that the research was not about trying to get them to re-engage with church, which was reaffirmed in the interview, and potential participants were given the option to ignore the contact altogether. Appendix A lists the specific questions used in the interviews, which consist of open-ended questions. Sometimes through the conversational interview, other questions were asked, but these were for the purpose of depth of data and clarification. When participants made vague comments, they were asked to expand by offering an example, an experience, or explanation of what it was like (as suggested by van Manen, 1990). When participants offered emotive statements, their statements were reframed as a question or a summary in order to further expand and fact check (van Manen, 1990). At times, silence was allowed in order to give freedom for processing (van Manen, 1990). The interviews were recorded with

the permission of the participants using the Simple Recorder MacBook application and transcribed using the interviewScribe Pro MacBook application. With a few participants, they offered more information after the recorder was switched off, and so the researcher asked permission to write these down as anecdotes (suggested by Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

As a follow up to the interview, it was intended that three focus groups would be facilitated; one with those who had left the church, one with those who stayed, and one with leaders of a youth group. The purpose of focus groups within phenomenology is for fact checking to increase the reliability of the interpretation of data (van Manen, 1990, Padilla-Diaz, 2015, Creswell, 2013). For Sample 1, one participant indicated they did not want to participate in the focus group, and out of the other seven participants, two joined the focus group. For Sample 2, two participants stated their preference to not participate in the focus group, however, of the five other participants interviewed, none came to the focus group. This could hardly be defined as representative of the group of young people interviewed, considering none from Sample 2 attended the focus group, and only two to the Sample 1 focus group – insufficient for fact-checking. However, the contributions from those who attended the focus group were still taken into account. The themes and significant statements were presented to the group, who were asked for comments according to questions, “What have I missed? What would you like to add? What does not seem correct? To what extent would you say I’ve accurately represented your experience?” There was discussion around these different aspects, and participants wrote their thoughts on large sheets of paper which was then transcribed onto an electronic document.

The next stage of research was a non-participatory observation, used in phenomenology to help “fill the picture” (van Manen, 1990, Creswell, 2013). It is vitally important that the researcher not impact the event in any way (van Manen, 1990, Creswell, 2013). The intent in the original research design was to observe two youth groups or young

adult events, however, it was only possible for one event to be observed, limiting the ability to compare observations. Youth Pastors of Baptist churches were contacted once again, and it was requested that the researcher observe an event for the purpose of understanding more about the phenomenon. One Youth Pastor was responsive, and so a young adult event was observed from the back of the room. The group were not made aware that they were being observed, due to the fact that it would change their behaviour, and I was informed that people come to events like these all the time with a laptop in hand. It was intended to inform those present of the observation, particularly if those under the age of 18 would be present, however, this event was for those aged 18 and older. I attempted to remain non-participatory, however, many people came over and talked to me throughout the evening, and the manner of these conversations was noted. During observation, notes were written about the event with regards to the question, “What experiences could be causing these young people to stay? What meaning does this group hold for them?” Observations about how the youth pastor and leaders interact, how/what was the teaching, how young people respond to one another, what they discussed with one another, and the dynamics of the event atmosphere were all noted. The event finished late into the evening, so it was decided to hold a focus group with the leaders at a later date. The purpose of this focus group was to fact check definitions regarding terms such as, regular attendance, active attendance leaving the church, and so forth. The focus group enabled the question of the effect of the researcher’s presence on the event to be discussed, and to gain further insight into another perspective on the phenomenon. Questions used in this focus group are listed in Appendix A.

## **Ensuring Research Validity**

It is highly important to maintain the integrity of this research to retain validity, especially in representing what participants said, and *meant*, accurately. The report could

influence the churches involved in the observation process too, and whatever is said about these churches must respect the dignity of these churches. In other words, not be judgemental, but accurate and protective of the church's anonymity. Creswell (2013), Padilla-Diaz (2015), Polkinghorne (1989) and van Manen (1990) present criteria for valid research. Firstly, the phenomenon must be clearly defined. The phenomenon of young people leaving the church has been defined with clear boundaries: Western Australia, Baptist denominations, and ages 15 – 29 only. Secondly, the philosophies of the methodology must be clear, which were clearly discussed under Conceptual Framework. Thirdly, assumptions and judgements must not influence the conversation. As stated earlier, the researcher remained reflexive throughout the research process in order to prevent own judgements influence the conversation, even when the experiences shared contradicted the researcher's own thoughts. The researcher tried to view each participant's story through their eyes, not the value judgement of the researcher. Each participant was also given the same questions and not told of previous answers to questions, so that the participants were given the opportunity to present their thoughts in depth. Fourthly, the researcher is continually reorienting the discussion back to the question, and through observation phases attempt to not influence the situation observed. When participants would get off track, the researcher reminded them of the question or reframed the statements back towards the question. When participants lost their train of thought they were reminded of the most recent question, and the key research question, or their statements were reframed. When participants made statements that had different meanings to different perspectives, the researcher checked by asking what they meant by that phrase. For example, one participant suggested that certain behaviour was like a Pharisee, and I explained that while I might know the meaning of that, others might not, and to expand what one she meant by that. Fifthly, for observations the researcher must attempt to not have any impact on the event itself, and during the

observation, I sat at the back of the auditorium, and attempted to keep interactions with others to a minimum, only interacting if it was from the initiative of others. Sixth, the transcripts must be accurate, and themes must be 'easily linked' to the transcripts. The transcripts were checked for accuracy through listening to phrases multiple times, and once typed, listened to once again to check the script was accurate to the audio. Themes of meaning were frequently checked multiple times back to the transcripts to ensure the themes represented what the participant was saying.

## **Ethical considerations**

The research was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Edith Cowan University prior to beginning research. The considerations for ethics in this report were informed by Creswell (2013) and van Manen (1990). These authors discussed three effects: the effect on the participant, the interviewer, and effect on the readers.

The effect on participants was considered frequently throughout the research process. Each participant was given an information letter (prior to the interview, see Appendix B) which contained information about potential emotional risks, and access to information about counselling if they re-experienced any trauma while recounting their experiences. When contact was made with participants, they were given the option to act as though they never received the contact so as to offer a way out of the research while saving face. Some were followed up if they told their Pastor they were interested in the research, but if they did not respond to a second attempt at contact, it was assumed they were not interested anymore. Participants were given freedom often to withdraw their participation in the information letter by a certain date, and during the interview were reminded that the purpose was not to get them into church but to understand how people experience church. Participants were frequently given the option during the interview process not to go further into a discussion if

they did not want to, participants rarely took this opportunity. One participant expressed that at one time they had suicidal thoughts, and so an informal suicide risk assessment (based on my training in Mental Health First Aid and Gatekeeper Suicide Prevention) was completed during the interview, and the participant was found to be at no risk. The participant was informed regarding why these questions were being asked, and the disclosure was reported to the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee, who decided no harm had been done. A process was created in the event of any report of sexual abuse, in that contact would be made (in consultation with the participant) to the Baptist Union. However, no reports were made so this process was not used. There existed potential ethical dilemmas in interviewing mature minors (those aged 15 – 18), potentially requiring parental permission, however, no participants in this age group were found so this did not become an issue. Confidentiality was also maintained throughout the process, any identifying information was removed from transcripts (names, spouse and friend names, names of past and present churches, names of workplaces, ministry programs etc). Each participant is referred to a randomly assigned participant number, so that there can be no association of the number with the order of interviews. Names of church referred to and churches observed removed to protect their dignity as a church.

The effect on the reader has been considered through the entire process, ensuring that all data is accurate and a fair representation. It is important to consider, because research of this kind could cause churches to change their operations. However, the discussion of results and conclusions have been carefully written so as not to try to cause certain changes to churches willed by the author, but accurate to the data. The effect on the researcher was considered, and the proposed protection was that of remaining reflexive. It is important to note that the research has had impact to the researcher in gaining a perspective of church

through other individual's point of views, thinking more critically when attending church than before.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data was analysed according to methods described by Creswell (2013), van Manen (1990), and Giorgi (2012). The selective method was chosen, where the data was pored over repeatedly – reading through the transcript multiple times through, highlighting significant statements, and identifying and interpreting themes of meaning held in the statements. Each significant statement was highlighted using the “Review” feature in Microsoft Word and annotated according to the identified theme. These statements and themes of meaning were then compared with one another and summarised under theme headings. As each transcript was read, more themes were found, requiring redefinitions of themes found in earlier transcripts. This process took many times of returning to the data to check the accuracy of the themes to the data, and to find themes that added something to the data from literature. The keywords were then collated into four categories: Positive significant statements (stayer), Positive significant statements (goer), Negative significant statements (stayer), Negative significant statements (goer). The statements were then grouped and regrouped until common themes were found. These themes for each category were compared across categories, until overall themes were apparent. These themes will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Initial outcomes

Table 1 provides details about each participant and their age, gender, attendance/non-attendance, and frequency of attendance if they do currently. Participant age range spanned from 19 to 28 years of age, with a mean age of 24. Seven of the participants were female, eight were male. Seven of the participants no longer attend a Baptist church, and eight were attending a Baptist church at the time of the interview. Of the females, two were attending a Baptist church, five were not. Of the males, five were attending and three did not. All but two participants who stayed in church were from a Christian family background, however, one of these two exceptions did not discuss their family. Six of the seven non-attenders also grew up in a Christian family. Six of the 15 participants came from international backgrounds; either they or their parents were born in Asia, Europe, or Africa. It is possible that more had international backgrounds but did not disclose this. Four of the participants were of a white South African background, second only to those who did not disclose an international background. This high proportion of South African participants is important to note, for it could sway the data (if relationship to religion in South Africa is different to that in Australia) and could be framed as an overrepresentation when one considers that South African born residents of Greater Perth only represent 2% of the population, according to the 2016 census (ABS, 2017c). However, this could be accounted for upon a review of South African religion statistics in comparison with Australian. According to SSA (2004), the Dutch Reformed Church (and similar) was among the most popular protestant religious affiliations in South Africa in 2001. The Dutch Reformed Church isn't as common in Western Australia, with only nine Dutch Reformed churches across the entire state (Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, n.d.), by comparison there are 112 Baptist Churches in Western Australia (Baptist Churches Western Australia, n.d.). It could be a possible conclusion that the Baptist Church

is closest in tradition (with some theological differences) to the Dutch Reformed Church and hence, South African migrants to Western Australia could perhaps turn to the Baptist denomination instead. Future research could be interesting to understand the high representation of South African respondents from Baptist Churches.

*Fig. (Table): Demographics of participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	19	Male	Currently attends	Once per week
<b>Participant 2</b>	22	Female	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 3</b>	28	Male	Infrequently attends	Bi-monthly
<b>Participant 4</b>	20	Male	Currently attends	3 times a week
<b>Participant 5</b>	23	Female	Currently attends	>2 times a week
<b>Participant 6</b>	23	Female	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 7</b>	25	Male	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 8</b>	23	Female	Currently attends	2 times a week
<b>Participant 9</b>	25	Male	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 10</b>	28	Male	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 11</b>	27	Male	Currently attends	2 times a week
<b>Participant 12</b>	24	Female	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 13</b>	19	Female	Does not attend	
<b>Participant 14</b>	24	Female	Never attended Baptist	
<b>Participant 15</b>	28	Male	Currently attends	Once a week

Some of the participants within the ‘stayer’ category attended the same church since they were either born, or since they lived in Perth. Others described that they had been to multiple different churches, including other Baptist congregations, or denominations of Church of Christ and/or charismatic churches. Those who had left other churches to attend a Baptist church were kept in the ‘stayer’ category because their attendance was to a Baptist church at the time of the interview. During the interview, these participants were invited to share why they left those churches, and their motivations for continuing to attend their Baptist church. Some participants also discussed that they were attending church events less often than they used to, giving reasons of busyness of working full-time or reasons of other conflicting priorities.

One participant in the ‘non-attender’ category was attending a different Christian denomination at the time of the interview, and had ceased participation with the Baptist tradition. This participant was placed in the ‘non-attender’ category, for the purpose of understanding reasons for leaving the Baptist tradition, despite their attendance of another Christian denomination. Two other participants did not consider themselves as having ‘left’ the church, maintaining that they did not have time available to attend. One of these participants expanded on other motivations that encourage them to prioritise their limited time to other things. Issues of judgement, changes in belief, religious dogma, and conflicting beliefs were given by participants as the key reasons they chose to leave their Baptist church – as stated earlier, some leaving church altogether, some going to another denomination, others ceasing attendance for a time. As stated in the previous section, one participant was interviewed, but not included in the data for reasons of never having attended a Baptist church.

The focus group, held after the interviews were complete, yielded little response. Of the non-attenders’ sample, no participants attended the focus group; of the stayer sample, two participants attended the focus group. Participants explored the ideas that came out of the interview and were asked to either expand, add to, or correct these themes. The themes were deemed by attendees to be mostly correct but lacking in their perspectives on young people under the age of 18 not being included or catered to very well. The results are obviously very limited, due to the lack of response.

One young adult event was observed at a Baptist church, an after-dinner event of casual interaction. There were games, televisions, tables, tea and coffee, snacks, and bean bags, to enable individuals to chat and connect with one another. Attendees to the event were free to engage in activities freely, the event was mostly unstructured time. Attendees appeared to know what was usually on offer, gravitating towards what they were interested in

without hesitation or need to be invited. Attendees spent most of their time either playing games, sitting at tables or on bean bags chatting with one another. At one part of the evening, the Pastor used a microphone to encourage everyone to sit closer to the 'stage' area, where he and one attendee sat for an interview about their life experiences. At the conclusion of the sharing time, the interviewee was asked to share an 'encouragement' with the group, a prayer was offered, and then attendees were invited to 'hang out' for as long as they wished. Whilst observing, the researcher contemplated the question, "What experiences could be causing these young people to stay? What meaning does this group hold for them?" There is much interpretation required here, because one can only draw assumed conclusions. The event appeared to be inclusive: individuals made an effort to make sure each person at the event had someone to talk to. The relaxed nature of the event (a lack of apparent structure) seemed to enable attendees to participate in ways they desired, enabling 'organic' conversations to occur; the presence of games, activities and food appeared to provide an escape from social awkwardness. The attendees seemed to naturally drift into personal conversations, some of which contained potentially contentious topics. It appeared that participants were free to share their opinion without judgement or rejection. The Pastor obviously made effort to connect with every person present, moving from table to table to bean bag to game to activity. The subjectivity of meaning to attendees limits the accuracy of conclusions made, for example, participants may have actually felt opposite to how it was described by the observer; perhaps they found it to be lacking in depth. Observatory notes were based on the perspective of the researcher of the event not that of those immersed in the event.

The observation was limited in that only one event was observed by the researcher, despite the original designation of two different churches to be observed. This occurred due to a lack of responses by other churches. When churches were contacted for research, a request for participants to be involved in the research as well as an observation were made at the same

time. However, only 1 of these churches responded to this second request. There was no acknowledgement and therefore no reason given when other churches didn't respond to the request for observation so any reasons would be purely speculative. Perhaps these church leaders felt that an observation might put at risk the confidentiality of any young people who participated in the interviews or put at risk the anonymity of their church. Perhaps also, they were apprehensive of the conclusions that could have been made about their church, even though anonymity was confirmed in the request. On another hand, perhaps these churches were busy and the request was missed, forgotten, or seen as too difficult to be carried out.

A youth Pastor and two youth ministry leaders from the observed young adult group were invited in the following week for a focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to explore definitions, as well as explore their perspectives on the key research question. The focus group was in unanimous agreement that my presence did not impact the event in any way. Definitions regarding regular attendance, active attendance, and leaving church were discussed in the focus group, results of which were discussed in Chapter 1. Regarding their experiences of people either leaving or staying in the church, the majority of the discussion was centred on discipleship (that is, mentoring through an ongoing relationship); and secondarily religious dogma, then belonging, freedom to discuss doubts and questions, feeling cared for, and small groups.

Through all of these interviews, focus groups, and the observation, five themes emerged: spirituality and religion, small groups, religious dogma, paradoxical behaviours, after effects, and changes in beliefs.

## Themes

### *Spirituality and religion*

Each participant (excluding focus group participants) was asked to reflect on the meaning of the words, “spirituality” and “religion”, and their experiences and expressions of the supernatural. Some participants gave definitions of the words, some discussed implications of the word for themselves or others, whilst others combined the concepts into one – calling it ‘faith’ or ‘a relationship with God’. Sometimes their descriptions of a relationship with God was interpreted to belong to the category of spirituality, as one participant explicitly stated: “spirituality is a lot more personal; a relationship built with Jesus” (Participant 11).

### *Meanings of religion*

Religion was frequently described in terms of rigidity: “religion for a long time, felt like rituals and maybe things ... done by religious people that were people [who] aren’t as free as maybe I see myself” (Participant 11). Participants frequently referred to terms such as rituals, rules, traditions, deeds, and exclusivity to describe religion. Some examples given by participants of rituals were prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance. Religion was described as something static, something not flexible nor adaptable; for example, repeating what ancestors of the religion did, just for the sake of, “it’s always been that way so we’re gonna [sic] keep doing it that way” (Participant 1). The majority of definitions and descriptions of the word religion were negative, and what’s interesting to note is that these descriptions were also used by those that identify as Christian and church attenders. The word religion seemed to have a lot of negative connotations, even to those who ascribe to a religion. Participant 8, a 23-year-old Christian, said, “Religion does have a lot of negative connotations to me”. This quote seems to sum up a lot of the feelings towards the word,

perhaps because of the way participants internalised the way others perceived religion. Many Christian identifying participants preferred to not call themselves religious, instead they called what they have a ‘relationship’ rather than a religion. One participant described being religious as akin to a Pharisee, referencing a group of people in the Bible whom Jesus Christ criticised for doing good things to be seen, but unchanged internally:

“They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. Everything they do is for show. ... What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27-28 NLT)

Other participants implied a similar idea, saying that in religion a person follows set rules that they do not understand – for no reason other than, ‘just don’t’. Another participant offered a possible explanation, describing how religion developed within an entirely different context to the modern world – meaning that many of the ‘rules’ no longer make sense. Participants described religion as a hindrance to spiritual development, as a label, an excuse, and as the cause of many wars.

Not all descriptions and meanings of religion were emotively negative. Some descriptions were relatively neutral, describing religion as a belief system, a way of making sense of the world, a system used to guide the community into pro-social behaviour. Others felt that religion was a positive concept at times. Religion was described as a guiding system, a provider of purpose, a builder of community, transcendence, an explanation of the world. One participant emphasised the Christian religion as something of truth to him, “[Christianity is] something that I see as being true, even if you don’t feel it all the time.” (Participant 15). Other participants replaced the word religion with ‘faith’ or ‘relationship with God’ and

described it with positive discourse. Words such as guidance, dependence on God, confidence, prayer, and listening to God, were used to describe these two concepts. Many participants emphasised that religion was frequently seen as a way of earning the benevolence of God, whereas their 'faith' was about receiving God's gracious benevolence as a gift and not a reward for their 'good works.' One participant described the confidence they gained in the face of making decisions, both in dealing with the consequences of past poor decisions, and in making future decisions without fear of the consequences. This participant emphasised how his time 'away from God' helped them to see that.

### *Meanings of spirituality*

Participants varied mostly when describing spirituality, some even having two different versions of the word that held different meanings for them. This makes sense in the description by most participants of spirituality as something unique, individual and personal. "Spirituality is very vague. So, I mean it could be talking about supernatural experiences, or it could be talking about religion, people's beliefs about life and about death and the universe in general." (Participant 7). Most commonly described was an awareness of 'something' greater, this something referring to a great diversity of ideas. For some participants, the 'something' referring to being aware of their own spirit, spiritual beings (such as demons and angels), for others this 'something' was vaguer, such as an awareness of 'something' being there and a bigger picture of life, and for others this 'something' was being part of the grandeur of the universe. One participant, who did not identify as a Christian said, "I just feel like, any person whether they're not brought up in Christianity or not, they wonder like is there anything bigger out there?" (Participant 12). In reference to an awareness of spiritual beings, participants described this as something intangible that they believed in without proof. Participants also described a 'small voice' that was physically or mentally heard, an

internal ‘nudge’, gut feeling, seeing ‘signs’, or having an internal self-dialogue, as these experiences of the spiritual world. These participants frequently described these feelings or the voice as guiding their lives. They described the Holy Spirit guiding them through major life decisions, minor decisions, and through a sense of right and wrong. This was, at times, the explanation for what it meant to have a relationship with God, where a person would connect with God through prayer, and then wait to ‘hear’ through reading the Bible and listening to their thoughts.

The awareness of the impact and purpose of one’s life was also a frequent description for spirituality. It was described by some that their behavioural choices either drew them closer to or further away from God, characterised in a sense of relational intimacy with the divine being. A sense of meaning and purpose was drawn from having a positive impact on other people. This positive impact was described in terms of legacy, charity, teaching others about their faith, keeping others on the journey, and, “about making sure my heart is in the right place, to love everyone just as equals.” (Participant 1). When asked to explain how spirituality affected their day-to-day lives, many spoke about how they could act towards other people. They labelled expression of spirituality as giving without seeking reward, not judging others, showing love to people, having a broader perspective about people, having integrity and genuineness, showing kindness to the poor and to enemies, and living according to what they described as a good life with purpose. The sense of purpose was related to spirituality for most participants – some described their purpose in life as something given by God, others described how belief in God gave their life meaning and satisfaction. This was particularly relevant for some participants, who felt that science and human comprehension could not explain everything, whereas spirituality could. Participants found spirituality helped them to explain why there is ‘evil’ in the world, their own existence, and their

experiences. Participants described spirituality in mostly positive terms, especially as something more genuine than religion.

Some participants did, however, discuss how spirituality made them feel uncomfortable. To some, when they thought of spirituality, they thought of something that was unrelatable; they described how Pentecostal churches express and experiences spirituality through supernatural acts (such as, miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, etc), how those from a non-religious spiritual perspective seemed “hippy”, “touchy-feely”, “unsettling”. For these last descriptions, participants felt uneasy with the lack of framework. On the other hand, some participants considered spirituality as something they hadn’t thought about much and did not consider a priority. One in particular described how their lack of spiritual experiences made them question all other aspects of God and religion.

### *Experiences of the supernatural*

Participants were asked to share if they had any supernatural or spiritual experiences and were given the freedom to define this as they saw fit. Each participant had unique perspectives and experiences of the supernatural, however, some expressed that they had no experience of it. Those who had no experience of the supernatural felt that any experience that could be interpreted as supernatural were explainable in ‘human’ terms, or they felt suspicious about any sort of supernatural experiences that they heard others describe. Others described trying hard to attain a supernatural experience but receiving nothing: “I tried very very hard, I prayed a lot, and nothing. Nothing changed for me, really.” (Participant 12). The participant continued to explain that they continued to find church boring, and they never heard ‘God’s voice’ as other people had described.

Those who did experience the supernatural described it in various ways, firstly regarding timely Bible verses. Multiple participants described times in their lives where they

were facing difficulty, and then they would stumble upon a verse in the Bible that seemed relevant to that situation. For one participant, it was “like the Creator of the universe was talking to like, personally giving me a verse.” (Participant 11). Another participant described the supernatural in terms of being given the ability to “speak in tongues”, also known as glossolalia. Glossolalia refers to the Christian practice, frequently observable in Pentecostal churches, of either supernaturally being able to speak foreign languages, or, more commonly, speaking in words defined as only intelligible to God, considered a spiritual gift (Jennings, 2008). The participant described a sense of relief and freedom when they were able to speak in tongues. Many participants described a feeling: ranging from feeling the prayers of others, feeling energised after spending time in prayers, feeling at peace, feeling the presence of a spiritual being, feeling a ‘nudge’ to do something, a feeling of purpose or being in place, or a physical feeling of something unexplainable. For example, one participant described how they were singing worship songs in church, and, “I thought my friend next to me was holding my hand, squeezed her - and when I opened my eyes, her hand was down there [pointed to the ground]. And I felt like this massive abundance of like warmth and love” (Participant 6). This participant also went on to describe an experience of a vision, which they described as something supernatural without knowing who or what sent the vision. Answered prayer was also a frequent occurrence: participants described how they were praying about a difficult situation in their lives, and then soon after praying receiving a text message from a peer of encouragement that was relevant to the situation. One participant described a situation where he had forgotten an assignment that if incomplete would cause a failure in their course; he prayed about the situation and later the lecturer changed an aspect of the tutorial which enabled all students to do the assignment again. The participant said, “that was when I sort of went, ‘woah you are real, there’s something there.’” (Participant 1). The supernatural was

described as being in control of circumstance: using failures to guide them to a good outcome or guiding them to what they hoped for and thought impossible.

The description of ‘hearing God’s voice’ was interesting to note, which some participants defined as their experience of the supernatural. Often participants heard the ‘voice’ when they were needing to make decisions, or they heard the voice in regard to future decisions. As referred to earlier in the discussion of meanings of spirituality, this ‘voice’ was described by some as something they could hear audibly, others described it as a voice in their thoughts, and thirdly as an internal ‘nudge’. The ‘voice’ was frequently described as something they knew was from God, without being able to explain why or how they knew that. Participant 15 described how he could tell the difference between his own conscience and the voice of God:

“the key things I think are recognising when it’s God and I suppose for me that would be it’s always very clear, and it comes with a peace about it as well ... when it’s an encounter with God, it comes with conviction about you know, where you’re at in life, maybe you’ve gone one direction, and he’s calling you to go in a different direction, but it also comes with that peace.”

This sense of peace was referred to by others as well, described as a sense of being ‘in place’, or a sense of ‘this is right’. Participants described that their supernatural experiences gave them strength to face difficult times, grounding in times of confusion, support in times of grief, and peace at times when they thought peace should not be experienced. Some also found that supernatural events consisted of how their behaviour had changed without agency from themselves. These changes were ascribed to the supernatural, who had given them patience and placidity in place of anger, or a greater awareness of right and wrong.

## *Small groups*

Perhaps one of the most obvious themes among the interviews was regarding small groups. Small groups, also called bible studies, life groups, cell groups, community groups, were described by participants as places where groups or cells of about 10 individuals would meet once a week at someone's home to discuss the bible, Christian principles and their application to behaviour, and pray for each other's situations. Small groups offered close relationships, deep conversations, support, spiritual growth, and freedom to disagree. For some, they had other forms of small groups (including mentoring and music teams), and for some small groups made attending church seem unnecessary.

The first aspect, close relationships, was frequently described of small groups. Participants found they could develop more significant connections to others through small group, to the point that they felt wanted at their small group. These relationships enabled participants to share their life challenges and 'journey together' through each other's life events. The small group was described as a community of their closest friends, which many had been part of with the same individuals for a significant period of time, such as 15 years. Small groups were a place where anyone could go and experience belonging, despite being different to others there. For example, participant 8 felt marginalised in her church community until she was able to join a small group, through those connections she was able to feel integral to the wider church community. For some participants who had ceased attending the church and small group, the relationships were significant enough that they were able to continue socialising with that group of people in other settings.

Perhaps the reason these relationships felt significant, was their description of conversations characterised by personal disclosure, empathy and support. Participant 11 explained that the size of the group enabled the sense of safety in disclosure, as well as receiving encouragement in place of judgement post-disclosure. Participants could share

about their weeks, share openly, chat about challenges they faced in their daily life, and “asking people how they are really going ... You know, people really opened up.”

(Participant 9). Participants would pray for each other’s needs, follow up on situations told previously, and consequentially, participants felt loved, cared for, encouraged, and safe. The discussions were not necessarily focussed on the bible or Christian principles at all times, however, for some participants spiritual growth was an important aspect of small groups. Participant 15 felt that small groups were a place people, including non-Christians, could “have like a genuine encounter in some way, with God”. Small group members would sometimes read and study portions of the bible, and then discuss their interpretation and application. Small groups were a place of ‘input’ spiritually for many, their source of spiritual growth, and some described how their spiritual life had increased in lethargy when they were not attending their small group.

A few participants mentioned that being prayed for amplified the feeling of support. When participants referred to being prayed for such discussions were closely tied with feeling cared for. Participants were prayed for, followed up regarding the thing prayed for during the week, and prayed for about situations the participant requested prayer for even if they did not agree with the participant’s actions. One participant in particular found that knowing a friend was praying for them was an impetus for recovery from mental health issues. This participant “... fell into depression and I was actually going to commit suicide, and I told that to one of my friends, and he said he would pray for me and yeah after a while my circumstances got better and I stuck with it...” (Participant 13)<sup>1</sup>. Being prayed for was often paired with personal disclosure about struggles, and being able to request prayer meant that relationship was deemed as significant. Participants felt being prayed for was important when they

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<sup>1</sup> A suicide risk assessment was completed as a response to this disclosure. It was found that the participant was not at any risk, however, it was reported the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee and no further action was deemed necessary.

presented difficult scenarios, such as difficult questions – the listener would seriously consider their thoughts, and pray for them about the issue, and then follow up on the issue.

The second important aspect to the sense of closeness in the small groups, was the freedom to disagree with, be disagreed with, reprove one another, while still feeling safe. It was important to participants that they were able to have arguments over topics and still remained friends despite their disagreement. They felt the need for freedom to discuss things that could be considered contentious (including doubts, questions, controversial political and biblical topics), rather than avoid these issues. For participant 9, it was important that they had members in their small group who were of different perspectives, “we had a couple of people studying theology, so they were kind of having their input and there were a few people that were ... a bit fundamentalist”. He also mentioned there were individuals who were non-Christians, homosexual, and those who did not attend church who felt safe to be there because they could share their thoughts without being judged. The ‘safe’ diversity led to a diversity of opinions, which led to times of disagreement, which led to increased significant conversations. The ability to disagree or argue led some members to be changed positively by such disagreement. For some participants, this disagreement took the form of being reprovved by another member. Such experiences were described as uncomfortable at the time, but a good thing which they look back on with appreciation. For one participant, she was in a relationship with someone that the leader of her small group considered unwise for her to be with; so the leader discussed this with the participant. What the participant counted as significant in that experience was how the leader and the rest of the group continued to be supportive after expressing their thoughts, “I was doing something that they didn’t agree with, but they were there and they would ask how it was going and they would pray about it, and they were always around me for that.” (Participant 8). Another participant commented that when there was a context of a supportive friendship, disagreements were positive

because a lingering reputation was not attached and the issue could be reconciled. The key for participants in this was that they felt loved and cared for whilst being corrected or disagreed with. As will be discussed in the next theme, religious dogma, this freedom was considered lacking within church contexts.

There were multiple participants who no longer attended church services, but still found their small group valuable. One such small group was defined as having only 40% of its attendees who still went to a church service. The reasoning given was that church added little additional benefit over small group. Small group was a place where it seemed any background or belief could feel welcome, whereas church was described as the opposite. Small groups consisted, as already described, as places of meaningful conversations, where members received love, care, support, advice, prayer, sounding out of thoughts, and cathartic disclosure. Whereas church was described as being structured in a way that new and long-term attendees could easily breeze in and out without talking to anyone or having any significant conversation. While participants in the follow-up focus group suggested this freedom to be anonymous could be desired for those who are feeling introverted, this was mostly seen as detrimental to those not members of a small group. A youth pastor described it this way: “[At church] you’re one of 500 people on a Sunday morning, but in a life-group, you might be one of six or seven, or 10. It’s more intimate.” (Speaker 1, focus group 2).

There were other forms of a small group that were described, including one-to-one mentoring, being part of a music team, being part of a recreational group connected to the church, and informal small groups. Mentoring was depicted as being a one-to-one long-term (about four years) investment, where a mentor – who is somewhat older than the mentee – meet to discuss life challenges, while guiding them through Christian principles. For some, this helped them remain ‘on track’ with their faith in the face of ‘temptations’, but for all who described this idea it was fundamental that they felt significant to their mentor. A youth

leader who participated in the post-observation focus group said, “I can personally think of like, relatives that have walked away compared to me staying. And why was that? It’s because I was disciplined and invested in...” (speaker 2, focus group 2). It was felt that these individuals who did not receive this mentoring received the ‘wrong message’ about Christianity, thinking salvation was given meritoriously (as opposed to ‘divine grace’) and they did not have enough merit. Another form of small groups was a group of people who would perform music in a team on a Sunday morning, to lead the congregation in musical worship of God. These music teams were described as mini communities where the leader cared for the members of the team, caught up with them, showed support to them through their situations, and offered prayer for their situation. Additionally, participants sometimes found they had informal small groups, where they would meet up with close friends regularly and share about their experiences, challenges, joys and learnings in their life. They felt they could go to other members of the informal small group if they had a need and receive support, often through prayer.

### ***Religious Dogma***

The idea of religious dogma refers to experiences in church where family members, leaders, Christian university groups, or other congregants gave an impression of being unaccepting of any other perspective. Sometimes churches avoided issues altogether or were passive regarding them (such as those on overpopulation, denominational differences, abortion), because they were too contentious to discuss, and at other times churches were described as being focussed on some issues over others. Participants found the church to be unwavering on issues such as excessive drinking, premarital sex, homosexuality (such as their stance on the plebiscite held in 2017 regarding marriage equality), women in leadership, clubbing, Israel, sharing an apartment with members of the opposite sex, and regular

attendance to church on a Sunday. It was perceived that the church would tend to focus on these particular issues, while ignoring others that participants believed to be more important. One participant noticed this in the way they were treated regarding their experiences of doubts, where they did not experience love and support from their Christian community in that issue. Another felt that they were focussed on more for having a non-Christian partner, whereas the young leaders in the youth group were not spoken to about their apparent drug use. A youth pastor reflected on the discourse of those who would drink excessively as opposed to other things: for even occasional excessive drinking, the person was described as unsuitable for leadership, whereas in other issues a person was described as 'struggling' with something and in need of care and support. With issues that were framed in these negative terms, it was experienced that church members and leaders did not have much compassion: they defined the person in terms of the person's behaviour, and not their other positive behaviours. One speaker in the focus group noted that churches seemed to ignore issues such as lying, pride, and gossip, giving attention instead to those that were considered by the church as more serious. Participants noted that both groups of behaviours are categorised as an offence according to the Bible, but perhaps the first was considered more visible and public – being reported to Pastors by other congregants. Those who had been categorised into this group of condemned behaviours were frequently no longer welcome to participate in music teams, ministry committees, and became stigmatised even if the behaviour they were accused of never occurred. This labelling and singling out caused some participants to either find other places to express their desire for serving, or leave church entirely.

It seemed to many participants that their churches were either forceful about their views and closed-off to any other perspectives, which they described as being 'black and white' about issues. It was thought by many that it was okay for their church to hold certain views, but not okay to enforce those views on people and use a discourse that theirs was the

only valid perspective on issues of doctrine and politics. Those who held a distinct view were treated as though they were no longer accepted by the group, because they felt their view was not accepted or discoursed as a valid other perspective: they felt they were not allowed to think that way, and so they had to ask themselves if they were in or out. This occurred in multiple contexts, including through sermons, group discussions, one-to-one interactions with leadership, and family. Christians were described as being ‘close-minded’, particularly the elderly generation, for example, regarding what was dubbed by one participant as the ‘social gospel’. The social gospel referred to when churches would work to meet the felt needs of communities, including their physical needs, in contrast to what could be labelled as the proselytization gospel which refers to working towards converting members of the community to Christianity. The former was seen as invalid by churches in comparison to the latter, effectively communicating to one participant that the church did not legitimately care about people, only about creating more Christians. Churches were described as being close-minded regarding the nation of Israel, in their staunch defence of the nation and justification of violent acts committed by the nation while ignoring the suffering of Palestinians.

Multiple participants experienced this black and white treatment by their family. For one, their parent was stuck on the participant’s chosen living situation: a share house with members of the opposite sex, which was considered as something ‘you just do not do’ without any explanation of why, or consideration of when it might be appropriate or necessary. For two other participants, they felt forced into the Christian world-view by their parents. They had begun to experience doubts, and decided they no longer wanted to attend church and be a Christian, but their parents were unaccepting of this. “I think I was around 15 when I told my parents I didn’t want to go to church anymore. But they didn’t accept that, we’d get into screaming matches about it. Pretty much they would force me to go, which I kind of resented.” (Participant 12). Both participants felt a sense of resentment in being

forced to go to church, and the unacceptance of their disbelief, feeling what they both described as being a ‘black sheep’ in the family and not feeling loved unconditionally by their family. They found that their relationship with their parent was affected long-term: “once you know that your mum is not approving of your way of life or of your beliefs it just affects the whole relationship, the whole dynamic.” (Participant 7).

There was a sense from multiple participants that their experiences of dogma were due to the existence of formal and informal hierarchies. One hierarchy was regarding age, where the elder were considered to have the ability to make wise decisions, while teenagers were perceived as less capable. This became apparent to participant 12, quoted above, when told their age was an inhibiting factor for them to be able to decide independently concerning church attendance. They were treated as if their thoughts were irrelevant, because they were too young to decide. In the focus group, participants reflected on the absence of young (under 30 years) people and single people on the church council. Marital status was another noted hierarchy: those who were married were considered wiser than those who were dating or single on relationship issues. One participant relayed an experience of a peer, who had been with his girlfriend for five years, feeling degraded by being given advice from someone who recently married after two years of dating. The friend felt that their years of experience were considered less valid because they hadn’t yet married. A third hierarchy was regarding reputations, whereby (as mentioned above) individuals who were known to have engaged in specific ‘sins’ were not welcome on councils and committees, and any opinions offered by them were automatically disagreed with. A young adult ministry leader reflected on this, saying, “there’s almost like the hierarchy of faith, and the enlightenment of religion, where it’s like, I know all and I’m wise and I’ve gained understanding.” (focus group 2, speaker 2). These ‘enlightened’ ones had only achieved such hierarchy because of their abstinence from

specific sins, while other sins were not concerned for in consideration of their reputational status.

Such hierarchies tended to create disunities, and a partitioning of social groups, when discourses of 'us and them' were present. This presented within discussions of marriage, homosexuality, religious identification of spouses, and others. Participant 11 reflected on the experiences of a friend of his, a homosexual man who heard sermons preached on the church's disagreement with gay marriage, and he felt concerned for his friend: "I felt so bad for my mate- he should have a place where he feels like he can be ministered to, doesn't matter if he, if he's gay or if he's not gay, it should still be welcomed into church." It was apparent that the discussion was framed within a way that made those who did not agree feel unwelcome. Another participant attended a north metropolitan Pentecostal church, and felt pushed away because of her inability to practice Glossolalia. She experienced a divide between those who could, and those who could not. Other participants experienced this in the thought or act of bringing their non-Christian partner to church: they believed their partner would not be accepted, or they experienced their partner not being accepted: "I felt the stares ... you could just tell by people's body language that they weren't as welcoming and so I was like I don't really wanna go anymore" (Participant 6). This sense of being treated as an 'outsider' to the inner group was also noted by Participant 2: "Not necessarily telling you off, but also just the way like they act around you. You can tell that they don't approve of what you're doing. But it's not like not necessarily always verbal." Additionally, people who held non-standard views on doctrine noticed that others kept separate from them. Participant 13 felt this, when their family began identifying as going to church on a Saturday: "the pastor of the church was basically a little anti-Semitic, and was not very happy. And calling us Jews and Judaizers and that sort of thing." The general theme was that churches demonised

anything outside of their own view, including labelling those outside Christianity as ‘evil’ and ‘bad people’.

This demonization is perhaps a reason many experienced a lack of freedom to express their true opinions, their doubts and their questions. This was experienced for many with their family, when the participants’ orientation to Christianity was defined by doubt, they did not feel free to share their true feelings with their family – including their apprehension of possibly redefining their identity. It was not only family that participants experienced this with, however, since it was felt they could not share their experiences of judgement or doubts with anyone at the church. Those who experienced doubts about the existence of God did not feel safe to approach any church leader or congregant about their confusions. Many perceived that there was no opportunity, let alone sense of safety, to express and explore doubts, fears, and questions without being given an ‘easy’ answer that did not consider the complexity of the person’s cognitive dissonance. One speaker in a focus group said, “a lot of youth struggle in the services because they want to ask questions, but you can’t. You can’t just put your hand up and ask, Um excuse me Pastor [name] what do you mean?! And so, they just like, yeah they really struggle in relating to the things said, and then so they zone out.” (Focus Group 2: Speaker 2). Many participants supposed that young people do not have a voice in churches, because any views that do not fit within the church’s list of doctrines were not considered nor explored. There was no openness to change, to other opinions, suggestions: any contrasting suggestion or opinion was met with ‘deaf ears’, hostility, or placation. One of the key issues described with freedom to express honestly was the awareness that any difficult questions were met with ‘cop-out’ answers which denied the complexities of life. Questions were met with answers that could be boiled down to: ‘just because it is.’ It was believed by participants that such answers made it difficult for people to believe, and made them feel unwelcome because they did not embrace the teachings with unquestioning belief.

By contrast, not all descriptions of church were dogmatic, some described church in opposite terms. The seeming opposite of religious dogma was prioritising relationships. Leadership that offered thoughts and opinions that the participant disagreed with was considered welcome because it was contextualised within an accepting relationship: both parties were accepting of one another regardless of belief opinions. Pastors were viewed positively if they were characterised by an interest in journeying with people, rather than enforcing doctrine. For some participants, they welcomed disagreement and what they termed as ‘accountability’, as long as this was within the setting of acceptance and love. Specifically, for Participant 8 (as referred to in the theme of small groups), when a leader expressed their concern over the participant dating a non-Christian, this was expressed within the context of a long-term relationship of unconditional support and love. The conversation was also followed up with support and care, regardless of the participant’s decision regarding the relationship. Participant 15 received this accountability as genuine care, and added that he could share ideas and thoughts with this other, and know that the other would contemplate the idea before giving an answer. It was also necessary that the answer take into account the unanswerable grey areas, rather than attempt to catalogue all of life and thought into black and white. This was definitely echoed by other participants, who longed for dialogue over enforcement.

### ***Paradoxical behaviours***

Behaviours of participants at times could be described as paradoxical; those who had negative relational experiences continued to attend church, and those who had positive relational experiences chose to leave church. It is apparent that there were other factors involved for these participants in their positioning with church. Some of these factors for those who stayed despite experiencing relational issues include a desire to change how things are, church being an input for their relationship with God, and having a core group of

friendships that would draw them back despite any conflicts. Factors that caused people to leave despite having positive relationships included ministry ‘burn-out’, changes in beliefs, and loss of belief in God.

For one participant in particular, they felt very aware of the concerns within their church that caused others to leave, but this participant chose to stay in order to be part of the change they hoped to see. For another participant, there was a period where they did not want to go to church because of a lack of interest in God but continued because their family wanted to go together. The family of that participant then experienced some relational difficulties and sought help from the church, which proved to be successful. The church provided employment opportunities for the family, and this led to a general change in the family and the participant’s own interest in church. Other participants mostly cited their ‘relationship with God’ as a motivating factor for their attendance of church. For two participants who at times had no friends either at all or in their age bracket, they continued to attend because they believed that church was beneficial for their relationship with God. Another participant explained how this was the key aspect for them, despite having mostly positive experiences: “I think it’s those kinds of encounters, for me, encounters, with God, that kept me there. ... If you didn’t have that, it wouldn’t be something you’d stick around for. Because you’ve got friendship circles in like sports and stuff as well.” (Participant 15). Another participant also described how they found going to church made them feel closer to God through the sermons and participation in worship music, but also a key reason was their feeling of being supported by a core group of friends through a difficult break-up. The sense of having a core group of friends was a motivating aspect for many other participants, regardless of any other issues they experienced in church. Some experienced conflicts or other relationship issues in their church, but the strong sense of support and care they received from a core group of people – such as through their small group – motivated them to

continue being part of the church. Other participants reflected on visiting different churches, experiencing 'cliquey' behaviour or impressive services but shallow relationships, so they chose to either leave and find another church (ending up at their current Baptist church), or returning to their Baptist church. For another, their negative experiences of religious dogma were mostly with a university Christian group, however, the support and accepting nature of their Baptist church encouraged them to stay around. However, this participant was pulling back from church, because of their desire to find a romantic partner and the difficulty of finding one within church caused them to look outside the church. This idea was also expressed in the focus group, where it was discussed that individuals sometimes need to find a soulmate outside the church because of the contrast of pressure within churches to marry but the lack of potential partners within the church. They explained that this led to cognitive dissonance, because they were pulled by equally opposed forces: their attraction to the non-Christian individual, and the values and teaching of their church.

This was identified as a cause for leaving for one participant. They found a partner outside the church, reflecting that those within the church were not 'good men.' This led to the participant experiencing judgement from others for dating a non-Christian partner, leading them to leave the church. Another common theme among those with positive experiences was time: for one, this was because of studies causing Sunday to be the best time for work shifts, for another this was a matter of life balance. In terms of life balance, this participant felt that church was not contributing anything more than their own personal study was, and they found they had limited time to dedicate to their spouse except for a Sunday (as a side note, this issue of limited time was noted by staying participants, who commented on their reduced commitments to church activities due to their busy schedules). The participant who experienced limited time said, "I'd go back if I had the opportunity to. But it's not like, 'I will never go back because it's scarred me for life.' So, I would go back, I wouldn't say

left the church in the sense never going back, but left as in can't go at the moment.”

(Participant 2). For one of these participants, they also felt that the church used them – an issue noted in the focus group as well:

“I think also like, we can abuse them from a sense of just working them to the bone. ... without input into them. ... And therefore, they go, I'm so burnt out, I'm so tired, I've got nothing left in the tank, no one's invested in me, why am I doing this?” (Focus Group 2: Speaker 1).

A participant who stayed experienced this to a degree, saying “[they] were all like, ‘Serve! Serve! Serve! Until you can't serve anymore,’ and then [they are] like, ‘Well you're useless to us now.’” (Participant 5). The participant ended up leaving that particular church and coming to their current Baptist Church. This was the experience described by participant 10, who found this sense of being abused in service, plus feeling like their time was limited, plus finding the teaching to be unhelpful: “Just got to the point where the church message was nothing new. Nothing fresh, nothing revealing. It didn't necessarily challenge me or make me grow. ... you know by and large it was kind of watery” (Participant 10). He attempted to make changes, like other participants, but all suggestions given by him ‘fell on deaf ears.’ Participant 10 had some very positive relationships in church, but found that these were not contingent upon his attendance of church, so church was no longer seen as a priority.

Differences of belief were noted by multiple participants as their impetus for leaving. Firstly, this was experienced in being put into an ‘either-or’ scenario because of the church's unwillingness to accept other views (as referred to under Religious Dogma), meaning they had to either leave, or conform. In one situation, this ‘either-or’ scenario regarded a participant's relationship with a non-Christian partner. At first, Church was a safe place and a family for this participant but when she introduced her non-Christian partner to her Christian friends, their reactions to him made her feel like she had to choose between being welcome at

church or have her partner. In another situation, a participant earned a reputation as a ‘party boy’, even though he never ‘went partying’, and the stigma was unshakeable, so he was never taken seriously by others. Additionally, his own study of the bible made church sermons seem unhelpful: “So I would go, every now and then, but more and more just that stigma is attached stayed there and if I’m not gaining any real, you know, spiritual growth from it, didn’t see point of attending that church.” (Participant 9). Secondly, other participants experienced a change of belief in the existence of God, where one participant described how any arguments given were not sufficient because it did not *feel* true. Another change described was a participant who disagreed with the Baptist Church’s teaching on heaven and hell, the trinity and Sunday (as opposed to Saturday) worship.

### ***After Effects***

Some participants referred to the after effects of not attending church – both positive and negative. Some found no negative effect in not going to church, the main theme of this was where participants believed that their faith was not dependent or ‘situated’ in church. They enjoyed the friendships at church, but did not feel a sense of loss of community in not going because any significant connections they had were not dependent on their attendance of church. Some participants even experienced more growth in their spiritual life, because prior to their cessation of attendance they were active in individual research and reading of theological discussions. One participant in particular felt they grew more out of church than they did in church, and described their religious research as self-motivated, independent and active. Another participant, who left because they no longer believed in God, felt relief in not going despite an awareness that people might have judged her for not going. Other experiences of church felt an effect on their spirituality when they stopped attending church. There were descriptions of participants questioning their belief in God after leaving Church:

“I don’t know if I believe in God ... like I feel like there’s some sort of a something ... Some things I’ve felt I can’t explain it, but I don’t know it’s a god.” (Participant 6). Others felt less ‘connected to God’:

“I suppose it’s that you feel closer, or you feel more connected to Christ and God.

It’s, without it you’re a bit more -it’s not that I feel dead or anything like that, I still feel very much alive, but it does feel like there are parts of me that are not living.

Or not living to the full.” (Participant 3).

Such participants were apparently less confident in their faith after leaving the church.

Two participants reflected on how leaving church affected their mental health. For one, she was not able to attend church for a time due to living regionally and her family not having a car; she described how she experienced depression as a result of the social isolation. For the second, she experienced grief over the experiences and was less able to look after herself, noticing a change in her personality. Finally, another participant described the confrontation of changing their beliefs. They found it challenging to face the potential of losing a social network, loss of meaning, loss of purpose, and loss of identity. The participant was reluctant to redefine their identity and undermine something they had given so much emotional investment into; but once they came to terms with the potential change, the process became simple and easier.

### ***Changes in beliefs***

There was a commonality of changes in belief with age, spanning from beliefs changing from a more absolutist philosophy to more relativistic, to changes in views about the church, God, and about those who don’t attend church. A large majority of participants experienced a change in views from absolutism (which frequently was called a ‘black and white’ view of the world by participants) to relativism (labelled ‘shades of grey’ by

participants). Family upbringing was often cited as a cause of their absolutist views, and university or age as a cause of the change to a relativistic approach. Participants found that things they never questioned when they were younger began to make less sense, and so they stopped accepting everything the church taught as absolute truth (described by some as, God's words). One participant reflected on their family being non-religious and closed to any discussions of a religious nature, leading the participant to reconcile this with the church's teaching on heaven and hell. The incongruity of experience with the teaching of the church was frequently expressed, especially regarding the church's teaching on homosexuality, abortion, and marriage. Homosexuality was frequently described as a 'sin' and abortion as 'murder' under the absolutist view, but both as a 'right to choose' under the relativistic view. Marriage was referred to by one participant as an archaic ritual that is no longer necessary in modern society, and as something of a lesser priority by another: "I used to say, Oh I'm not gonna [sic] be with anyone before I'm married. And then, my Mum said she was glad I did, cos you don't again, I don't mean to offend anybody, ... but in my opinion, you don't know someone until you've lived with them." (Participant 6). For others, the change was not as far-reaching, whereby instead of changing their own view completely on a topic, they accepted it as something that is either unanswerable or different for everyone.

Views of church changed for many individuals, as is expected for those who left church, but also the case for those who stayed in Church. For two participants when they were younger church was about games, but later became something more important: "Well when I was younger it was a place to play, mostly. But as I grew up it became a place to learn about God and his way and meet with, meet and talk with people who think the same way." (Participant 13). The second participant who as a child thought of church as a place about games, stated that when he was younger there were times when he did not want to go – feeling no connection to the church. However, things started to change for him after asking

himself some poignant questions about his life: “So, it wasn’t until I grew up and started to think logically about the situation and think, ‘where is my life going? what is my place in the world?’ And it’s kinda [sic] those big questions that sort of draw you towards an answer. And in Jesus I found those answers.” (Participant 1). Afterwards, church became more significant to this participant because he attended to connect with God.

Other participants had a change in the opposite direction regarding their view of God, where as they experienced people of a different perspective, their belief in God was challenged. For Participant 7, he was curious to understand why some people did not believe in God or believed in other religions. Following such searching and research into apologetics, he could not resolve his doubts with what was being taught on a Sunday morning: “Like it didn’t even though they were compelling arguments, it still wasn’t enough. It just didn’t feel true I guess.” (Participant 7). This also seemed to be the case for Participant 12, who was taught by her family to believe in the existence of God but began to question this belief: “if there is a God, I really do question if he’s a loving God as we were taught. Just because of all the things happening in the world. If there is a God, I just don’t believe he is a loving God, anymore.” (Participant 12). This was coupled with a lack of experience of what she observed in others – hearing God’s voice, feeling changed and so forth. She also experienced a change in her views regarding outsiders. Those outside the church were seen as ‘obviously wrong’ and ‘bad people’, but her experience with non-Christians challenged this view: “when I met non-Christian people and saw that they’re actually not what I was told they were like, so I started to challenge some of the other things that I was told about, growing up.” (Participant 12). It is possible that her positive experience of outsiders undermined her trust in the teachings of the church, who were portrayed as those not to associate with.

Some participants noticed a change in their beliefs, and in their practices in moving internationally, some hailed from the United Kingdom, a number from South Africa. They

described the differences between their experiences of church in their birth country compared with Australia, reflecting that this could also be related to their age – they were quite young when they moved to Australia. This is an interesting topic of itself and was not explored in detail in interviews, however, some who were born in South African did go into some detail about the differences. One difference noted was the assumption differences: in South Africa participants experienced an assumption that any Caucasian person is a Christian, in contrast to Australia where it is assumed at first that any person is irreligious. They found that as a result, religion is not something normally talked about, meaning that they had to ‘come out’ as Christian. While they found that the lacking cultural expectation in Australia meant that they had to make up their own mind about whether they would continue to pursue Christianity, they also found they were more prayerful in South Africa because of the constant danger. There were also discussions regarding differences of denominational practices. One participant noted the difference in dress in her Dutch Reformed church in South Africa and her Baptist Church in Australia: “[in the Dutch reformed church] you either had a dress on or you had a skirt on and covered up and this girl walks past with like shoe-string tops and my Mum was like, “Oh my word!” She nearly freaked.” (Participant 5). The Dutch Reformed church was more formal than her current church, administering exams to children before they were allowed to partake in communion, a separated relationship with the Minister, and only certain individuals were allowed to perform particular duties. Participants who came from South Africa did appear to have minor changes in beliefs regarding appropriate behaviour and dress in church.

This chapter has demonstrated that participants had five themes relevant to their experiences of church. Concepts of spirituality and religion (including the supernatural) were shown to be diverse, and experiences of church were frequently dogmatic in contrast to experiences of small groups. Participants’ decisions to leave or stay were at times paradoxical

and contradictory, and there was diversity of effects after leaving the church or staying in church. Participants also found that their beliefs had changed, either influenced by the church or by other influences, but a common thread was found of a move to more relativistic beliefs. The next chapter will discuss in detail some of these findings, and the interconnectedness of the themes, and how these themes are relevant to youth ministry practice.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This thesis began by asking questions about young people and the church. It was questioned why it is that some young people leave the church, why some stay, what meaning church brings, what it's like to leave, what it's like to stay. Through the process of reviewing literature, another question arose of whether there would be a relationship between the church and spirituality. This study has attempted to answer these questions, within the limitations of the methodology and sampling. This has been achieved through discussions of paradoxical behaviours, spirituality, small groups, and dogma. The study also confirmed some of what others had asserted in the literature and this will only be briefly mentioned, while themes that extend the existing discussion will be explored further.

Relationships were referred to frequently in literature as a predictor of staying or going, and participants in this study frequently described relationship dynamics that gave a sense of belonging which encouraged them to stay, or a lack of this sense which motivated them to leave. These relationships also included family influences, and the familiarity with the leadership: those who were more relational were valued more highly, those that were more authoritative were associated with negative experiences. Relevant and helpful sermons were important to participants in this study, as was the case in the literature. Deconversion narratives (discussed solely by Fazzino, 2014, defined in Chapter 1) were very similar to the narratives of participants in this study who had deconverted from Christianity, and experienced a process of identity reformation, grief, and coming to terms with the change. The manner in which religion was defined and described in the literature is confirmed by the findings of this study: rigid and legalistic, strict, and deficient in spiritual vitality. However, some participants in this study had positive descriptions of religion, citing the benefits of a common belief system, and the provision of guidance and community. Dogma was frequently described by the literature as a result of the strict nature of religion, which meant young

people felt they had no freedom to affect the running of the Church, express doubts or questions and so forth. Participants in this study expressed the same sort of experiences, but added that their churches gave more attention to and were more forceful about some issues, in particular those behaviours which are more overt and politically charged as opposed to those which are subtle and relational (such as arrogance, gossip, judging etc). It was expressed that churches were more concerned with self-propagation over caring for an individual's needs. By contrast, spirituality was perceived as something more authentic by participants, which aligns with the literature describing spirituality as more normalised than religion. While spirituality was defined as something unique to each individual in the literature, and described differently by participants in this study, themes were common to both. Transcendence, guidance, purpose, interpreting existence, acting in accordance with the awareness of 'something' greater, strength to face difficulty, were such themes. The positive mental health outcomes of spirituality were corroborated by this study, a topic regarding which the literature is divided. It is significant that all these themes mentioned were confirmed by this study, because many of the studies that asserted these ideas in literature utilised poor research methods, lacked research basis for their claims, or did not present their methods (as discussed in Chapter 2). This study has shown that their results were affirmed despite methodological issues. I will now turn my attention to the themes which added to knowledge of experiences of church, religion and spirituality.

### ***Paradoxical behaviours***

It was found that although there were many reasons for young people leaving the church – such as those mentioned above – there were occasions where some stayed despite negative experiences (such as negative relational experiences) and some ceased attending church despite positive experiences (such as positive relational experiences). This revealed

that there was more to their decision to leave or to stay than relationships alone. As stated in the chapter 4, some who had good experiences in the church could not find a suitable romantic partner within the church, so they searched outside the church which lead to receiving some criticism or non-verbal judgement for their decision. Such judgement was linked with their decision to leave. For others, it was a combination of not having the time to attend church, finding that the church was not contributing anything spiritually, suggestions falling on deaf ears, and having more positive, spiritually enriching, relationships outside the church through small groups. For such participants, the fact that the church was not challenging them spiritually, that they had enriching relationships outside the church, meant that it was not justifiable to give their limited time to the church. For others, earning a 'bad' reputation that was unshakeable was an impetus for leaving, despite having many positive relationships at the church. For another still, there were positive relationships at the church, but they felt the need to leave because they had ceased to believe in God.

These factors all show links to other themes described in chapter 4. The first is the obvious link with religious dogma. The issue of religious dogma referred to the ways in which the church either required strict adherence to a moral code or enforced absolutist views that participants did not agree with. Dogma was one of the biggest issues mentioned by participants, causing them to feel that if they wanted to feel welcome in their church, they had to adopt the views of the church - If they did not adopt the views, they felt unwelcome. Frequently this was experienced through sermons, disapproving looks, or their opinions being 'shut down' and not considered in discussions. Many participants relayed that when they were younger, they agreed with the teaching of the church on such issues, but as they came into contact with people of different views (for example, through university, casual work) their beliefs changed to a more relativistic view. The interesting aspect is that the church was only described to be dogmatic with regard to topics that were political or overt, such as

premarital sex, homosexuality, gender roles, abortion, alcohol. Participants felt that the church ignored other issues in the church, such as the way people in the church treated each other. Participants appeared to have no problem with the church being strict with regard to core doctrinal teaching (such as salvation, who God is, the afterlife, and so forth), but had issue when the church had absolutist views regarding political discussions. One could view this from multiple angles: it could be concluded that church discourse was dogmatic only in areas which had political and obvious implications; it could be concluded that participants did not mind if the church was dogmatic about core tenets of faith, but they did mind if the church was dogmatic about political issues (such as same-sex marriage, gender equality, abortion etc.); or it could be determined that participants viewed the church as dogmatic when the church presented a view that was different to their own and the vast majority. Perhaps it was a combination of all three, however, upon reviewing the data, it was clear that participants were not only concerned with the view of the church, but on how views were presented and how discussion of other points of view were not welcome. The issue appears less to be the standing of the church, and more upon how the standing was presented and whether others were welcome to hold differing views.

The second link, less obviously, was with that of small groups. Many participants who had left the church but continued to identify as a Christian also continued to attend a small group after leaving the church. These participants described small groups in opposite terms to their church, describing how there was freedom for difference of opinion, freedom to discuss controversial views, and still a feeling of belonging despite difference. They described that they had significant spiritual enrichment through their small groups, and relationships through the small group that were significant enough to not depend on attendance of church. Even if they did not see these friends at church, they knew they would still see them outside of church. Hence, even if there were positive relationships in the

church, the relationships experienced through small groups were deemed by participants as more significant and more impactful. Therefore, when issues of dogma and life balance occurred, church was not seen as necessary. More will be discussed on small groups below.

The other side to paradoxical behaviours is when participants stayed despite negative experiences. The majority of the negative experiences were when people who chose to stay had experiences of religious dogma, conflict, shallow relationships, social isolation. For some of these, they had never experienced the negativity personally, but had observed others experience it – and were nonetheless affected by the observation. It was quite evident that for many of those who stayed despite negative experiences, that their reasoning was linked to spirituality. Frequently these participants described that they remained in church because they believed it was good for their spiritual relationship with God to be there, or because they had experiences of the supernatural in church. Evidently, these things were deemed as a higher priority than positive human interactions. Other reasons for staying included the desire to change the way things are. Such participants observed the way young people were not catered to in church services, and the way the church spoke about certain issues, and felt a desire to make an impact. They desired to help young people and the marginalised to feel welcome in church, and potentially affect the positioning of the leadership on such individuals. This desire could be described as transcendence – the participants remained in order to participate in a higher purpose. Alternatively, some participants stayed in church because they had a core group of friends through their small group that gave them a self-described sense of belonging. It seemed that issues in relationships could happen with other individuals, but their core friendships remained positive and strong, so they stayed.

Therefore, in answer to why young people stay and why young people leave, the answer is these young people had contradictory experiences and exhibited paradoxical behaviours. This is the only study I am aware of which presents a discussion of paradoxical

behaviours. Other studies commented on negatives and positives of church, and reasons for leaving *or* reasons for staying; none have ever described that sometimes people act in ways that are unexpected. It would be expected that if there are positive relationships and a sense of belonging, people will stay; and if there are negative relational experiences, people will leave. However, it has become apparent from this study that individuals can have negative experiences but still a reason to stay: participating in church was beneficial to their spirituality, or the few positive relationships were significant enough to outweigh the many negative relationships. This study has shown that individuals can have positive experiences, but still reasons to leave: the church was not open to their perspective, they had limited time, or they found that the church was stifling to their spirituality. It would be expected then, that those who left the church all found greater freedom to express their spirituality, however, this was not the case for all concerned participants. The relationship between church and spirituality did appear to be different between stayers and goers, however, it was also different among stayers and among goers. The comparison of spirituality will be discussed below; however, it is an already evident implication for churches that dogma tends to stifle spirituality.

## ***Spirituality***

There has already been substantial discussion in literature regarding spirituality's benefits to mental health, and to coping with life and uncertainty (refer to chapter 2). However, no research has been conducted that compares spirituality between people who attend church and those who do not. While the relationship between church and spirituality was not specifically asked of participants, a comparison of participant's experiences of church and their descriptions of spirituality revealed some understanding of the link between church and its' effect on spirituality. This revealed more in answering what church was like

for participants.

There were marked differences in the definitions, descriptions and experiences of spirituality between those who stayed in church and those who left. However, there were also differences between participants in each group – agreeing with the assertions of literature that spirituality is unique to each individual. Perhaps the most common descriptions associated with spirituality amongst those who stayed in church were related to God and to transcendence. Staying participants frequently used the term ‘relationship with God’ to describe their spirituality, referring to either how close they *felt* to God, how strong their faith was in God. Transcendence is a term that was chosen to summarise various phrases participants used to describe a sense of a ‘bigger picture’, a greater purpose, the grand scheme of things, one’s life contributing to a specific God-given purpose, and specific circumstances being part of an orchestrated plan. Participants described this ‘greater’ purpose (picture or plan) as being controlled by God. Many staying participants felt that their sense of spirituality was strengthened by being among like-minded individuals, listening to the ‘voice of God’, or by practices which could be deemed as religious not spiritual – prayer, Bible reading, and attending church. There was a consensus that a person’s spirituality was supposed to affect their morality, for some they only referred to internal changes (attitudes and thoughts), others referred to being guided or making better decisions because of spirituality, having ‘an impact’ on others, or, being changed passively *by* the spiritual forces (such as how one participant describe it, the ‘moving of the Holy Spirit’). Additionally, descriptions of being aware of spiritual beings was frequently mentioned, such as God, demons, angels etc. and related is that some described experiences of the voice of God, feeling something physically from something not material, a ‘sense’ of the presence of spiritual beings or the prayers of others, landing upon Bible verses which were relevant to a

situation, someone who does not know their situation saying something which felt relevant, or, an internal feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction.

Participants who stayed in church seemed to mostly describe church as beneficial to their spirituality. Many described how their 'faith' was strengthened by being among others of a similar mindset, and their sense of closeness to God. For these participants, sermons were helpful in the same sense, as were participating in worship songs. Being among others who shared the same core belief was beneficial since this brought opportunities for sharing ideas and discussing beliefs, refocussing their purpose for the week to come, and having their beliefs challenged. The benefit of sermons was seen as receiving guidance, 'conviction' from God, building a foundation for their spirituality and receiving new perspective. Worship songs were often included as being important to their spirituality, as participants had 'encounters with God' through worship music, in line with assertions of Jennings (2008). One participant reflected on how their time away from church helped them to realise that they felt 'more alive' when in church and among other Christians, when asked to explain this statement, they referred to their relationship with God. By contrast, two staying participants reflected on the times when there was a lack of benefit in going to church. For one, they continued to attend out of familial obligation because the church was focused more on reaching non-churched – neglecting those within the church. This participant in particular eventually experienced spiritual enrichment in another church, which had a more charismatic flavour to its times of worship. The second participant felt that the church was stifling the spiritual 'growth' of young people (themselves included) because of the focus on principles over people, and hence, forcing their views on people. This participant made the decision to remain in church to change the experiences for others – a spirituality in itself. Consequently, this participant had a strong sense of spirituality after this decision, because as described earlier, having an impact was a spiritual act.

Those who left the church have some similarities and differences with the above descriptions of spirituality; however, it is important to note that the group of leavers exhibited greater diversity than those of the stayer group. There were individuals who deconverted (ceasing to believe, as defined in Chapter 1) and then left the church, one who had left a Baptist church for a different denomination, some who had left the church but continued to identify as a Christian, and some whose beliefs about God had changed after leaving church (such as on issues of heaven and hell, homosexuality etc., as discussed in Chapter 4). It is important to take this into account when comparing the similarities and differences. In terms of similarities for those who left but believe compared with those who stayed, there were also descriptions of a relationship with God, however, the term 'faith in God' was usually preferred. Believing leavers also found that spirituality encompassed guidance, empowered them in making perceived positive and moral decisions, gave them a sense of purpose and sense of right and wrong, a sense of peace and in place, and confidence in the face of a variety of situations. Leavers also expressed their spirituality similarly, through prayer, Bible reading, worship music, and experienced the supernatural in physical or emotional feelings, or through the description of the voice of God. This group referred to concepts of spirituality that stayers did not mention. Authenticity was the most notable, in salience against the responses of stayers, and in frequency among results. As frequently as stayers referred to God in their descriptions of spirituality, believing leavers referred to authenticity. It was deemed by some of these participants that religion was the antithesis to spirituality in terms of authenticity: religion was described as pretending to be spiritual, whereas spiritual was simply being spiritual. For some participants, spirituality resulted in seeking to be a more authentic person, and for others, it resulted in pursuing their spirituality independently. This authenticity was described as listening to the inner voice in making value judgements, not only the teachings of religious leaders. As a result, some emphasised the uniqueness of

spirituality – that each person’s experiences are unique, their supernatural experiences are unique, their beliefs are unique, and each person is on a unique ‘journey’. In describing supernatural experiences, two participants described experiences as referred to above, however, many in the leaving but believing category were suspicious or sceptical over others’ experiences of the supernatural without expanding on their perception of the event, only moral reasons for their suspicion.

Participants who had left the church and deconverted, mostly did not believe in God specifically. There were statements of belief or wondering if there is ‘Something’, but it was stated that it is not a god that they are thinking of. One expressed that they believed that there are spiritual beings, but mostly ‘evil beings’ who are the explanation for bad events in the world. For two-thirds of young people who deconverted, they said they did not find the concept of spirituality relatable. They had no experiences of the spiritual, and for some this was despite many efforts to pursue spiritual experiences. Spirituality for the deconverted, then, was also described as related to the physical world: being part of an enormous universe that works together, meditation, and following through on their self-determined sense of purpose in life. On the whole, all of the deconverted leavers felt that spirituality was not a priority in their life at the time of their interview, something they might think about later.

For those who left the church, church was obviously unhelpful to them spiritually. Participants described their sense of spirituality (or, faith as others articulated) as being independent to the church, because their own spiritual searching (including biblical and theological study) was more fulfilling than what they received from their church. They found that when they left the church, their spirituality seemed to take on a new life, because they had more time for pursuing spiritual growth individually. Uninspiring and non-challenging messages, religious dogma, prejudice to alternate opinions, and lack of dialogue were aspects of churches blamed for this. Some participants were stigmatised, and this stigma prevented

spiritual enrichment through the church. It was also felt that churches were not genuine: they spoke at length about values that were not actioned, such caring for the poor and marginalised. Others felt that they could not relate to the teaching of the church, thinking it archaic and inapplicable to their lives. Some participants also found that their small group was the antonym of church – they felt challenged, they could debate and discuss, they were not judged for an alternate opinion, and they were free to dialogue – and so they experienced spiritual growth in their small groups. There is a clear link here between religious dogma, and spirituality: it seems that dogma stifled spiritual growth for these participants. For one participant, their belief in God had changed since they left the church – but this was not given a value judgement by the participant whether such belief change was positive or negative. From the perspective of Christian spirituality, this would be described as a trough in spirituality, however, from the perspective of the participant it was described more as matter of fact, and how they feared that they could not return to church because they would be judged for no longer believing – rather than being journeyed with. For another participant, they believed church was imperative to their spirituality; however, this participant is somewhat an exception because they left a Baptist church for another denomination because of differences of beliefs.

Evidently there were marked differences between stayers and leavers; stayers mostly found their spirituality was centred on God and their relationship to God, whereas leavers were mostly focussed on authenticity in their spirituality. It is quite possible that for the leavers who remained believers found their spirituality was also centred on God, however, this was not made explicit. For the deconverted leavers, spirituality was mostly a sense of fulfilling their self-determined purpose. For those who remained in a Baptist church, church was mostly important to their spirituality, and, for those who left church was mostly unimportant to their spirituality. There were a few on both sides who had opposite opinions –

those who stayed but found church not to be the key to their spirituality, and those who left but found that their spirituality had waned without church. It was not *definitively* clear whether church was perceived as beneficial, harmful, or neutral to the individual's spirituality. However, it was found which aspects of church are beneficial, and which aspects are harmful. Churches which focused too heavily on a standard of behaviour, were 'black and white' in teachings about political and overt issues, and gave no freedom for discussion of contentious issues, appear to be harmful to the individual's spiritual growth. Sermons which were challenging and thought-provoking, vibrant worship, and acknowledgement of, and openness to, discussion of 'grey areas' were aspects that promoted the growth of the individual's spirituality. This implies that churches have been, to some extent, too focussed on outward behaviour and not focussed enough on the journey of spirituality.

### ***Small groups***

Small groups as a theme is highly contrasted with descriptions of churches. While churches were characterised by shallow sermons or shallow relationships, small groups were defined by depth. Small groups gave participants the freedom to participate in debate, discussion, disagreement – such things were deemed by many participants as impossible in their church. Whereas participants felt judged in church for a difference of opinion, or for not following a behavioural norm, or where they noticed others being judged in such a setting, they felt acceptance in small groups – and noticed others being readily accepted in small groups. Perspectives from conservative to liberal were welcomed in such settings, as well as doubts, difficult questions, and personal difficulty. Participants felt a strong sense of belonging, especially as they received support both in having the freedom to express their perspectives, but also through their personal difficulty – other members of the small group would follow up on how their difficulty had progressed and would offer to pray for them.

Being prayed for seemed to be a significant way that participants felt supported and cared for. There was obviously a stark contrast between descriptions of religious dogma and small groups.

As stated earlier, religious dogma seemed to stifle spirituality, whereas small groups seemed to – even for those who had left the church – vitalise spirituality. Participants who described small groups as beneficial to their spiritual growth explained that this was a direct result of being able to study religious texts, discuss different and opposing views regarding the text, disagree, and argue. It was clear that when churches avoided topics, or did not give freedom to express their views, participants would become further entrenched in their views. However, when participants were able to debate and discuss different perspectives, they found their views sometimes was changed by the discussion, or sometimes was confirmed by the discussion. The method (structure) within churches is to teach only one point of view as if it is the only perspective, and expect conformity to that view – however, the results of this study show that for many people such methods were grating, and dialogical discussion was far more effective. Churches seemed to be lacking in providing the opportunity for such dialogue – church was frequently a monologue. Whether this was viewed from the motives of the church, or from the experiences of those who leave – the results were negative: the church’s methods do not always encourage spiritual growth, or from the view of those who leave church, the church’s methods are stifling, grating, and oppressive. The method, on the other hand, of small groups was quite opposite, and had the opposite effect as well. This was especially evident through those who left the church but continued participating in small groups.

The findings regarding small groups are consistent with the literature. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011), Fazzino (2014), and Loewen (2015) all concluded that shallowness, being numbers focussed, and dogma had a negative effect on church goers, and churches lacked

any nurturing of spiritual growth for congregants. Kinnaman and Hawkins in particular postulated that churches should focus more on depth than on numbers, implying that large numbers of attendees results in the opposite of depth. However, the authors did not suggest how this could be achieved. I would argue that small groups is the fulfilment of this need, since (according to participants) anyone was welcome and everyone came away from the small group feeling encouraged or inspired in some way – including those who considered themselves agnostic. It appears that small groups is the answer to the need for depth, and also the answer to the problem of dogma. The implication is that the size of churches is an important factor: when there are too many numbers, it is impossible for there to be significantly deep relationships and conversations. It is quite possible that the larger churches (where not everyone can be known to one another) cannot effectively facilitate depth without connecting every single participant into a small group. Even if they were able to do so, church goers might still perceive church as dogmatic, stifling, and shallow, and small groups as nurturing and deep. Some churches (as discussed by Kinnaman and Hawkins) are striving to bring in a great number of young people into their church through impressive concert-style services or other methods; however, according to both participants in this study and in Kinnaman and Hawkins' study, this is ineffective. While many young people might attend, their attendance would be transient, and the program would not facilitate any spiritual growth. There needs to be a solution for churches to follow that would enable depth and disable dogma – I argue that the solution is for churches to be less focussed on reaching a high number of attendees, and more focussed on facilitating depth. This study shows that one such effective method was through small groups. It was evident through the results of this study, that what these participants were longing for, and perhaps other young people, is a personal ministry where they felt included, valued, and a sense of belonging. Participants in

this study experienced this to a high extent through their small group, or through one-to-one informal mentoring.

One aspect to keep in mind in this discussion is to note that a phenomenological study is by no means generalisable. The fact that there were no negative experiences of small groups could potentially be the result of the small scale of this study and be a unique phenomenon. Other individuals who were not participants in this study might have negative experiences of the same or different small groups, and this would certainly change the results of the study if it were the case. It would be naively optimistic to assume that because all experiences of small groups in this study were positive, that it means all experiences of all small groups are always experienced positively. However, given the results of the literature pointing to the need for depth, the need to be free from dogma, and the need for low numbers, this suggests that the results of this study could well be true elsewhere as well.

### ***Implications for youth ministry***

This discussion of how church has been experienced, how young adults in Perth experience and describe religion and spirituality has implications for theology, and the facilitation of church services, however, this is beyond the scope of this study. This discussion will mainly focus on how this study has implications for work among young people, in particular to what I have defined as youth ministry (see Chapter 1 for definition explanations), and a brief statement of potential implications for youth work.

The context of this study found three main issues not explored in detail in other literature: paradoxical behaviours, the relationship between church and spirituality, and the benefit of small groups. It was found that even when young people had positive relationships they sometimes still left the church because of experiencing religious absolutism – where the young person's doubts, opinions, questions, contributions weren't welcome, where young

people who did not follow the strict moral code were unforgivingly stigmatised, and where the church held absolutist views and were outspoken on political and obvious issues but not on subtle interpersonal issues. Some young people also felt that church was stifling to their spirituality because of the religious absolutism and lack of dialogue, as well as sermons that were not thought-provoking. Within such issues, there were implications for why young people leave the church, and why young people stay in church. The reasons for leaving reveal implications for potential change that could be made to youth ministries, and I would argue that adopting (more accurately, adapting) a youth work model could be beneficial. Aspects of a youth work model that could answer these issues include the position of the young person, empowerment, and the youth leader's self-awareness.

Firstly, the position of the young person is an important aspect in need of change. As stated in Chapter 1, typically in youth ministries the young person is not in control of the service they receive or the conversation (especially if the "conversation" is actually a sermon from the Pastor). This could be one reason for the experiences of religious absolutism: the young person does not have control over the topics or the direction of the conversation, and the conversation is not often a dialogue. Perhaps this is why many young people felt that they could not express doubts, questions, opinions, or feel that their contributions were valid. While some youth ministries might follow a relational practice similar to that of youth work (YACWA, 2014, Cooper, 2018), this relationship appears to be one which is highly directed by the Pastor or youth leaders. Within youth work contexts (as discussed in Chapter 1), the young person is considered the 'primary client' – meaning that the needs (as identified by the young person) and interests of the young person are the first priority (YACWA, 2014, Australian Youth Affairs Council, 2013, as cited in Cooper, 2018). Typically, then, the young person is the director of the service they receive, according to what they need (Green, 2008, Bessant, Sercombe and Watts, 1998 as cited in Cooper, 2018). For some youth ministries, it

might be deemed that the spiritual growth of the young person is the highest priority – exemplified by one participant who described their church as disinterested in any activity that didn't directly teach the “gospel”. This, however, does not place the young person as the primary client, it places the activity of propagation of Christianity as the primary ‘client.’ It also means that the young person is treated like they are not capable of assessing their own needs. Adopting a model of youth work would mean that youth ministries treat the young person as the primary client, who is capable of assessing what their greatest needs are, and who then directs what they receive from the youth ministry. The young person can then if they wish express and explore doubts, ask difficult questions, and explore what they see as their greatest needs rather than what the church might wish to impose.

Secondly, the priority within youth work settings of giving consideration to the young person's holistic contexts and needs could help resolve some of the issues of religious absolutism. Youth workers take into account the young person's social, cultural, familial, religious, and spiritual contexts (Green, 2008, Cooper, 2018, YACWA, 2014). The experiences of participants of this study reveal that their churches were too narrow in their prioritisation of the young person's needs. It was evident that churches were absolute about issues which were political and overt, imposing with regard to the church's teaching, and closed to other opinions. Youth ministries could adopt a model that gives consideration to the young person's holistic context; this might come in the form of dialogue: asking young people about their contexts and experiences could allow for a dialogical discussion of different points of view regarding spiritual and religious perspectives. Many participants in this study (both stayers and goers) felt that their life experiences did not match up with the teachings of the church. If youth ministries were more aware of the contexts of their young people before offering any ‘teaching’ or religious/spiritual guidance, and took these into

account when offering guidance, then the young person might experience less religious absolutism.

Thirdly, one of the major themes common across literature and within the outcomes of this study, is the implication of relationships to a person's attendance of church. Within this study, it was found that even if a person has some positive relationship experiences, they might still leave the church if they feel judged, stigmatised, or if they feel their contributions are unwelcome. According to Cooper (2018) and YACWA (2014), attending to the social connections of young people is an important aspect of youth work, as referred to above. It seems within this study that churches were often ignorant, or, disinterested in the relational implications of ministry structuration or the relational contexts of the young people in attendance. It would be advisable that youth ministries attend to maintaining a sense of belonging for all young people that attend, by observing the way that each young person relates to other young people in the ministry, and considering the implications for a sense of belonging for each young person when teaching doctrine. This additionally includes youth work facets of self-awareness, equality, diversity and anti-oppressive practice (YACWA, 2014, Bright, 2015, as cited in Bright, Thompson, Hart and Hayden, 2018, p. 197). Youth ministries could benefit from leaders respecting diverse young people whose values and interests might contradict those of the church, promoting equality for all young people regardless of their beliefs, sexuality, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status etc., and constantly self-reflecting in order to ensure their actions and words are inclusive and anti-oppressive. Such an inclusive, anti-oppressive practice might prevent experiences of religious absolutism.

Fourthly, young people felt stifled in their spirituality by the church's strict boundaries on what participants in this study referred to as the 'grey areas'. The church taught as though these issues were easily morally categorizable, however, the young person's

experience was that the right and wrong of a situation was contextual and therefore different for each situation. Adopting an empowerment model of youth work into youth ministry could help to overcome this issue. Currently, youth ministries reflect more of a ‘treatment’ model described by Cooper (2018), where the young person is seen as deficient and in need of correction. An empowerment model does not see the young person as deficient, but society as in need of change (Cooper, 2018). Hence, an empowerment model in a youth ministry context might mean that the focus is on empowering the young person to make up their own mind on issues. This is not necessarily empowerment in a traditional youth work sense, but in a sense of empowering the young person to find answers rather than trying to get the young person to accept the church’s teachings.

The positive aspects that were described by participants in this study also reveal the implications for what youth ministries could adopt, tap into, or continue doing. Participants in this study were quite clear on the priority of spirituality in their engagement with church. For some, church was a place that was insufficient in growing their spirituality because of ‘shallow’ interactions and teachings, and so they left the church. For others, they found church to strengthen their spirituality – either through spiritual encounters, or through teaching and interactions – so they stayed. Participants apparently wanted to discuss their doubts, questions, and debate different opinions on spiritual issues, so clearly spiritual and moral issues were seen as important. Based on this data, it is clear that youth ministries should not abandon spirituality when adaptating a youth work model to youth ministry. Bright et al. (2018) claimed that, “All youth work is premised upon, and concerned in the most ethical sense with, espoused processes of conversion – of empowering and enabling young people’s potential transformation from one state of learning and being to another.” (p. 198) going on to claim that this is only indoctrination when the young person is not given the freedom to choose.

There is clearly going to be a tension in both adaptively incorporating a youth work model and maintaining religious conversions or religious instruction as a value of the church. There could be a wide spectrum in this tension, from youth ministries which are only interested in religious conversions and doctrinal conformity to youth ministries which do not discuss anything spiritual or religious in order to avoid any oppression caused by divided opinions. Neither case seems to be what the participants in this study were hoping for, and I believe a middle ground can be found. I recommend that this middle ground would consist of a dialogue in consultation with the young person: *1. Making the young person the primary client means that they lead the conversation and they define what their needs are.* The young person could be offered religious or spiritual advice, opportunities to engage in topical religious or spiritual discussion, and Bible studies – but if the young person doesn't feel that these meet their need other activity options would be made available at the youth ministry. In other words, they are not forced into conversations which they do not want to be part of. *2. Give consideration to the contexts of the young person's life.* The first priority upon a young person accessing the youth ministry would be to find out about their contexts – social, familial, and cultural. The youth leaders would firstly aim to get to know the young person's past experiences (including of church and other religions/spiritualities), not firstly aim to get the young person converted. The youth ministry would aim to relationally know the young person and work to understand their needs. Through these conversations an interest in spiritual issues might arise, however, this discussion should only be followed through if the young person is interested. *3. Give attention to the social connections in the youth ministry.* Youth leaders could confidentially compile a list of the young people that attend the youth ministry, with details of each young person's context (as per the previous point), religious and spiritual views (to respect their diversity), and who the young person is friends with in the youth ministry. In order to respect the diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs of the

young person, youth leaders could again, offer discussions of religious and other views but in a way that the young person does not feel forced to assimilate to the church's teaching. 4. *Empower young people to make up their own minds.* Youth ministries could present the teaching of the church in a manner that states it as 'one option' and offer opportunity for young people to express their thoughts without judgement or imposition. Both the leaders and the young people would be encouraged to explore why they believe what they do, rather than only the case for the church's teaching be presented. Such a discussion would best occur within small group scenarios. Participants expressed that small groups were the best way to facilitate this depth of discussion that they longed for. Therefore, spirituality and even religious conversions, could still be maintained as a high priority even when working with adopted aspects of youth work practice – by ensuring this is not forceful, absolutist, or treated as the only priority, and the ministry is defined by dialogue and multiple options rather than monologue.

Some participants stayed in the church to express the transcendence aspect of their spirituality; even though they had issue with many aspects of the church. For them it was a place where they felt they could make an impact on others and be part of something greater than themselves. Youth ministries could use this potential – giving young people opportunities to have an impact on others and be part of something greater than themselves. For example, youth ministries could provide opportunities for participation in social justice programs and campaigns, or something simple such as services for the community, or even simpler something such as encouraging each young person to find another young person in the youth ministry that they aim to connect with and care for.

### ***Implications for youth work***

While this study was not conducted in a youth work context, there is the implication that this study shows the importance of spirituality to some young people. Authors such as Green (2006, 2008) argue for the inclusion of spiritual perspectives in youth work settings, especially in an open and exploratory way. While this study cannot comment on such an argument, it does reveal that some young people are keen to explore spirituality and religious perspectives. The study also reveals that some young people feel that churches are not the place for them to be able to explore their spirituality, because their views did not fit with the mainstream views of the church they attended. This is perhaps where youth work could be of benefit – providing a safe space for young people to explore their spiritual views without judgement or without feeling that they have to fit with a predetermined doctrinal teaching. The study also reveals that there are a number of young people who might be in need of support after leaving the church, since some experience isolation, grief, and mental health issues in proximity to their leaving of the church. Perhaps youth work services could provide a service to such young people. I recommend that youth work services include spiritual and religious supports as potential options (among others) when providing informal education – for example, in areas of addiction, identity, crisis support and so forth. I recommend that youth workers enable young people to explore spirituality throughout discussions, such as asking the young person if the issue they are bringing up has any spiritual or religious implications for them. Youth workers should be open to both helping the young person explore their spiritual beliefs, and open to not discussing spirituality and religion.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

This study faced some limitations, especially in the form of recruitment. This study was conducted in Perth, a small city of less than 10% of the Australian population and was always intended to be a small-scale phenomenological study. Phenomenology has its limitations as a discipline, since it is not designed to generate theory. There is a possibility that despite best attempts my voluntary and paid positions (past and present), participant knowledge of my belief in Christianity, or perceptions of me could have changed whether young people were willing to participate in the study or changed what they were willing to share. It is possible that the nature of this discussion deterred some from being interviewed – possibly it was too emotionally confronting to discuss. The method of recruitment failed to reach 15 – 18-year old’s who had been initially identified as an unresearched group. The gap of participants in this age group is significant, meaning that the recruitment method of requesting Perth North Metro Chaplains to ask any in their social and professional network was ineffective. The research is limited in that, as mentioned in Chapter 3, only one church was observed as opposed to the planned two, and the focus group was non-representative of the samples, limiting the possibility of comparisons and fact-checking. This study is also limited in not being able to assess whether claims of cultural shifts in Europe and America are occurring in Australia; this study is not exhaustive enough to be able to substantiate such assertions. It is also an important gap to note that in this study, no participant disclosed identification with a minority group, such as LGBTQI+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, refugee Australians and so forth. Without these perspectives, there is still a gap in the essence of experience of spirituality, religion, and Baptist churches. It is interesting to note that no participant mentioned anything of the impact of social and mass media, nor on public convictions of sexual abuse committed by members of clergy. This is not to say that no participant’s decisions or experiences were *not* impacted by such events and aspects, but

the lack of any discussion of such topics could reflect the small sample size. The study is also limited by the breadth of the phenomenon which resulted in many different perspectives – a discovery which came apparent after data analysis. The interviews elicited many different discussions that all could have been a phenomenology in their own right, such as spirituality and the church, small groups, religiosity, supernatural experiences, prayer and so forth. This study could not enter into each theme with enough depth because of the breadth of the study.

With these limitations in mind, some suggestions for change are necessary. Further studies are needed on specific phenomena, such as an in-depth phenomenological study of spirituality, supernatural experiences, and how church, small groups, or other religious activities have an influence on an individual's sense of spirituality. Future studies could compare the experiences of Baptist churches and another denomination – understanding the differences and the similarities of what causes people to stay and what causes people to leave. However, this could be too broad perhaps for a phenomenological study, a different methodology would be necessary for this larger-scale picture of experiences of the church. Alternatively, a study that could focus purely on those aged 15 – 18 could be beneficial to the field of knowledge, since this age group is largely unresearched regarding church and spirituality. In order to reach this group, it might be necessary to recruit through high schools, youth centres, or other methods of recruitment.

This study has contributed new knowledge to the field of young people's experiences of Baptist churches. In particular, this study has shown that young people's experiences of the supernatural are diverse; some church-attending and non-church-attending young people have had no supernatural experiences and described supernatural experiences of others with scepticism; some have experiences a physical feeling from a supernatural event; and others experience a 'sense' of a spiritual presence. This study also revealed the not-yet-explored

aspect of the relationship between spirituality and the Baptist church – contributing to knowledge that each person’s understanding, definition, and experience of the spiritual was diverse across both groups of young people. However, a commonality was found: those who attended church found that church was relevant to their spirituality either through opportunities for participation in the transcendent or through aspects of a worship service that they experienced as spiritual. Those that didn’t attend church mostly found church to not facilitate enough depth to be of any spiritual use, or, found the church to be stifling to their spirituality. This study also contributed new knowledge with regard to paradoxical behaviours of young people with regard to church attendance. No other literature had documented the aspect that some young people stayed in church despite negative experiences, nor the aspect that some young people left the church despite positive experiences. It was found that religious absolutism or changes in beliefs were the impetus for the latter, and spiritual experiences and transcendence were the motivators for the former. Such a discussion reveals that positive relationship experiences, while important, are not the sole motivating factor for church attendance or non-attendance, which is a significant contribution to the literature discussion on spirituality and young people, as well as young people and the church. Finally the study contributes the knowledge of the positive contributions of small groups, an aspect that had not been mentioned in any of the literature found. While literature had described the need for depth, none had mentioned small groups. This study has shown that small groups are a significant method of facilitating depth, belonging, and spiritual growth.

Such contributions to knowledge have clear implications for working among young people in a church-based context (youth ministry). It implies that churches and youth ministries need to address issues of religious absolutism, while supporting the facilitation of spiritual growth such as through small groups. It was recommended that youth groups

consider adapting a youth work model to youth ministry, in a way that allows for the tension between youth work goals and codes as well as the church's priority for propagating Christianity. The goal in such an approach was to allow young people to feel welcome regardless of their beliefs, even if the hope of the organisation is for the young person to follow the teachings of Christianity. The result is that the youth ministry would support young people in whatever their concerns might be without forcing the conversation towards a religious or spiritual direction. Discussions of religious beliefs and Christian teaching could be offered in an exploratory manner, where all are invited to express their perspective on the topic at hand. This will enable the youth ministry to be inclusive practice, defined by equality and diversity. It may be that youth ministries could benefit from adapting a youth work model while maintaining an agenda of religious conversions. While it may contrast with a youth ministry's natural disposition to work within a youth work model, it is vital in order to adapt to the needs of young people and express the Christian ethic of love and care.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

Some of these questions have been adapted from Haralambos & Holborn (1995), in their discussions regarding secularisation, and some adapted from Copel (2008).

*Sample one (those who stayed in church):*

Conversational style interview covering the following topics:

1. How often do you currently participate in church activities? Which activities? Age?
2. What has been your experience of church?
3. What aspects of church motivate you to stay?
4. What could the church do that would cause you to leave?
5. What meaning does religion and spirituality hold for you?
6. Describe whether your beliefs or practices have changed.
7. Have you ever had any supernatural experiences? What do you think about these now?
8. How does your spirituality affect your day-to-day life?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Sample two (Those who left church):*

Conversational style interview covering the following topics:

1. How often do you currently participate in church activities? Which activities? How has that changed? Age?
2. What has been your experience of leaving church?
3. What was church was like for you, when you used to attend?
4. What motivated you to leave the church?
5. Could the church have done anything that would have made you want to stay?
6. What was the process of leaving church like for you?

7. What meaning does religion and spirituality hold for you now?
8. To what degree have your beliefs and practices changed or remained the same?
9. Have you ever had any supernatural experiences? What do you think about these now?
10. How does your spirituality affect your day-to-day life?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### *Focus Group Questions*

The researcher will explain the purpose of the focus group. The group will be presented a summary of the themes of meaning drawn out from the interviews. The process of how this was done will be explained to the focus groups, and then these questions will be asked:

1. To what extent has the summary captured the most important themes?
2. What has been missed?
3. Is there anything you would like to add?

### *Sample three (Youth Pastors/Workers/Leaders)*

1. In what ways did my presence impact upon the event? What differences did my presence cause?
2. In your experience, how would a young person be considered a regular attender? For example, frequency.
3. When would you decide that a young person has 'left'? For example, the time period since they were last seen.
4. In your experience, what causes a young person to leave the church?
5. In your experience, what causes a young person to stay in the church?
6. What does your church do in order to attract young people?