THE ROLE OF ENCOUNTER WITHIN CONVERSION IN PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC CHURCHES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION.

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Word Count: 88856
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

(Used after first occurrence)
AoG: Assemblies of God
BNIM: Biographic-Narrative Interview Method
CH: Cranmer Hall
CP: Classical Pentecostal
FE: Fresh Expressions (the central organisation)
FFT: Finding Faith Today
Fx: fresh expressions (the general approach, concept and strategy)
IN: initial narrative
LST: London School of Theology
JEPTA: Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association
JPT: Journal of Pentecostal Theology
MsC: Mission-shaped Church
NC: New Church
P+c: Pentecostal and charismatic
PIN: particular incident narrative
SQUIN: single question inviting narrative
T4V: Theology in four voices
TAT: Third Article Theology
TQ: theoretical question(s)/(ing)

Bible references throughout are to the New Revised Standard Version, 1989.
THE ROLE OF ENCOUNTER WITHIN CONVERSION IN PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC CHURCHES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION.

Abstract

This research is an investigation into the role of encounter in conversion and its implications for mission by Pentecostal and charismatic (P+c) churches within the United Kingdom. Initially, contemporary conversion praxis is explored in literature associated with the ecumenical Fresh Expressions project. Within that broad setting, conversion is now understood more as a pathway than a crisis event, and experiential encounter with God has a generally low profile. Two articles respond to those issues. The first is addressed primarily to the P+c community and in the light of the contemporary missional discussion seeks to suggest directions for the enhancement of P+c theology and the reciprocal contribution that might be offered to Fresh Expressions praxis. The second considers a specific problem within conversion praxis, that of measuring conversion. A separate exploration of research methodologies considers how the encounter within contemporary conversion might be explored among recent adult converts with little or no prior experience of church, with due regard to particularity as well as exposing shared themes. A biographic-narrative method is proposed as being methodologically transparent, allowing practitioners to engage with the data’s relevance and offering potential for replication.

The empirical research task has been to gain insight into the frequency, range, salience and context of experiential encounter in the conversion of people attending Pentecostal and charismatic congregations, who have little previous experience of church. It is placed within a multidisciplinary context considering methodological issues from both psychosocial and theological perspectives prior to reporting at length on the narratives of 32 participants. In order to illuminate the particularity and broad themes arising from the data, they are considered from the academic perspectives of P+c pneumatologies and that of biblical studies. Subsequently, the approach of Third Article Theology is engaged to place both theological and experiential data within a missiological framework in order to push towards praxis. Specific attention is given to the possibility of considering developments of missional pneumatology within the P+c tradition in the light of the particularities of the contemporary experience of conversion. As part of considering implications for practice the limitations of the research are noted and several possibilities for further investigation suggested.
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NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the narrative introduction, placed between each part, is to make clear the relation between the different elements in the portfolio, in particular the way in which the earlier sections developed into the thesis. It is not intended to be part of the formal assessment and also functions as a personal statement.

The central concern of this thesis has developed out of my lifetime involvement with Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality, and increasingly reflective missional practice. Brought up within the classical Pentecostal tradition, on the outer edge of east London, I left in my early twenties to lead a house church that had evolved from a youth theatre group, and soon became absorbed into the New Churches. In the 1990s an opportunity arose to ‘adopt’ another small group, this time in rural Wiltshire, which was at the early stages of becoming church. The new forms of church in which I was raised and have subsequently served have only partially engaged with the needs of mission within the contemporary context. Following the experience of both ecumenical evangelistic initiatives, and heightened revivalistic expectations in the last decade of the twentieth century, the route to a credible and sustainable missional strategy for my own church has been less than straightforward.

To supplement my own contribution to local reflection, with the support of the church I serve, I took the opportunity to pursue MA studies in Emerging Church. Those studies led to a dissertation that reviewed the emerging church challenge to charismatic spirituality. That challenge had arisen because, within the UK, prominent contributors to the emerging church conversation, who had roots within P+c Christianity, had mounted a sustained critique of the spirituality in which they had been brought up. The dissertation concluded that while there was substance to the critique, it had resulted in functional cessationism, and the resultant praxis had little to contribute to a developed missional practice that sought to respond to change within contemporary society while retaining the central P+c value of encounter with God. During that research, I met with Chris Russell, vicar of St
Laurence’s, Reading, a fresh expression for youth and now working part-time as the Archbishop’s Advisor for Evangelism & Witness. In discussing ‘alternative worship’, characteristic of some fresh expressions and some emerging churches, he expressed a view that creative worship ‘without encounter’, it was ‘religious art therapy’. That comment has lost none of its force in the decade since it was made, and seemed to me to encapsulate the dilemma posed by fresh expressions for Pentecostals and charismatics.

A felt need for an enhanced missional praxis that was attentive to both the cultural context, and to the commitment of P+c spirituality to experiential religion, continued to engage not only my attention but that of my home church. They agreed to support me in part-time doctoral level investigation of encounter within contemporary conversion. In parallel with the emerging church conversation, the Fresh Expressions project had developed as a substantial missional response within the Anglican and Methodist Churches. In its initial stages, it had claimed the support of both evangelicals and charismatics, and provided an ideal starting point to explore a developing consensus around contextual church planting and the place of conversion that allowed for, or expected, conversions and encounter with God.
1: CONVERSION IN FRESH EXPRESSIONS

Research focus

This missiological research is concerned with the role of encounter in conversion and its implications for mission. It is expected to be preliminary, to stimulate praxis and to indicate possibilities for further research. Narratives have been provided by 32 converts with little or no church background from ten churches, which in equal numbers are part of New Church (NC)\(^1\) and classical Pentecostal (CP) denominations. Given the narrow focus of this thesis on encounter within the conversion process, it is practicable to consider this section of the tradition as a single unit, which would have been more difficult if some other areas of praxis had been in view. It is widely accepted that churches within the P+c tradition share a family resemblance evidenced in the priority given to experiential encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit. That gives rise to a ‘strong experiential continuity

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between the Pentecostal movement and the Charismatic movement”² and within England at least, almost all of those in English CP and NC denominations locate themselves within the wider evangelical tradition.³ As such they share an understanding of conversion derived from ’standard evangelical discourse, with emphasis being placed upon the proclamation of the gospel message of faith in Christ and experience of new birth.”⁴

**Fresh Expressions as a conversation partner**

It will be demonstrated that the contextual church planting project of Fresh Expressions, is heavily influenced by that same evangelical discourse and provides appropriate and contemporary missiological partnership in reflection. In 2004, in the light of falling numbers and disappointment with evangelistic initiatives, the Church of England published the *Mission-shaped Church (MsC)* report,⁵ and together with the Methodist Church launched Fresh Expressions (FE)⁶ that has become the largest church planting project of recent times.⁷ Over more than a decade the definition of a fresh expression of church has been honed and simplified, though the core concept remains unchanged. ‘Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don’t “go to church”’.⁸

Twelve years on, considerable debate continued as to what constituted an authentic fresh expression of church. Lings, on behalf of the Church Army Research Unit, forcefully portrays the issue as being between indicators of relationship, and criteria

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⁶ FE (capitalised) refers to the organisation.
⁷ As of 2013 by far the largest increases in church numbers were estimated to be in black-led churches and in FE. Brierley, *Statistics* 2, 7..
based on practices; ‘the latter significantly prejudicial against young churches whose identity lies deeper than their performance, and whose identity is more closely connected to their intentions and potential’.9

P+c Christianity has been described as ‘a religion made to travel’ and ‘a global culture’.10 Its developing missiologies have long been considered from ‘foreign missions’ perspectives11 or other global views.12 More recently, Amos Yong has sought to identify a specific Western perspective in P+c missiology, drawing attention to the post-Christendom environment, though his perspective is more or less exclusively restricted to the USA13 There is little evidence that P+c missiology is being shaped by the different conditions in Europe, specifically the UK, whether these are attributed to ‘supply side differences’, varied ‘Christianizations’, or more general secularisation theory.14 Fresh expressions (fx),15 together with the wider contextual church planting project, is well placed to contribute to developing this more local focus.

Specifically, while P+c Christianity has proved singularly adaptive in form and style, by the turn of the century little missiological research on contextualisation

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9 George Lings, *The Day of Small Things* (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, November 2016), 20-22.
15 ‘fresh expressions’ (fx), refers to the general approach, concept, and strategy.
has found its way into P+c praxis.\textsuperscript{16} While there is legitimate concern shared with other evangelicals that contextualisation has been ‘hotly debated and sometimes little understood’,\textsuperscript{17} and can drift into syncretism,\textsuperscript{18} its absence is perhaps surprising, given the relatively early commitment to adapting ecclesial structures (even if not engaging in deeper contextualisation). Melvin L. Hodges, whose writing was formative in Pentecostal missiology, was a strong advocate of indigenisation\textsuperscript{19} drawing on the missionary methods of Roland Allen, including the ‘three-self’ concept that he adopted,\textsuperscript{20} and which is continuing to form part of the debate about evaluating fx.\textsuperscript{21} Andrew Lord, writing in 2000, prior to the launch of FE, and having noted the lack of formal P+c input to the contextualisation debate, pointed to potential contributions from two Anglican charismatics, Robert Warren and Graham Cray, each of whom have subsequently become influential within FE and the wider movement.\textsuperscript{22} P+c

\begin{itemize}
\item Anderson, Introduction, 212; For a recent evangelical approach, see: Andrew J. Prince, \textit{Contextualization of the Gospel: Towards an Evangelical Approach in the Light of Scripture and the Church Fathers} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 37–70.
\item Andy Wier, \textit{Sustaining Young Churches}, (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016), 55.
\item Lord, ‘Contextualization’, 206-207. (Bishop Graham Cray was Archbishop’s Missioner and chaired the working party which wrote \textit{MsC}. From 2009-2014 he was leader of the Fresh Expressions team. Robert Warren’s writings were cited in the report and continue to be part of the conversation. See: \textit{MsC}, 33, 58, 80, 100, 105, 159 fn.4; George Lings, ‘Evaluating fresh expressions of Church’, \textit{Anvil} 27:1 (2010), 23-41; 24; Lings, \textit{Small Things}, 208.)
\end{itemize}
mission may continue to benefit from other contributions from similar overlapping perspectives.

P+c churches in the UK face the same challenging context as other denominations. The extreme disappointments of evangelical church planting initiatives in the last two decades of the twentieth century were felt by them as well as others23 and the Assemblies of God (AoG) have explicitly acknowledged that those goals were unrealistic.24 FE has provided the most coherent and widespread response thus far to those failed expectations, even though P+c church planting has continued with, in some cases, increased vigour in the 21st century. However, while FE is assiduous in attempting to measure whether those attending new groups are transferring from other congregations, are returning to church after a long absence, or have no previous church involvement, P+c church planters have shown less interest in exposing themselves to that level of evaluation.25 While that may in part be due to a rejection of the value of assessment based on patterns of participation, it is also likely to reflect that in the minds of some P+c churches, transferring to their congregations from another represents a kind of conversion, an ‘intensification’ of previous commitment,26 or that gathering a crowd of like-minded worshippers is considered to be a preliminary to successful planting. P+c churches have not been overly worried by falling attendances; certainly, AoG and NC denominations have been growing, while other denominations were shrinking in size.27 Many across the

26 Insofar that Cartledge is correct in his suggestion that it is likely that the majority of Pentecostal converts will come from backgrounds in other Christian traditions, these would be excluded from the priority ‘non-churched’ target of FE. Cartledge, Testimony, 71, 77.
27 Brierley, Statistics 2, Table 0.2.1; 9.1.4.
tradition, accurately or not, see themselves as successful and their services attractive. Nevertheless, church plants have not always been successful and growth has often been much slower than acceptable to P+c aspirations.

P+c churches have, with other evangelical denominations, followed the trend away from evangelistic crusades towards courses such as Alpha. According to Michael Moynagh, and confirmed in this research, alongside post-denominational charismatic networks within the Anglican denomination,28 they have also shown interest in the broader contextual project that includes emerging church and youth church. Specific examples of early engagement with contextual church praxis are seen among the P+c denominational gatekeepers facilitating the field research for this project.29 One has written a dissertation urging his church to engage with FE; one has been a member of the national FE team from 2006; one is referenced in the formative book, Emerging Churches; and another for some years blogged on the subject and moderated an emerging church website.30

As a partner in conversation, and a missiological lens, this research engages with FE, fx, and the wider contextual church planting project throughout. It is a central element in reflection on conversion theology in the first journal article, and qualitative research that sits alongside FE is considered in the second. Sampling guidelines are influenced by the logic of FE categories. As part of the field research methodology, the major multidisciplinary analytical model has been adopted because of its substantive fit with, and challenge to, fx praxis. At appropriate points in the

29 This was not a conscious criterion in selection of denominations, though it may have facilitated access.
empirical report and theological reflection, fx viewpoints are drawn in. Unsurprisingly, the influential insights of Graham Cray emerge with other fx voices as part of the discussion of missional implications and the conclusions arising from the research.

To that end, a review has been attempted of the literature emerging from the FE movement over the past twelve years, particularly in its formative phase. The purpose has been to establish whether fx practitioners are aiming for conversion and have seen people becoming Christians, and to provide a basis for reflection on empirical data on P+c praxis. To do this, a wide-ranging survey has been conducted of published resources for practitioners and their advisors. To the print material was added a body of more than 250 stories on the ‘Fresh Expressions’ website and three Fresh Expressions DVDs. A high level of confidence in the comprehensiveness of the review was provided by the extent and range of material covered. While a case may be made for inclusion of other texts, it is unlikely that doing so would have changed the understanding of conversion among fx. More recently, thinking about how conversion is to be conceived within the project has begun to consolidate. A review of more recent sources, relevant to the focus on conversion, has been included, and the fx/contextual church perspective on conversion illuminates this thesis throughout.

The foundation document

The Fresh Expressions initiative was launched with publication of the Mission-shaped Church (MsC) report in 2004. The view of George Lings is that both the fact that it told good news of what was already happening, and the response to it from General Synod and others created a favourable climate for the success of the accompanying project.31 ‘The scale of the response [was] far beyond anything its authors had imagined’,32 and led to a stream of further publications. Some considered how its principles might be applied in different contexts. Others explored questions it raised, or provided a critique of its proposals. Web material and videos offered case studies in how the principles behind MsC had worked in practice. An introductory

31 Lings, Small Things, 60-61.
32 CofE, MsC (2nd edition), vii.
chapter places conversion on the agenda. ‘The challenge is to form communities that facilitate encounter with God and God’s people in such a way that convinces, converts and transforms those who respond to them.’33 Cray had described ‘the gospel…as a call to an appropriate repentance’ in the introduction.34

Setting a pattern for several of the titles that followed, MsC devoted substantial space to a commentary on a variety of categories of fresh expression of church; about half of the examples selected made reference to people coming to faith. A cell church expected young people to be ‘saved and discipled’ and that prodigals would return,35 while missional congregations saw groups of people come to faith through Alpha36 and others ‘evangeliz[ing] their networks’ and ‘bring[ing] people to faith’.37 There was one reference each to ‘confirmation’38 and ‘an appeal’ that resulted in ‘seven or eight professions of faith’.39 Only one expression chose to use the phrase ‘journeys to faith’.40

Other examples made no mention of conversion, though to do so would not have been expected where the target group was recently de-churched or disenchanted. Some were at an early stage in gathering community or, from the liberal or catholic wings of the Church, expressed their goals in different terms. However, there were some surprising silences. A plant from Holy Trinity, Brompton, and a Baptist seeker church in the Home Counties might both have been expected to have conversion as a core value. Each celebrated numerical growth but failed to explicitly connect this with people finding faith. While such an omission could have been an oversight, it may indicate that network churches are more likely to recruit church transfers than unchurched people.41

33 CofE, MsC (1st edition), 13.
34 Ibid., xiii.
35 Ibid., 54.
36 Ibid., 60.
37 Ibid., 61.
38 Ibid., 69.
39 Ibid., 76.
40 Ibid., 56.
41 Ibid., 66–67, 69.
Immediately following these descriptions, almost exactly at the mid-point of
the report, five ‘values for a missionary church’ were listed, including this:

A missionary church is active in calling people to faith in Jesus and it is equally committed to the development of a consistent Christian lifestyle appropriate to… the cultures in which it operates… It is concerned for the transformation of individuals, as well as the transformation of communities.42

Around a dozen synonyms for conversion were employed to define aims or to describe what was happening. In this way, disciple-making and conversion provided framework for stories of fx. However, when the report turned its attention to theology, these concerns appeared to be pushed to one side – for theology, read ecclesiology.43 The latter half of MsC was preoccupied with ecclesial issues and the strong emphasis on conversion in the earlier part of the book was reduced in impact by the fact that it was ignored in the chapters on theology and methodology. However, taken as a whole, there was enough to encourage those who were subsequently to write on a mission-shaped topic, or to start a fresh expression of church, to pay attention to the challenge of conversion.

Analysis and critique

MsC proved itself to be a true forerunner in that several subsequent publications followed in focusing on ecclesiological, rather than missiological concerns. This is certainly the case with Mission-shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today’s Church, a collection of edited papers from a series of day conferences that were intended for those ‘who want to engage … with reflection on the nature of the church.’44 The final chapter explained why. ‘We are reasonably good at thinking about mission … however, collectively we remain poor at thinking about the Church.’ 45 Few of the fourteen contributors considered what it might mean to come to faith. One who did address that issue was Lindsay Urwin, the Bishop of Horsham.

42 Ibid., 82.
43 Ibid., 84.
Writing on the role of sacramental ministry, his chapter discussed the credibility of two youth churches. The critical focus he brought to these projects was evidenced in his dismissal of another venture, where no candidates for confirmation after seven years meant that a project failed to qualify as ‘an authentic fresh expression of church in terms of the New Testament.’ From the catholic tradition, Urwin was looking for sacramental markers of conversion and discipleship. For The Point, a youth oriented fresh expression in his diocese, ‘a major step on the road to becoming an authentic expression of resurrection living would be the day when we celebrated a baptism, confirmation and Eucharist.’

Urwin talked of the ‘experience’ of coming to faith; James Dunn, writing on fresh expressions of church in the New Testament, pursued this theme in considering the experiential character of faith. ‘[A] Christianity that cherishes no sense of intimate relation with God through Christ … and that treats the experience of the Spirit as essentially threatening, is no longer Christianity as defined by the New Testament.’ Expressed in this way, Dunn encapsulated the P+c ideal for conversion as neatly as anywhere in the literature. However, intimacy and experience were not acceptable to John Hull, an early critic of fx who, in the same volume, also addressed personal and individual relationship to Christ that, for him, was experienced exclusively in the horizontal dimension. A vertical relationship with

46 Lindsay Urwin, ‘What is the Role of Sacramental Ministry in Fresh Expressions of Church?’ in Croft, Questions, 29–41.
47 Urwin, ‘Sacramental Ministry’, 36.
48 Ibid., 29.
49 At the time of Mission-shaped Questions it had been in existence for four years. Available: http://thepointchurch.co.uk/ (accessed 2 July 2012).
50 Urwin, ‘Sacramental Ministry’, 38.
51 Ibid., 36.
Jesus leaned towards a ‘kind of erotic spirituality in which it is easier to adore Jesus than to follow him.’

_Evaluating Fresh Expressions_, edited by Louise Nelstrop and Martin Percy, was published in the same year and was, similarly, a collection of conference papers focusing on ‘issues raised by the shift in the Church of England’s ecclesiology that fresh expressions of church entail.’ Percy saw fx as a post-institutional form of an associational model of church which he doubted could ‘Christianize and convert’. Steven Croft viewed the scene more favourably, describing the importance of process evangelism, particularly Alpha, in fresh expressions and elsewhere, for those who have never learned the faith. He also saw the Decade of Evangelism, not considered by all to be a great success, as a period in which process evangelism courses flourished and many churches saw ‘adults come to faith, be nurtured into faith and then be incorporated into the local Christian community.’

The inclusion of Alpha as a fresh expression of church by Nelstrop, seemed a strange choice and the justification offered in the introduction, that seeker churches used it, was weak. Alpha was hardly ‘fresh’; it had never been offered as an expression of church and was at least as likely to be employed by inherited forms of church as new. Nevertheless, its inclusion did provide opportunity for Stephen Hunt to discuss its success in achieving conversions; though, “conversion” is a difficult term to grapple with and is impossible to quantify.” He concluded that conversions have been few and far between but that Alpha may push forward a process where

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58 Croft was the first Team Leader of Fresh Expressions and contributed to many of the early publications.
59 Steven Croft, ‘Formation for Ministry in a Mixed Economy Church: The Impact of Fresh Expressions of Church on Patterns of Training’, Nelstrop, _Evaluating_, 40-54 [43–46].
‘the penny drops’ at a later stage.\textsuperscript{61} At the time of Hunt’s research, Alpha may have seemed an easy target. More than fifteen years on, a project that pushes forward a process that for some types of person leads to conversion, seems to give Croft the better of the argument. David Male’s contribution was a plea to focus on reaching the non-churched, concerned with evangelism and ‘how much … unchurched people [are] becoming disciples of Jesus.’\textsuperscript{62} Clarifying the nature of conversion he cited Bosch, placing evangelism at the centre of mission, and ‘calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, inviting them to become living members of Christ’s earthly community, and to begin life in the power of the Holy Spirit.’\textsuperscript{63}

\emph{For the Parish}, by Davison and Milbank, was a thoroughgoing critique of FE and all it stood for, including its ability to assist people on the road to faith.\textsuperscript{64} It offered a number of challenges that have been responded to with respect and appreciation in reviews and subsequent writing, including several titles in this review. It presented a strong view of the corporate dimension of salvation, to be worked out within the (parish) church. In \textit{MsC} literature ‘the church is not part of the goal of salvation but some extraneous means’.\textsuperscript{65} It was sceptical about the kind of conversion on offer in fx and, though it saw regeneration as a one-time event, occurring in baptism, it believed that fx were ill equipped to foster conversion in its continuing dimension as Christian growth. ‘[C]onversion is achieved by… submission to the way of life of the Christian community’,\textsuperscript{66} while the mission-shaped formula offered an easy path for weak converts. \emph{For the Parish} was one of the works most critical of FE, but one that engaged most explicitly with the subject of conversion, even if its thrust was unlikely to resonate with the P+c tradition.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Hunt, ‘Packing’, 172.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} David Male, ‘Who are fresh expressions really for? Do they really reach the unchurched?’ Nelstrop, \textit{Evaluating}, 148–160.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} David Bosch, ‘Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today’, \textit{International Bulletin of Missionary Research} 11:3 (1987), 97–103 [100].
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, \textit{For the Parish} (London: SCM Press, 2010).
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Davison, \textit{For the Parish}, 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 187.
\end{itemize}
**Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church** was a report from a joint Anglican/Methodist group set up in 2007 to deal with a range of practical and ecclesiological issues. Its specific interest to the current enquiry is tangential. However, it did address criticisms raised by both Hull’s critique and that of Davison and Milbank. In responding to the former, it concluded that Hull’s rejection of a vertical relationship with God did not do justice to Scripture. In the case of the latter, the report considered that the catholic emphasis on the role of the Church was compatible with FE mission strategy, and it asserted a legitimate diversity of the degree to which the Church is mediator of salvation. These observations, with implications for conversion and discipleship, did not make it to the report’s conclusions. Ecclesiology was just as much a preoccupation for the joint working party reporting in 2012 as it had been for Croft, and for Nelstrop and Percy in 2008 and, for Davison and Milbank in 2010.

**Applying the principles**

According to their introduction, the ‘Mission-shaped’ series was developed to consider how the principles presented in *MsC* could be applied in different areas of the Church’s life and mission. The series was concerned with ‘perspectives and inner values [that] are necessary to be part of a Mission-shaped Church today’, and their authors had ‘the benefit of years of practical experience’. Four titles were published in 2006: on children, young people, the parish church, and rural areas. *Mission-shaped Youth* arrived a year later. It is perhaps surprising that more titles have not been published: about mission-shaped housing estates, men, older people, or students, for example. The conclusion is inescapable. These were the titles where authors were readily available and that could be taken quickly to market. For this

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68 Anglican-Methodist, *Fresh Expressions*, 120.

69 Ibid. 138–151.

reason, too much should not be made of the uncertain profile of conversion in each of them and there are significant points worth drawing out.\textsuperscript{71}

Each of these books included examples of practice. \textit{Mission-shaped} and \textit{Rural} started out with an extended account, from the author’s own ministry, of the way in which cell church met the needs of five women who made a commitment to follow Christ in a discipleship course.\textsuperscript{72} In the last two paragraphs of her main text she returned to the theme of discipleship and the joys of walking with people coming to ‘Christian faith for the first time’.\textsuperscript{73} A range of \textit{fx} were described, including one where ‘some new local people [made] commitments to Christ’\textsuperscript{74} and, later in the book, a Church Army evangelist reported that following Ignatian-style prayer a lifelong church attender ‘said that she had met Christ for the first time in her life.’\textsuperscript{75}

The stated values of \textit{Mission-shaped Youth} were those of the ‘evangelical wing of the Church’\textsuperscript{76} – relying on ‘the transforming power of God’\textsuperscript{77} and winning young people to faith\textsuperscript{78} and to Christ.\textsuperscript{79} God through Christ has the power to save, bringing young people into the assurance of salvation. The same God has the power to heal and to transform lives and communities. Young people are not interested in a God who makes no difference and no demands.\textsuperscript{80} The main part of the book was a mixture of case studies with commentary, though few of these gave examples of coming to faith or discussed conversion, which is puzzling given the book’s starting point. Its final section described three ‘pivots’ for youth-mission-shaped church:

\textsuperscript{71} While \textit{Mission-shaped Children} explored evangelism extensively, developmental factors in ministry to children made it a special case and for the current purpose it can be passed over. Margaret Withers. \textit{Mission-shaped Children} (London: Church House Publishing, 2006).
\textsuperscript{72} Gaze, \textit{Rural}, xi-xv.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 107–108.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{77} Sudworth, \textit{Youth}, 10.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 13.
worship, belonging and discipleship. This last ‘will have implications for young people’s lives, their addictions, their families, their revenge, their criminality, their responsibility’.

Discipleship was pivotal, and according to both the opening and closing chapters, youth ministry relied on the transforming power of God. However, in between, when it came down to what was happening on the ground, there was little evidence, or celebration, of either.

Mission-shaped Parish\(^\text{82}\) had a very different context, making the case for inherited church within a mixed economy. A short chapter was given to Christian nurture, discussing the need to teach the faith to those who had never heard it and celebrating ‘astonishing’ fruit in people becoming Christians through small groups in parish churches.\(^\text{83}\) Separate chapters described how civic churches might engage in disciple-making,\(^\text{84}\) and the contribution of cathedrals which were ‘building bridges, Christ [was] being revealed and some people [were] becoming disciples as a result.’\(^\text{85}\)

The final book in this small series, Mission-shaped Spirituality by Susan Hope,\(^\text{86}\) fitted uneasily. It was intended as an aid to reflection; the spirituality it advocated was unquestioningly charismatic, as though that were the only possible missional spirituality. It might have been dismissed from the review as irrelevant were it not for its claim to be ‘full of contemporary stories of mission’\(^\text{87}\). Some of Hope’s stories were about prayer and the spiritual renewal of practitioners but, among those about mission, conversion was clearly in evidence. The author was

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., 113.


\(^{83}\) Bayes, Parish, 101.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 93.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 132.


\(^{87}\) Hope, Spirituality, xii.
converted, 88 people were touched by God, 89 others came to faith, 90 were changed, 91 or became Christians. 92 Healings were described 93 as was responding to the gospel through communion. 94 The frustration generated by Hope’s approach is twofold. Firstly, it implied that if spirituality was appropriately fervent, conversions would follow. There was no sign of strategy. Secondly, it is difficult to know whether these were all the stories to be found of their type. Several, though not all of the most dramatic are to be found repeated in other, later, sources. When concentrated into a few pages, fifteen stories of conversion are impressive. Spread across the UK over the years up to 2006, they seem less so.

*Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* 95 and *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* 96 were the first two titles in the series *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*. The first book was notable for attempts to find common ground between evangelical and catholic traditions within the Anglican Church. It started with the recognition that mission and evangelism are associated with the evangelical wing, which had appropriated *Fresh Expressions*, 97 and that the language that had emerged around MsC fitted most comfortably with evangelicals. 98 Catholics considered that evangelicals ‘overemphasis[ed] individual relationship with Christ over and against corporate belonging’. To provide a balance, Cotterell placed, alongside the five marks of mission, a model that was ‘incarnational and sacramental’, where ‘actions do the talking’. 99 Croft sought to reassure both

88 Ibid., 9.
89 Ibid., 29.
90 Ibid., 28.
91 Ibid., 94.
92 Ibid., 21.
93 Ibid., 84–86.
94 Ibid., 78.
96 Graham Cray, Ian Mosby, and Ian Kennedy (eds.), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010).
98 Ibid.
traditions with talk of personal transformation, admitting that, as yet, there was a lack of research to demonstrate its extent; though he does suggest that ‘the evidence we have points clearly to genuine conversions to faith, as well as progression to maturity.’

*New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* was less focused on the catholic tradition. New monastic practice was proposed as a way to provide an ‘appropriate catechumenate’ for previously unchurched ‘new believers’, and it talked of ‘making disciples’ in the context of community. This was a key concern, with ‘catechesis and discipleship’ as equivalent terms, focused on ‘never-churched spiritual seekers who are looking for a spiritual path.’ In a 24-7 prayer room, a young person ‘found faith … and eventually joined in with a local church.’ This explicit reference to conversion was exceptional in *New Monasticism*. There was a preference for the language of discipleship that was evident in Shane Claiborne’s assessment; there had been a preoccupation with evangelism at the expense of spiritual formation over the past few decades. The editors of this book supported Claiborne in seeking to rebalance a ‘lopsided Christianity that is a mile long and an inch deep.’ The editors identified a seriousness about discipleship among their authors, though the language of coming to faith may need contextualising for ‘post-secular’ and ‘never-churched’ groups.

*Church Unplugged* was the story of The Net church in Huddersfield, by David Male, its founder. It was structured around ten ‘essentials’ for ‘creating new church’, including mission, evangelism and discipleship. By the first anniversary

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100 Croft, ‘Gamaliel’, 47.
101 Graham Cray, ‘Why is New Monasticism Important to Fresh Expressions?’ Cray, *Monasticism*, 1-11 [6].
103 Andy Freeman, ‘New Monasticism, Mission and Young People’, in Cray, *Monasticism*, 50-57, [52].
he was able to talk of ‘people coming to faith’ and the church growing. Male’s focus was on the unchurched, a concern he had previously raised in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*. ‘We need churches that create an environment for unchurched people to meet with Jesus. If we don’t do that we have failed in our main task.’ In addition, he wanted to ‘help people of all ages find Jesus.’ For such an extended reflection surprisingly few examples of people finding faith were included and two stories are worthy of note. The first was a moving story told by a man who had been sleeping rough and had a prototypical crisis conversion. Male also told of an altar call by a visiting speaker, something that was not The Net’s normal practice and perhaps unsurprisingly, led to no response. The following week, during his talk, there was an interruption from ‘Angela’ who explained that she had been on the edge of her seat the previous week but had been unable to move. ‘I want to tell you all that I am ready to follow Jesus, I am ready to become one of his disciples.’ That profession led to three others, with many of the congregation, including Male, in tears. The roles of the altar call in Angela’s decision, and of her testimony in the three other professions, were not discussed; nor was the question of whether there might have been a case for building into The Net’s practice some opportunity for people to respond on a regular basis so that an appeal did not come as a potentially paralysing surprise.

The parallels between *Church Unplugged* and Michael Volland’s *Through the Pilgrim Door* are limited but obvious. However, their social contexts were quite different. Male’s was focused on the unchurched population of Huddersfield; Volland’s was associated with Gloucester Cathedral where he was a staff member. His project, soon called ‘féig’, initially appealed to de-churched people and those disenchanted with existing worship. Male’s enterprise accelerated quickly; Volland’s growth curve was less steep. Male’s writing was more analytical; Volland’s less so.

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108 Ibid., 51.
109 Ibid., 81.
110 Ibid., 57.
111 Ibid., 76.
112 Ibid., 83–84.
for a number of reasons, including that the project was younger, that he was still in post at the time of writing and that he set out simply to tell the story. Feig fits the alternative worship model of doing church, while The Net appears much closer to seeker church. Noticeably, they had differing expectations. Male expected and experienced drama, while Volland valued those encounters that ‘took place quietly and over time.’114 Without simplifying too far, it is possible to suggest that Volland may represent a sensitivity that has yet to emerge in the P+c consciousness; one that is comfortable with uncertainty and with a slow pace of change.

Mission-shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture, by Steve Hollinghurst, flowed out of his work as an evangelist to those involved in alternative spiritualities115 and was attentive to the cultural turn as were Volland and the New Monastics. He shared with some other writers a concern to factor in the decline of Christendom. He suggested that under the previous conditions there existed a flow from Christian identity (at the lowest level) to belief, and from there to practice. In the emerging context the reverse might be true and that self-identification as Christian might be the most advanced, rather than basic, marker of a more intentional spirituality.116 Evangelism was ‘discipling not-yet Christians’117 and should call for a more holistic repentance, in which ‘we also need to move away from a modernist approach that converts minds towards a holistic mission that converts whole people, societies and cultures.’118 He gave depth to the idea of coming to faith as a multi-dimensional process by suggesting that faith is only fully realised as a ‘whole packet of gospel seeds’ is planted, a response to the gospel coming at any stage in the process and to any aspect of the ‘whole story’.119

114 Volland, Pilgrim, 141.
116 Hollinghurst, Evangelism, 53.
117 Ibid., 168.
118 Ibid., 168–169.
119 Ibid., 168.
Hollinghurst raised the importance of spiritual experience at several points.\textsuperscript{120} In one of his few stories of faith he described the process by which a man with intellectual doubts was drawn into the church community and where, ten years on, he was a ‘committed Christian’. For this man, ‘the experience of faith and not rational belief was in the end the key issue’,\textsuperscript{121} pointing towards a multidimensional framing of conversion. Hollinghurst did not describe a range of spiritual experiences or their validity, but he was expecting to bring people to faith through a contextually sensitive evangelism, allied to a miraculous faith that leads to healing in body, mind and spirit, and being set free from the power of sin\textsuperscript{122} Mission-shaped Evangelism engaged with issues of P+c concern, specifically in its approach to alternative spiritualities, and its reflection on late 20\textsuperscript{th} century revival aspirations, which is referenced below.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{Fresh!: An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry}\textsuperscript{124} had three authors. Its focus was on pioneer ministry and fresh expressions of church, the dependence of the latter on the former being established early on by David Goodhew, both within the Christian tradition and in the current context. Conversion to Judaism was difficult and rare in a pagan culture, in significant ways similar to contemporary relativism. Christianity offered something quite different: exclusive adherence and increasing commitment to Christ and his values\textsuperscript{125} where ‘[c]onversion and community were two sides of the one coin’.\textsuperscript{126} In the current context, objections to focusing on growth were raised. Caring for people included ‘introduc[ing] them to the eternal love of Jesus’. There was a need to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[120] Ibid., 169.
\item[121] Ibid., 175.
\item[122] Ibid., 248–250.
\item[123] Ibid., 59–60, 92, 222, 230-231.
\item[125] Goodhew, \textit{Fresh!} 3–8.
\item[126] Ibid., 11.
\end{footnotes}
‘emphasize the importance of sharing faith’, which became ‘crowded out by other concerns’.127

**Updating the stories**

From 2009, for some years, a mini-site within the main FE website was devoted to short reports by practitioners.128 The curating of these stories, and the accompanying system of tags, were a useful way of establishing what those leading FE considered important and interesting. By the end of June 2012 there were more than 200 stories on the website. Very occasionally, a report included one or more stories of faith, though these were few and far between. A mother of several young children contributed the following story of baptism.

I let the children decide whether they also wanted to be baptised … It was an incredibly charged moment for me personally … That day I felt all three of us had turned a corner and we began a new journey strengthened by the love of God.129

An older man reflected on his experience. ‘I have gained an inner joy and contentment believing that my life has been saved by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross’.130 Both these stories had the traditional shape of a testimony of conversion, each including an initial account of unhappiness. The fact that neither described a sudden encounter detracts little from their impact.

Much more often, general statements were woven into an account of how a particular venture originated and had developed. For example, Moot offered the opportunity for reflection and meditation to workers in the City of London. ‘[T]hose who are spiritual questers experience stillness and transformation. As a result, some become regular visitors who are now in a process of opening up to Christian spirituality’.131 ‘Thirst’ was a café church project that grew out of meetings at the

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127 Ibid., 47–49.
128 By October 2018 only a few stories from the archive were available on the main site, http://freshexpressions.org.uk/story-archive/ (accessed 23 October 2018).
primary school gates. For a period, people ‘began to get healed, come to faith, and wanted to know more about Christ and how he could transform lives. It was about discipling them through relationship.’ As well as these aggregated reports, practitioners sometimes described their motivation and goals in ways that focused on conversion. Based in Northern Ireland, a Church Army evangelist aimed ‘to enable younger people to come to faith and experience Jesus in a real and living way, not just knowing about him, but knowing him personally.’

Of the stories on the website, around fifty talked of initial Christian experience in some form or another. Here, ‘finding faith’ and ‘coming to faith’ were by far the most frequently used terms. Some people ‘become Christians’. Baptism was mentioned in a significant number of cases and appeared to be, most often, by immersion. Less frequently than baptism, but still notable, confirmation was also referenced. The language of change was used, almost always of those with marked social problems, but was not attached to the term ‘conversion’ even when the degree of personal transformation was radical and dramatic. Discipleship was mentioned from time to time, most often as a process subsequent to coming to faith. There is telling evidence, in the system of tags employed on the website, of the priorities of those who collated the stories. Around 100 were in use, and the biggest category was ecclesiological and administrative references, followed by types of fx and activities. Baptism and discipleship were strongly represented, while lifestyle issues and felt needs made up less than a quarter of the total. There were no tags for conversion, finding faith, change or transformation.

FE also published three DVDs, each containing stories of individual expressions, the first two in consecutive years and the third three years later. To

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some extent, the material repeated and expanded stories from the website or books. Nevertheless, they did provide some impression of the development of the FE project up to 2010, there was significantly more talk of conversion in the third DVD, and there were more personal stories told at length on the DVDs compared to other sources.

**Conversion in more recent literature**

By 2016, four times as many Church of England fx were being started as at the time of the MsC report. Three quarters of them had come into existence since 2006, and it seems reasonable to assume, with Lings, that some of the writing reviewed above has had an effect on those figures.\(^{137}\) In order to supplement the account of the discussion of conversion within the literature, five further titles have been reviewed, published between 2012 and 2017. Sources have been selected, from this point on, not to discover whether conversion of an evangelical and charismatic kind is valued as a goal of fx, but how it is understood within praxis.

Among the churches surveyed by Lings in 2016, Messy Church was the most prolific of fx, accounting for 32.5% of all projects.\(^{138}\) With parents and children together it combines relationship building, outreach and worship. This wide range results in particular challenges because of the different needs of its child and adult members – both those who are not-yet Christians, and the volunteer team who are often also part of another congregation. It leads to the critical question, addressed to many fx, as to whether they are working towards being church in their own right, or will remain outreach projects in the long term. Nevertheless, the reach of Messy Church and its perceived success had, by 2013, led to a first exploration of *Messy Church Theology* edited by Lings,\(^{139}\) in which three chapters addressed the question of conversion through the topic of discipleship.

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\(^{137}\) Lings, *Small Things*, 41-42.

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 40, Table 11.

\(^{139}\) George Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013).
Paulsen reported on research with seventeen Canadian families. Rather than using baptism and confirmation as markers, she employed a model of conversion change which sought evidence of three things among the participating families: the development of basic Christian behaviour, a sense of belonging to the Christian community, and increased knowledge and acceptance of Christian beliefs. Behavioural change was measured by knowledge of Scripture, talking about God with children, attending corporate worship, prayer, and Christian fellowship. Belonging was demonstrated in increased perceived connection to the messy church community, the parent congregation, and the wider church. Both of these indicators showed substantial growth. Less significant was change in belief but, given that there was no detail provided of the mix of de-churched, marginally churched, and non-churched participants in the research, a lack of movement is difficult to interpret. Paulsen’s study is important in using a multi-dimensional model of conversion and in providing alternatives to attendance data to assess discipleship growth, and direction of travel. The main implication of the research for discipleship was that ‘even in a culture that is dismissive of or hostile to Christianity, there are still opportunities to nurture new people as followers of Jesus.’

John Drane contributed a chapter on ‘Messy Disciples’, in which he explored the notion that discipleship is unpredictable and ambiguous. In making that case, he examined the gospels for patterns of discipleship and suggested that

the relative absence of specific personal information about the first generation of disciples probably explains why, in seeking to identify Biblical models, we have often given Paul’s dramatic experience precedence over the story of those who accompanied Jesus.

While the model of conversion associated with radical change and ‘the sinners’ prayer’ arguably may have been an appropriate contextualisation of the gospel by 19th century American revivalist preachers, it has become unhelpful where people

140 Judy Paulsen, ‘Does Messy Church make disciples?’, in Lings, Theology, 68–90.
141 Paulsen, ‘Disciples’ 87.
lack Christian background. In its place, he pointed to a process-oriented paradigm in Mark’s gospel that he links to a believing–belonging–behaving model that sometimes includes ‘blessing’ – from ‘free hugs’ to ‘community service’. Discipleship is neither linear nor ‘essentially rational or cognitive’, but is flexible and diverse. Drane presents a false dichotomy; the popularity of the Alpha course demonstrates that the cognitive dimension is central in many conversions. Nevertheless, his implicit challenge to the primacy of adopting a ‘particular cognitive schema’ as definitive of evangelical conversion creates space for the consideration of multidimensionality and, specifically, the emotional domain.

Considering ‘[s]ome frameworks to explore Messy Church and discipleship’, Bob Hopkins explored models of culture and of learning, and demonstrated the different trajectories of attendance growth and discipleship growth, before briefly adding his reflections, referring to the three- or four-dimensional model referenced by Paulsen and Drane. This he applied to the Messy Church style, so that in addition to belonging and believing, within behaving there is action and creativity in addition to potentially reciprocal involvement. For Hopkins, this links to a ‘blessing’ dimension and opens the possibility of a role for ‘spiritual experience’ through giving as well as receiving.

In drawing the strands together, Moore, who alongside his wife Lucy introduced the Messy Church concept, considered a mature phase of development,

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145 Drane had previously creatively explored this model in John William Drane, After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry, and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 2008), 82-86.
146 Drane, ‘Messy Disciples’, 115.
147 Ibid., 121.
148 For a nuanced fx view see: Moynagh, Context, 334; Moynagh, Life, 137-138.
150 Bob Hopkins, ‘Some frameworks to explore Messy Church and discipleship’, in Lings, Theology, 221–240.
and posed the question, ‘Are we making disciples?’ His ‘short answer [was], yes. Messy Churches in many places have seen new believers baptised and growing as disciples.’ However, the journeys to faith of the non-churched may take several years. In his own Messy Church, then ten years old, ‘discipleship is very much a work in progress. We have observed people gradually becoming more open to the faith. As leaders, we need to be prepared for the long haul.’ Within Messy Church theology, according to this analysis, conversion is not linear. It has (at least) three dimensions – those of belonging, believing and behaving – in various mixes and sequences. It is best understood as a discipleship process that is a work in progress, with the result that lives have been changed. ‘[P]eople of all ages have come to faith in Jesus Christ. They have expressed this faith in baptism and confirmation.’

One of the most significant writers on fx in the last decade has been Michael Moynagh. He is consultant on theory and practice to the FE team and has published two major missiological works in five years on missional practice and ecclesiology. In between, he has produced a smaller book, more oriented to practice: Being Church, Doing Life. In the first of these, Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theory and Practice, Moynagh locates himself within the broad evangelical tradition, but with an intention to offer a theological rationale for ‘new contextual church’, inclusively across the traditions. Like others, his assessment is that a point of conversion has been succeeded by conversion as process, characterised by a move from crusades to courses such as Alpha. A more recent trend has been towards an individual pathway involving a three-stage movement, in no particular order, from belonging to believing to behaving, a model for evangelism now familiar to most if not all of those involved in evangelism and

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152 Moore, Maturing, 247.
153 Ibid.
154 Paul Butler, ‘Introduction’, in Lings, Messy Church, 5–8 [7–8].
155 Moynagh Context; Moynagh, Life.
156 Michael Moynagh, Being Church, Doing Life (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014).
157 Moynagh, Context, xxi; Moynagh, Being, 148, 234.
158 Moynagh, Context, 338.
church planting in the UK.\footnote{Ibid., 334.} He raises concerns about the ease with which belonging without believing could turn an open-ended pathway into one that never arrives. His solution is to an alternative that places behaving at a much earlier stage in the pathway. With continual pointers to Jesus and within the experience of community, ‘[the] journey to faith starts with behaviour [in this case prayer]. Christian formation begins before they make a profession of faith.’\footnote{Ibid., 335–336.} The pathway to faith should be explored within a kingdom narrative, rather than as part of a story of self-fulfilment. Interventions from God – including healing – along the way are signs of the kingdom; ‘miraculous healing is not given for personal blessing.’\footnote{Ibid., 337.}

Moynagh considers that the growing use of faith commitment prayers in evangelical circles, from the Graham crusades onwards, has caused confusion, where previously the church has seen baptism as the rite of initiation. He finds problematic prayers that mark a point of conversion and often in practice perform an initiation into the faith. For Moynagh, an individual prayer sometimes followed by personal testimony may have been a suitable marker for nominal Christians who had previously been baptised as children. In the present context, where increasing numbers of people have had no contact with the church, a more extended, sacramental initiatory process is favoured. The focus on commitment prayers, rather than on baptism, suggests to him the possibility that the balance has been tipped towards the more private aspect of conversion and the neglect of its public dimension.\footnote{Ibid., 334.} However, the experiential dimension of conversion is not of the highest priority. He is concerned that in Alpha, ‘the main stress is on experience, a charismatic encounter with the Holy Spirit, which then brings assurance of salvation.’\footnote{James Heard, Inside Alpha: Explorations in Evangelism (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 211; cited Moynagh, Context, 359.}

In Being Church, Moynagh’s discussion of conversion again focused on the movement from point to process to pathway, the latter characterised by variety,
duration, and companionship. He describes a series of milestones; from distrust to trusting, to curious, to open, to seeking, to joining, to growing. Once individuals have shown an interest, you can accompany them patiently on their spiritual journeys, and provide signposts to Jesus. A critical stage in fx pathways is that of giving people opportunity to explore discipleship, through personal mentoring or courses, before church takes shape. These proposals for practice are theologically grounded. ‘The Bible does not say that you come to conversion first and you are made a disciple next ...[Y]ou can begin to disciple people before they have explicitly entered the faith.’

Church in Life was a further exposition of both missiology and ecclesiology for fx, in which Moynagh devotes a chapter to discussing discipleship in terms of transformation. In this his dominant image for ‘witness’ is that of companionship, which he contrasts with reviveralist preaching for a decision, and with the linear approach of courses like Alpha. Companionship has four characteristics. The goal is relationship rather than conversion, ‘which nevertheless remains very important.’ It recognises that ‘journeys to faith will often be longer than in the past’. As ‘reflexive individuals make different selections from the options available’, journeys will be more diverse. These journeys will occur in the context of fx and ‘[e]nquirers should play an increasing role in determining how the community enacts the gospel as their understanding grows.’

The final source in this survey of conversion within fx is a reflective narrative of a youth church pioneered by Andy Milne. In it he draws on Moynagh, and quotes heavily from Church in Every Context, occasionally from Being Church, and on one occasion from Church in Life (at that point unpublished). Belonging

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164 Moynagh, Being, 143.
165 Don Everts and Doug Shaupp, Pathway to Jesus: Crossing the Thresholds of Faith (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), cited by Moynagh, Being, 143-145.
166 Moynagh, Being, 131–132.
167 Ibid., 176–177.
before believing is part of the story,\textsuperscript{169} as is the movement from point to pathway.\textsuperscript{170} Occasionally short stories that had previously been on the Fresh Expressions website are dropped into the text. Milne places conversion in the context of discipleship journeys, but with a strong experiential emphasis. Encountering God through an answered prayer, a talk, or an act of kindness is a sign of the kingdom breaking in; it is potentially putting people in connection with God for the first time; it is seeing what we say lived out in reality. ‘The ingredients … are simply what happens when God is central to our disciple-making.’\textsuperscript{171}

Among questions for the team were the following. ‘Are people encountering God? Are people serving and starting to belong to the community? Are people engaging with prayer or Bible or talks at some level? Later on, are people becoming Christians and are their lives seeing transformation at some level?’\textsuperscript{172} Milne introduced missional worship – a context that included candles and liturgy as well as singing – as a separate step. It was a space for worship, deeper teaching, where people could encounter God through prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{173} This separate stage meant that new people could connect when they were ready. Milne’s disciple-making best fits the charismatic tradition, and Moynagh’s sacramentally leaning evangelicalism is broad enough to include him.

**Reflection**

There is ample evidence that conversion is a value held within Fresh Expressions; both the central project and its local manifestations. Transformation of people by the power of God is occurring, either suddenly or more gradually; though in the wider survey of the earlier material the evidence is not always clear, for several reasons. Firstly, Croft is no doubt correct in saying that the language of FE (the organisation) and fx (the concept) fits best with evangelicals, and it may well be that the diffuse and varied language of conversion is the result of an attempt to adjust

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{170} Milne, *DNA*, Kindle locations 1843-1860.
  \item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid., Kindle locations 1917–1923.
  \item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid., Kindle locations 1959–1960.
  \item \textsuperscript{173} Ibid., Kindle location 869.
\end{itemize}
the fit of the project. In Bevans’ terms, there has been an attempt to accommodate and to reflect conservative, liberal, and radical types of theology. Secondly, permission givers and resource providers were preoccupied with ecclesial matters and diverted the discussion to their concerns. In more recent years, this conversation has transferred to the field of quantitative research studies. Thirdly, many of the projects in this review were identified at an early stage, when new expressions of church were only beginning to build community, and it might be expected that conversion would come later.

Each of these factors had the potential to diminish in significance over time. Evangelical, and often charismatic, sensibilities now dominate. Moynagh and others have gone some way to lift the pressure of ecclesiological anxieties from practitioners even if the official research is still focused on attendance rather than more complex discipleship growth. There is some evidence that more mature expressions are producing converts, though the preoccupation is with attendance growth rather than conversion. A fourth factor, discussed at the outset of this review and evident throughout, may be longer lasting in its impact. The cultural turn, and with it the need to educate a post-Christendom community, has increased focus on conversion as process or pathway. If the reality is that progress to faith in the current era is slower, and moments of encounter, during that period, less able to be marked at altar calls or aroused by sung worship, it is hardly surprising that the language available is less assured.

The believing-belonging-behaving model is deeply embedded. It will be considered as this thesis proceeds; nevertheless, there are issues emerging from this review. While there is consensus around the meaning and scope of belonging, there is less clarity on what is meant by behaving. Is it church attendance, or ethical behaviour, or a mixture of both? Believing has been removed from its central position in evangelical conversion without much discussion about the degree to which beliefs constitute a Christian. The anthropologist Abby Day has written about

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the possibility of ‘believing in belonging’. Richard Peace has linked the idea of ‘belonging before believing’ to a belief in ‘conversion through socialisation’, and perhaps measuring behaving, partly or substantially, as church attendance could be linked to a category of ‘conversion through liturgical acts’. Stuart Murray has made the point that by the fourteenth century, within Christendom, the whole population shared common beliefs, behaviour and a sense of belonging strong enough to call themselves Christians. Nevertheless, has been an intermittent focus on those never churched, for whom the language of coming to faith may need to be contextualised. The language of transformation has often been used and fits well with the consistent emphasis on conversion within a discipleship process, rather than as its start. The metaphor of ‘pathway’ has been used to explore discipleship praxis. A conversion model based on the experience of the first disciples has been proposed as an alternative to that seen in Paul’s dramatic encounter.

The purpose of this literature review was to understand whether people were coming to faith in a way and to a degree that would engage charismatics and lead them to commit to establishing new forms of church. In MsC, four ‘post-denominational’ charismatic networks were listed, already with significant connections to fx. Charismatic, NC denominations came into existence from the 1970s onwards aiming to be church in fresh ways. To them and to many who are already seeing some success in the Pentecostal denominations, it is difficult to see what the fuss is about. Among innovative Pentecostals, youth-oriented churches have been around for a long time, at least since the 1960s, and evident in the NC in the early 1990s. Neither youth expressions nor those for children seem to present a

178 Email correspondence with John Singleton, Senior Pastor, Lifeline Church (25 March, 2019); Bolger, *Emerging*, 277-278.
convincing case in favour of the broader project, or fx which are serving-led or relationship-led, and in which worship develops at a later stage. The less acknowledged issue is that there is, as yet, sparse evidence of great success in reaching non-churched adults in the contemporary era.

The somewhat understandable preoccupation with ecclesiological issues has been noted. Understandably, Rowan Williams’ foreword to MsC was focused on the Church of England and its growth. Methods, joint partners in the project, were also concerned with ecclesial issues, and ecclesial concerns extend into the ‘inherited’ characteristics of the charismatic tradition, too. A joint conference was held by FE and New Wine, one of the post denominational networks listed in Mission–Shaped Church. John Coles, at that time the network leader, asked ‘Can we do New Wine values in Fresh Expressions’? Central to his presentation was that a particular style of sung worship should be introduced to any new form of church at an early stage if it was to conform to the network’s ethos. ‘I have been surprised at how quickly some fx have abandoned worship or been very, very reluctant to introduce it’. In support Coles referenced the role of ‘folk rock’ worship in his own conversion, close to forty years earlier. ‘Worship’, while the style may change a little, is charismatic sung worship and, in that, Coles could have been speaking for the whole of a tradition that believes that singing is the most likely context in which to encounter God.

P+c experiential and biblical values are well encapsulated in Alpha, cited as much as any evangelistic programme in the literature reviewed. It has, arguably, been the single most important factor in moving charismatics towards process evangelism; though if Derek Tidball was correct and evangelical Anglicans had always leaned towards gradual rather than instantaneous conversion, the greatest impact would have been on nonconformists. With points of crisis in the ‘Holy

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179 CofE, Mission-shaped Church (First edition), vii.
181 http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/ondemand/rcrm/newwinevalues. 00:30:00-00:40:00 (No longer available. Downloaded 23 August 2012)
Spirit Weekend’ built into the course, it has demonstrated on a large scale the possibility of coming to faith slightly more slowly. Nevertheless, by the end of the course, and with their experience of the weekend or awayday, participants have had the opportunity to learn that charismatic sung worship is the gateway to encountering God.

Charismatics are aware of conversion as process and of journey, but it is not a dominant motif. P+c religion is heavy with anticipation, waiting for something to happen, while it is more than ready to forget disappointment and look on the bright side when the desired result is delayed. Widely shared across P+c churches, an orientation towards revival, based on roots in evangelical revivalism, leads to a preference for the sudden and punctiliar. Enthusiasm for revival stretches across the tradition not only within global movements but also in the UK, affecting many parts of the tradition with stirring messages and references to past awakenings. John Glass, until recently leader of the Elim denomination, has written on barriers to revival. Terry Virgo, founder of New Frontiers, the largest and probably fastest growing NC denomination, is concerned for people to again focus in that direction.


186 John Glass, Released from the Snare (Carlisle: Alpha, 2000).

187 Brierley, Statistics 2, 7; Section 7.
He longs for a ‘sudden outpouring’, ‘an outbreak of God’s presence’, and rehearses prophetic encouragements that promise ‘many conversions’.

That such revivalist yearnings are shared across the streams of the P+c tradition is evident in Virgo’s enthusiasm for a book on revival by the late and respected Assemblies of God minister, Colin Whittaker. In turn, Virgo’s short article on revival was cited in a keynote address at a national leadership conference of the Pioneer grouping. A report from the 2012 summer event of one of the charismatic networks referenced in MsC claimed, ‘…more people saved than I can ever remember.’ If tentative and nuanced stories of gradual response to the gospel are to be enthusiastically celebrated, to the degree that reports of ‘many saved’ over a few days, and the possibility of ‘large numbers of conversions’ engage the attention at present, it is clear that there is a need for further shifts to the paradigm. The questions are: ‘How might such a change come about?’ and ‘Might authentic revival in a post-ecclesial era look rather different to those that have gone before?’ Both of these are considerations for the later discussion of praxis.


192 Hollinghurst, Evangelism, 59.
NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION TO PUBLISHABLE ARTICLES

The main work on the literature review was completed in 2012 as a result of which my attention had been focused on possible mismatches between fresh expressions praxis and P+c priorities. During that period, research conversations with P+c missional leaders, and attendance at two Fresh Expressions conferences with a charismatic constituency reinforced that view. Nevertheless, insights from the reflective process within the broad Fresh Expressions movement merited consideration from P+c churches; namely, that a consensus had developed around conversion as process, and that a multidimensional model of conversion was emerging that marginalised encounter. An article exploring these issues in the light of charismatic theology was accepted for peer reviewed publication by the Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association.

As the research has developed, with the church planting conversation occurring in the background, it has been evident that the planting of ‘franchised’ churches, that seeks to replicate a successful model of church, has retained its appeal within the tradition. This was demonstrated, specifically in relation to Anglican initiatives in qualitative research by Dadswell and Ross, that highlighted a problem around the measurement of conversion growth, that has equally remained unresolved in FE. The second article, yet to find a publisher, has sought to address that issue from the perspective of narrativity, within the missiological and multidisciplinary context.

Continuing development of the literature review has led to the identification of further issues of relevance to empirical data and to the P+c context. These will be considered within the consideration of praxis.
Abstract

This article reflects on the fit between the conversion praxis of the charismatic tradition and that of Fresh Expressions, an influential contextual church planting movement within the UK and beyond. It argues that while there is the potential for charismatic praxis to give greater attention to conversion as process, there is a lack of attention within Fresh Expressions to the role of encounter in conversion. Provisional proposals are made for paying greater attention to the emotional dimension of conversion if charismatics are to engage more deeply with the strategy and other contextual mission approaches.

Keywords: Conversion, Evangelism, Fresh Expressions, Soul Survivor, Alpha, testimony

For many British churches, the closing years of the last millennium were characterised by involvement in a ‘Decade of Evangelism’ that increasingly reflected a change in the way conversion was occurring.

It can be said that the ‘evangelistic appeal’ has changed from ‘I want you to get out of your seat and come forward now...’ to ‘we invite you to join a group that will be exploring the Christian faith over the coming weeks at...’

The turn from Christendom culture was well advanced in the last years of the century and, in a changing environment, confrontational styles of evangelism were increasingly found to be ineffective. In this emerging context ‘many people in a sceptical culture and with less initial knowledge of Christianity will take much longer to reach decisions about faith and commitment’. As an evangelistic

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193 D. Halls, ‘Encounter in conversion’. JEPTA 35:2 (2015), 129-143. The referencing style has been updated for consistency with this portfolio.
enterprise, at the heart of the ‘Decade’ was a commitment to conversion – ‘bringing people to faith in Christ’. However, resultant growth was patchy, both in existing churches and within the associated church planting project. ‘No denomination achieved its church planting targets and numerical growth in plants was by transfer and restoration of those disengaged with some conversions’.

**Fresh Expressions**

One of the most developed responses to the disappointments of the twentieth century and the changing situation has been that of Fresh Expressions:

[The term ‘Fresh Expressions’] is a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them; because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church.

More than a decade from its inception, interest in this contextual church planting project goes well beyond its Anglican and Methodist origins, drawing in a wide variety of denominations and post-denominational networks, including many within the charismatic tradition. From the outset, four ‘post-denominational’

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198 ‘[S]ome have chosen not to adopt this approach – either because it does not fit their ecclesiology or because they are unconvinced by what they have seen’. Lings, *Church Planting*, 14–15.
199 While much was made in the earliest publications of the somewhat exotic variety of expression to be expected, the actual practice has been much less adventurous. In recent national research, while at least 20 different recognisable types of fresh expression of Church were identified, just three accounted for by far the larger number of all the types applied: Messy Church (a particular ‘brand’ of family ministry) 32%; child-focused church, 19%; café church, 11%. George Lings, *Evidence about Fresh Expressions of Church in the Church of England*, p. 5. http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=138729 (accessed October 28, 2014. No longer available but see updated figures: Lings, *Small Things*, Table 48, 152).
charismatic networks were listed as already having significant connections to Fresh Expressions and now a number of associated organisations sit within the wider charismatic tradition.\textsuperscript{10} The Director of the Elim denomination’s National Evangelism and Church Planting Department has made a plea for his denomination to engage with aspects of Fresh Expressions\textsuperscript{203} and Michael Moynagh includes the Assemblies of God among the denominations in which the idea of Fresh Expressions is taking root, even if the term is not used.\textsuperscript{204} Charismatic networks of many types are engaging with the strategy and many more are applying the principles.

\textbf{Conversion within Fresh Expressions}

Mission-shaped Church launched the Fresh Expressions project in 2004 and devoted more than a quarter of its pages to reporting almost thirty Anglican fresh expressions of church that had been planted in the preceding decade. In about half of these people are ‘saved’ and ‘discipled’, ‘prodigals return’, ‘networks’ are ‘evangelized’ and people are ‘brought to faith’, including as a result of ‘an appeal’ that resulted in ‘seven or eight professions of faith’. From the outset, conversion was central to the aims and the values of mission-shaped churches: ‘the challenge is to form communities that facilitate encounter with God and God’s people in such a way that convinces, converts and transforms those who respond to them’.\textsuperscript{205}

Eight years on, Michael Moynagh, an influential British missiologist and Director of Research for Fresh Expressions,\textsuperscript{206} published a major work, \textit{Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theory and Practice}, offering a theological rationale for the enterprise. In it he finds that anticipation of a point of conversion has been succeeded by expectation of process, a development characterised by a

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\textsuperscript{10} (Soul Survivor, Holy Trinity Brompton, New Wine, and St Thomas Crookes in Sheffield): CofE, \textit{Mission-shaped Church}, 43.


\textsuperscript{204} Moynagh, \textit{Context}, 70.

\textsuperscript{205} CofE, \textit{MSc}, 54, 61, 76, 13, 82.

\textsuperscript{206} The central organisation rather than the broad project.
move from crusades to courses such as Alpha. This evolution has led to further recognition of individual pathways to conversion, though he cautions against seeing any of this as a linear historical trend. ‘Someone’s pathway to faith may involve a course at some stage and on the course a person may come to a point of commitment’.\(^{207}\) In the context of this article it is worth noting that Moynagh has a problem with the use of commitment prayers in that, where previously the church has seen baptism as the rite of initiation, he considers that the growing use of faith commitment prayers in evangelical circles, from the Billy Graham crusades onwards, has ‘muddied the waters’,\(^{208}\) giving the impression that the ‘sinners’ prayer and all that went with it appeared ex nihilo in the 1950s.

The consensus around the idea of conversion pathways involving a three-stage movement from belonging to believing to behaving as a model for evangelism is now familiar within evangelism and church planting in the UK, even if there are concerns about its adequacy.\(^{209}\) While Moynagh is rightly cautious about the validity and theological underpinning of the methodologies he describes,\(^{210}\) this proposition deserves consideration, though with due regard both to the wide range of meanings given to its terms by practitioners and to its origins. The ‘belonging before believing’ construct now co-opted as an evangelistic strategy is derived from a sociological model of religious behaviour developed by social scientists.\(^{211}\) Nevertheless, at the present time, belonging-believing-behaving is the favoured operational model and it invites thoughtful challenge.

Importantly, it allows no space for encounter; the experiential dimension of conversion is not significant, even though Moynagh does allow for healing and other forms of answered prayer.\(^{212}\) He is less than comfortable with the experiential

\(^{207}\) Moynagh, Context, 338.

\(^{208}\) Ibid., 359.

\(^{209}\) Ibid., 334, 335-336.

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 197-198.


\(^{212}\) Moynagh, Context, 359.
emphasis of Alpha, citing James Heard’s critique, that, while conversion ‘involves the matrix of repentance, faith, receiving the Holy Spirit and baptism, the main stress is on experience, a charismatic encounter with the Holy Spirit, which then brings assurance of salvation’.

Fresh Expressions writers do provide accounts of conversions, both gradual and sudden, where there is intense spiritual encounter, though it is worth noting that the more dramatic encounters tend to occur in the testimonies of those with life controlling problems. In summary, in the dominant conversion praxis within Fresh Expressions, while cognitive, relational and volitional domains are granted top-level significance, the affective dimension is demoted. However, belief in Christ leads to transformed behaviour and to shared life in Christian community.

**Charismatic theology of conversion**

Understandings of conversion in Fresh Expressions and charismatic Christianity have much in common but the mismatch in the area of the emotions and experience is more problematic than is often realised. The broad charismatic tradition embraces a spirituality of encounter and its role in conversion is summarised by Keith Warrington from the classical perspective. Pentecostals emphasise

the place of experience in salvation and the ensuing transformation of their lives. A significantly emotional experience (often more than an intellectual one) is anticipated as occurring at the moment of conversion and many testify to that effect. Although this is not unique to Pentecostalism, it does fit in with their emphasis and expectation of religious experience. Furthermore, it adds to the incisive nature of conversion; for Pentecostals, conversion functions as a watershed moment before which the person was an unbeliever and after which s/he became a believer. Fewer Pentecostals speak of a coming to faith that took a period of time; most are able to identify the month and day when they became Christians.

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214 See, for instance, Goodhew, *Fresh!* and Male, *Unplugged*, 76.
Experience is essential to conversion and punctiliar conversion is the norm. In a text not lacking in footnotes, at this point Warrington does not cite sources: these two features are for him incontrovertibly evident. Indeed his focus on experience in conversion is shared across charismatic theology, even if there is greater divergence with regard to its punctiliar nature.

J. Rodman Williams’s systematic work, Renewal Theology, emphasises the crucial and climactic nature of conversion, while recognising that the term may also stand for repentance and faith, regeneration and even for the totality of salvation. In both NC and renewal streams, praxis was hugely affected by John Wimber. Through his Church Growth course at The Fuller School of World Mission, in conferences and in several books, he renewed the landscape with a focus on power evangelism. ‘The charismatic/ Pentecostal/third-wave person may be walking through the streets or marketplace praying, “Lord, show me who the Holy Spirit is on. Who’s ready?”’

His is a model that is both intrinsically experiential and geared

216 The core beliefs of the classical denominations in the UK are consistent with his view.


218 [The use of the term New Churches is discussed above. This footnote is retained as it appeared in the published article.] The term ‘New Churches’ overlaps with ‘Apostolic Networks’, common in Pentecostal and Charismatic studies. However, in the UK, ‘New Churches’ has wider usage within ecumenical discussions, both research and ecclesial. Churches Together in England has appointed a President representing the New Churches http://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/234711/Home/About/Presidents/The_six_Presidents/The_six_Presidents.aspx (accessed 28 October 2014) and the term continues to be used in quantitative studies. Brierley, Statistics 2. ‘Renewal’ is used to describe churches that espouse a charismatic spirituality within broader denominations.


220 Christy Wimber, Everyone Gets to Play: John Wimber’s Teachings and Writings on Life Together in Christ (Boise, ID: Ampelon Publishing, 2009), 167.
to a crisis decision; though he describes conversion as a process, it is dramatically accelerated by power encounter.\textsuperscript{221}

Wimber’s conversion praxis has been strongly influential in the ethos and theology of the Alpha course,\textsuperscript{222} which, likewise, affirms process but with a preference for acceleration and abbreviation. On one hand, “[w]hile they acknowledge that “Damascus Road style” conversions do occur, they stress that even these are part of a longer process or journey”.\textsuperscript{223} On the other hand, James Heard discerns a crisis soteriology in Alpha’s theology\textsuperscript{224} and finds that most of Alpha’s published testimonies refer to a datable, event-type conversion.\textsuperscript{225} Warrington clearly could have included all charismatics in expecting conversion to involve ‘a significantly emotional experience’. While not all focus on the watershed moment, he gets to the heart of the matter here, too, when he says that ‘fewer .. speak of a coming to faith that took a period of time’. In charismatic circles, it is what is testified to that matters.

**Empirical research on encounter and process**

There is some distance between Fresh Expressions and charismatic theology in regard to the punctiliar nature of conversion and considerably more in respect to the centrality of experience, though on turning to the limited research on charismatic praxis within the UK, the differences may be less obvious.\textsuperscript{226}

\textsuperscript{222} Heard, *Alpha*, 58.
\textsuperscript{224} Brookes, ‘Principles’, 73.
\textsuperscript{225} [Examples current at the date of publication were to be found on YouTube.] \url{https://www.youtube.com/user/thealphacourse} (accessed September 13, 2014).
\textsuperscript{226} Of the three studies described, only one includes a broad range of converts. Kay’s population is exclusively ministers and Tidball’s are Bible College students. However, given the current focus, these vocational populations would be expected to describe conversions conforming to normative expectations and are particularly pertinent.
In 1996–7 William Kay conducted a postal survey of ministers in Britain belonging to the Pentecostal denominations and achieved a response from 930, of whom 51.5 per cent had begun their Christian commitment in childhood. Commitment to Christianity had been gradual for 72.8 per cent of those who had grown up in the denomination in which they were now ministering; among those with a churchgoing background who had subsequently switched denominations, gradual commitment accounted for 64.2 per cent. Conversely, among those with no religious rite attending birth, 58.9 per cent had been converted suddenly and of those who switched denominations without having committed parents, 64.5 per cent experienced sudden conversions. Kay concludes that ‘in general terms ministers with a churchgoing background made a gradual commitment to their faith while ministers without a churchgoing background made a sudden commitment’. But perhaps even more significant in Kay’s data is that a third of the first group made a sudden commitment and that for almost 40 per cent of the latter group, commitment came more gradually. In all, almost 60 per cent of CP ministers surveyed by Kay experienced gradual conversion.

A slightly more recent study involved entrants to the London School of Theology (LST) who, in their application form, answered the question, ‘Please explain briefly when and how you came to faith in Christ’. Derek Tidball, then principal, analysed 180 of these responses in 2004. Of this population, 18 were from CP and 26 from NC denominations, meaning that almost a quarter came from an explicitly charismatic background. To these could be added an unstated number of

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228 An overall response rate of around 56% with some differences between the denominations.
230 Kay explains this by saying ‘presumably these young people had churchgoing grandparents or had simply been baptised as infants without any religious commitment on the part of their families’. Ibid., xix.
students that Tidball, because of his close contact, knew were from renewalist backgrounds.²³³

Tidball makes clear that his question, while open-ended, does ask ‘when’ and ‘how’ and he notes that, across the range of traditions, ‘the data underlines the desire to specify the “event” in which conversion occurred’. Charismatics are more likely – but not overwhelmingly so – to use the language of encounter with the Spirit but no more likely than other evangelical theological students to have reported having met or experienced Jesus.²³⁴

Finding Faith Today²³⁵ was a report for Churches Together in England (CTE) of research across the British denominations into adult conversion in the 12 months running up to late 1989, partly to provide a baseline for the upcoming ‘Decade’. Though NC and renewal stream both feature in this study, it does not separately identify the CP stream.²³⁶ Of its sample of 511,²³⁷ only 31 per cent said their experience was dateable, with 69 per cent saying it was gradual, and even among the NC congregations, which at that time were seeing twice as many conversions as the average, sudden conversions rose to only just over half of their new members.²³⁸ John Finney, who wrote the report, concluded that ‘the gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years’, though he does not dismiss the possibility of sudden conversions or that calls for commitment may be important steps on the way.²³⁹ While the CTE study was primarily concerned with mapping the path to commitment, it did include questions

²³³ Tidball, ‘Construction’, 96.
²³⁴ Ibid., 88, 96–7.
²³⁶ Finney, Faith, 6, 8.
²³⁷ Made up of 151 interviewees and 360 respondents to a postal survey, the latter with a 44% response rate. Ibid., 1.
²³⁸ Ibid., 24.
²³⁹ Ibid., 25.
about religious experience and found that for 43 per cent, such occurrences had been an important part of their spiritual journeys.\textsuperscript{240}

All 1,600 participants in the three studies were converted in the twentieth century,\textsuperscript{241} the majority of Kay’s ministers before 1975; since then the trend to gradual conversion has presumably gathered pace. Even so, most of the Pentecostal ministers fail to conform to Warrington’s punctiliar norm. The theological students do their best to provide dates but Tidball concludes that these claims obscure an underlying extended process.\textsuperscript{242} The CTE research found that even among those from the NC, where the rate of people finding faith as adults was highest, only half experienced sudden conversion, a figure that is not that far from Kay’s and certainly close enough to suggest that the pattern may not be vastly different between classical and newer charismatics. Both the LST study and the CTE study enquired about experience or encounter. In the former, only about a third of the charismatic students used the language of encounter, in most cases with a dramatic experience in mind. In the CTE study, nearly half of the total sample reported (wide-ranging) religious experiences.

**Enriching praxis**

Beyond the sources cited above, thinking about conversion in Fresh Expressions frequently has to be extracted from work that has been preoccupied with ecclesiology, particularly in the earlier years of the project. Similarly, charismatic conversion theology is briefly considered in discussions that have a major interest in pneumatology; it is rarely addressed directly. That said, there are several partners available for dialogue who offer potential for enrichment, including academic theologians Amos Yong and Simon Chan who are both frequently cited when considering the trajectory of Pentecostal theology. To these may be added the renewalist, Mark Cartledge, and NC Vineyard pastors and reflective practitioners, Rich Nathan and Ken Wilson. Their book, *Empowered Evangelicals*, with a foreword by J. I. Packer, offers a strongly experiential thesis but one that critiques

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 93–9.

\textsuperscript{241} Except for just a few of the theological students who may have applied to college within three or four years of conversion.

\textsuperscript{242} Tidball, ‘Construction’, 102.
the doctrine of subsequence.\textsuperscript{243} Theirs is a contended but influential perspective that nevertheless contributes to leading edge charismatic thought on the issues of encounter and punctiliar conversion.\textsuperscript{244}

Yong locates his theology of conversion within a multidimensional salvation.\textsuperscript{245} The personal aspect involves ‘individuals encountering and being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ by the Spirit’, as part of which there are ‘identifiable moments in which awareness of the need for repentance comes to the fore and lives are turned in the opposite direction from which they were headed’.\textsuperscript{246} He affirms a tension between once-for-all salvation and a gradualist tradition and proposes a dynamic progression, with Spirit baptism as a metaphor that ‘calls attention to the process of humans experiencing the saving graces of God along with the presence of crisis moments when such grace is felt as radically transformative’.\textsuperscript{247} Yong turns to Wesley’s via salutis, which ‘recognises the fluidity of all spiritual journeys’ and leads him to reflect: ‘Which of the many times in my childhood that I said the “sinner’s prayer” during my childhood years was “it”’?\textsuperscript{248} Recognising multidimensionality, dynamic tension and fluidity, any theology of conversion will resist systematic confinement\textsuperscript{249} if it is ‘commensurate with the complexity of the human encounter with God’.\textsuperscript{250} It will articulate the many aspects of repentance in which crisis moments are placed in the context of developing relationships that result in an unfolding process.


\textsuperscript{244} J. Rodman Williams, \textit{Empowered Evangelicals} \url{http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/BibleStudyAndTheology/DrWilliams/ART_empow.aspx} (accessed 23 October, 2018)

\textsuperscript{245} Amos Yong, \textit{The Spirit Poured out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 91–92.

\textsuperscript{246} Yong, \textit{Flesh}, 92.

\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 105.

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 104.

\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 107-108.

\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., 105.
By contrast, Simon Chan does not see any legitimate tension, forcefully rejecting crisis conversion as ‘an entrenched part of [popular evangelicalism’s] belief system’, which has produced a faulty doctrine of conversion.\textsuperscript{251} Evangelicals ‘cannot stop at a hazy reconceptualisation of conversion as progression’, but must understand an extended conversion process with some discernible stages of spiritual development rather than the evangelical view of the Christian life ‘as one big indistinct blob’.\textsuperscript{252} Conversion is not to be considered a once-for-all event but a multifaceted single work, which can be experienced in different fashions. The version of evangelicalism that Chan attacks seems similar to that from which many contextual church planters and missiologists distance themselves. They emphasise discipleship and formation rather than punctiliar conversion and, indeed, the belonging-believing-behaving model is an attempt to respond to these concerns.

Mark Cartledge\textsuperscript{253} studied the ‘ordinary theology’ of Hockley Pentecostal Church in the British midlands;\textsuperscript{254} as a practical theologian, he brought insights from denominational theology and the wider CP community\textsuperscript{255} together with the experience of church members and inter-disciplinary perspectives.\textsuperscript{256} Within each of the conversion testimonies he studied, he discerned a punctuated process, and called for a revisioned (or in his terms, ‘rescripted’) theology that would acknowledge an ongoing interaction ‘such that the Spirit being active in previous experiences could be expected to lead a person from one stage to the next’. It would recover a deeper multi-dimensional understanding of sin that could be communicated with sensitivity and respect. Testimonies would recognise that the Spirit, as well as working in signs


\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., \textit{Theology}, 88.

\textsuperscript{253} Mark J. Cartledge, \textit{Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology} (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

\textsuperscript{254} Now renamed. https://www.life-cc.co/history (accessed 23 October 2018)

\textsuperscript{255} The Assemblies of God and Catholic charismatic renewal.

\textsuperscript{256} Lewis R. Rambo, \textit{Understanding Religious Conversion} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), especially 5, 20–43.
and wonders, is active in ordinary ways, providing insight and wisdom that open up new possibilities.\textsuperscript{257}

\textbf{Reconfiguring conversion}

When these visions of a reconfigured theology of conversion are overlaid, a number of common features may be discerned. Each sees a charismatic theology of conversion rooted in evangelical understandings and each tends to identify evangelicalism as a unified whole. Only Nathan and Wilson acknowledge evangelical gradualism; arguably the dominant view until at least the middle of the nineteenth century, espoused by Charles Simeon,\textsuperscript{258} and currently by J. I. Packer\textsuperscript{259} and Gordon T. Smith.\textsuperscript{260} Each of our dialogue partners configures conversion as holistic in its scope and multi-dimensional,\textsuperscript{261} and emphasise that encounter with God is complex and challenges attempts at confinement. Each has space for a conversion-initiation complex and in which, explicitly for Chan and Cartledge, rites of commitment play a role. Each emphasises progression or process, which for Cartledge is best understood as punctuated rather than gradual. The importance of experience in conversion is threaded through their arguments. It is made specific by both Cartledge in his desire to stimulate testimony to the Spirit’s actions in the ordinary routines of life and in Chan’s concern to place Spirit baptism forward into the Christian life out of their concern to place Spirit baptism

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 60, 80, 15–18, 78.
\item \textsuperscript{258} Charles Simeon, \textit{Horae Homilecticae. Vol. XVI} (London: Holdsworth, 1833), 252.
\item \textsuperscript{260} Gordon T. Smith, \textit{Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 3–16.
\item \textsuperscript{261} See, for instance, Andrew Lord, \textit{Spirit-Shaped Mission: A Holistic Charismatic Missiology} (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{262} Yong, \textit{Flesh}, 290.
\end{itemize}
within conversion-initiation so that it is less likely to be seen as a ‘superadditum’; although, by considering Wesley’s *via salutis*, Yong opens up space for encounter before the watershed. Nathan affirms significant encounter prior to conversion and Cartledge engages sociological perspectives to extend conversion in both directions.

Broadening the theological base to include a greater appreciation of the complexity of salvation and the place of conversion within it has great potential to illuminate pastoral and missional practice. As Cartledge demonstrates, it brings top-down theology together with the experience of converts, for whom conversion, rather than a watershed moment, is often that of a more or less extended progression from dawning awareness to transformative faith. While within charismatic theology crisis conversion has often been normative, and where it has not a punctiliar praxis has been espoused, both experience and theology can accommodate a more gradual process. In this respect, as in many others, charismatics are well equipped to respond to the decline of Christendom and the resultant lack of initial knowledge of Christianity compounded by a sceptical culture.

However, an evangelistic practice and, by implication, a conversion that develops within only three dimensions – belonging, believing and behaving – is less easily accommodated. Charismatics prioritise experiential encounter in conversion, the opportunity for which is found, quintessentially, in the worship event. Against this, Fresh Expressions promotes a ‘serving first’ model of contextual church planting over a ‘worship first’ approach. While Moynagh allows some room for alternative approaches, the case for leaving worship to a late stage in the process is clearly pressed by Graham Cray.

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263 Chan, *Theology*, 90.
A frequent mistake is to start with an act of worship before relationships have been formed that would guide the design of that act of worship. Building community and mutual relationships, rather than just ministering to unconnected individuals, is vital if the fresh expression is to be a community rather than a weekly event. A public gathering for worship can then be shaped which takes proper note both of the gospel and its traditions and the specific people for whom it is intended.266

Cray, as part of the leadership of Soul Survivor, one of the biggest worship enterprises in the UK, is not unsympathetic to charismatic sensibilities but, if a contextualised worship event is to be long postponed, the question of alternative contexts for encounter must be addressed.

Warrington, himself, has returned to the issue of encounter in a passionately voiced article in this journal,267 expressing his concern that there is a decline in the attention paid to the experiential dimension, that ‘Pentecostals are losing their expectation of [transformative] encounters with the Spirit’.268 While this may not be the case for all charismatics, there are noted examples of decline; for instance in speaking in tongues within the American Assemblies of God,269 and there has been a more widely observed, if anecdotally reported, decline in the use of charismatic gifts in the UK.270 The causes of such trends are not considered in detail by Warrington; reaction against disappointment or perceived excess, routinisation or a lull before another charismatic wave may each be factors.

Nevertheless, he concludes that ‘it is crucial to enable believers to experientially and intellectually realise the Spirit inspired event of conversion and his involvement in their lives thereafter’. Moreover, ‘[t]here exists an assumption .. that the Spirit only rarely encounters believers’ and hardly ever in the routine decisions and needs of life. On one hand, there is a role for extraordinary experience – power encounter as a means of re-establishing a legitimate encounter with the world as mystery and with God as transcendent. On the other hand, both the extraordinary and the ordinary need to be situated so that ‘the role of the Holy Spirit .. in a theology of conversion .. can be understood not just by means of the “miraculous” but also in terms of the everyday and routine’. Warrington’s is a vital contribution that, taken together with those of charismatics partners, points to both the need and the potential to develop a reinvigorated and strengthened conversion praxis in several areas.

**Mundanity**

Warrington’s concern for encounter in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary is supported by Cartledge and by Nathan, both of whom point to the central role of testimony in affirming less dramatic experiences of God. The former proposes that in his rescripted theology, more considered testimonies would illuminate the ordinary, though the latter finds wanting the ubiquitous ‘three-minute testimony’ that results in abridged and simplistic narratives. Kay incisively comments:

> [Pentecostalism] as a form of Christianity that values experience and conveys this experience through personal testimony or public narrative is likely to perpetuate the importance of dramatic conversion accounts. Moreover, when this narrative is accompanied by accounts of conversion out of slavery to drugs or crime, theological considerations recede .. into the background. Clearly the role of testimony is not a

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273 Cartledge, *Testimony*, 78.
side issue in a theological trajectory that will do greater justice to the variety and particularity of God’s interactions with humanity.

Prevenience

Warrington is concerned for an increased recognition of the role of the Spirit as facilitator and object of encounter and his would be an important voice in giving explicit recognition to the role of the Spirit in a process that extends backwards to a period before any ‘watershed’. Nathan and Wilson, like Yong, recognise a multidimensional and complex process and puzzle over a young woman’s significant encounters with God that evidently occur before her conversion is anything like complete. Cartledge’s rescripted theology would expect a progressive and ongoing interaction with the Spirit, a punctuated process that is also recognised by Gavin Wakefield:

Conversion as turning or returning to God has personal, psychological and social dimensions. It means a change of belief, behaviour, belonging, in whichever order it may occur. It may take a long time, or can be quick; of more importance is that it is happening. By understanding more fully the ways in which conversion is experienced and described we can develop a proper flexibility in our ministries, without losing the urgency of the need to turn to God in faith and repentance.

Focusing on an umbrella decision, and marking that as a point of conversion, fails to account for the work of God, the demands of discipleship or the depth and complexity of the human experience. In addition to a pervasive narrative style, charismatics already possess structures such as open ministry time and mutual prayer ministry in small groups that engage diverse experiences and which, at their best, have a key place in affirming and making space to develop the emotional dimension. Such longstanding practice, arguably, has similar potential to that which Sara Savage identifies in new forms of church for ‘intersubjective experience that

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275 Warrington, ‘Challenges’, 205.
276 Nathan, Empowered, Kindle location 2443.
connects people to God’ and ‘provides support for the journey of personal transformation’. 279

Integration

However, Wakefield’s prescription will not suffice for Warrington and it will not meet the need for charismatic theologians across the tradition who are seeking a more complex, multidimensional understanding of conversion. At some point the nature of these ‘significant moments’ must be made explicit; there must be at least equal provision, in addition to belonging, believing and behaving, for experiential encounter with the Trinitarian God.

In this regard, the work of Vassilis Saroglou indicates lines of development in a model of religion and religiosity that adds to the three dimensions of belonging, believing and behaving. He proposes ‘bonding’ as a fourth dimension, defined as connecting emotionally with ‘the transcendent entity’, resulting in emotional regulation and attachment security leading to emotions of awe and inner peace.280 Though the ambiguity of the term ‘bonding’ is problematic,281 Saroglou has constructed a robust model that has been empirically tested and allows equal priority to the emotional dimension. Moynagh has endeavoured to acknowledge encounter in a number of places,282 though his less than whole-hearted affirmation of the experiential dimension of conversion does not provide an integrative framework. Fresh Expressions writers do tell some stories of experience, though it may be that many significant moments on the way are not reported because there is nowhere to locate them within belonging-believing-behaving. In fact the model has a blind spot that parallels the way in which the charismatic criteria for brief, dramatic and


281 While Saroglou is precise, his term is more often used by his associates to refer to bonding with others rather than primarily with God.

282 Moynagh, Context, 337, 419.
unambiguous testimonies may undervalue ordinary and incremental encounters with God.

**Conclusion**

There is little doubt that Christendom assumptions and values are in decline, probably terminally so, across much of Europe. In response, Fresh Expressions as a contextual approach that encourages churches not to plant in their own image has emerged, involving charismatics from its earliest stages. Indeed, given their pragmatic approach to mission it would be surprising if charismatics of all kinds were not to examine, test and, where appropriate, adopt new ways of reaching people for Christ. However, it is crucial that new contextual churches in the charismatic tradition facilitate encounter with God; otherwise they will only ever work as a bridge to something more effective. The missiologists of Fresh Expressions are well aware that theirs is a work in progress and scope exists for charismatic contributions to their project and to other – emergent or missional – contextual church planting perspectives. Such inputs need to be built on both an extended understanding of conversion and reaffirmation of charismatic priorities.

In a changing culture, there will undoubtedly continue to be some who meet Jesus on the Damascus Road but many more who encounter him on the way to Emmaus. Kay has noted the tendency of Pentecostals – though he could have equally well referenced the broader tradition – to lionise dramatic conversion stories and, inevitably, excitement over these extraordinary miracles will obscure our view of works of God that seem more mundane. Evidence from the pilot phase of my own research suggests that when stories of faith are decompressed from the testimony format and recounted away from the public eye, surprising – if sometimes ambiguous – stories of God-awareness are widespread. These tentative narratives of ordinary miracles may not fulfil the ritual requirements of public testimony but there are clear benefits for praxis in developing appropriate platforms for their retelling.

Conversion is demonstrably complex and while for some there is a watershed moment, for others there are several significant moments and not just for those of us who, like Yong, as children responded to altar calls at any and every opportunity. The punctuated nature of the conversion process is clear to any pastor who has the
privilege of supporting people who – by fits and starts – belong, believe and behave as disciples; though seemingly in no particular order. A theology that fails to observe remarkably untidy human pathways is unlikely to give rise to robust praxis.

Finally, though by no means exhaustively, there is a need to identify and signpost the range of situations in which experiential encounter occurs. The limited number of narratives that I have analysed to date, suggest a great variety. Classic worship events featured but so did multiple moments of quiet reflection, small group settings, dreams, enjoying the created world and sudden insights under the pressure of domestic life or while trying to get to sleep.

Other than as a heuristic device, it is too early to add an experiential dimension to the belonging-believing-behaving model. However, if these three dimensions do prove useful within charismatic praxis, it may be that the emotional, affective dimension of conversion could be labelled as ‘breakthroughs’ (noting the plural). Breakthrough is a potent metaphor in the ordinary theology of charismatics, emphasising the semantic possibilities of surprise and challenge as well as transformation. The downside is that, in its singular form, ‘breakthrough’ overplays to the dramatic but it may be that a rescripted theology, along the lines that Cartledge proposes, could affirm narratives of multiple breakthroughs that occur on ordinary pathways.
2B: COUNTING CONVERSION – THE HIDDEN COMPLEXITIES FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

In 2013 a qualitative research study into Anglican church planting made the following observation.

Hardly any church plants could tell us the number of new converts. We realise that this is not necessarily a simple question to answer as people have very different stories and life journeys on their way to Christ. But it did intrigue us that this type of data was not readily available.\(^{283}\)

This major study was of 27 projects, nineteen of which were described as ‘charismatic evangelical’. While other denominations rarely put so much resource into asking the most difficult questions, there is ample evidence of similar vagueness. My own research into conversion in Pentecostal and NC denominations has been met by initial enthusiasm from church leaders. However, the task of identifying adults with little or no church background who have been converted in the last five years has proved too much for many, even where there have recently been widely circulated reports of substantial growth.

While there are undoubtedly multiple reasons for the difficulty in gathering people able and willing to tell stories of conversion, there is anecdotal evidence that it is not only for highly visible Anglican church plants that ‘numbers and figures can be viewed as problematic – not only in terms of recording and interpreting but also because they can create stressful expectations’. Even for the well-established, they can seem ‘disempowering’; drops in numbers can be ‘traumatic’, and ‘numbers are not as positive as the hype’.\(^{284}\) Warner identified widespread ‘vision inflation’ in the late twentieth century that characterised, conversionist-activist, entrepreneurial

\(^{283}\) Dadswell, *Planting*, 63.

\(^{284}\) Ibid., 66–67.
evangelicalism. Its narrative of imminent success proved untenable then, and it seems that unrealistic expectations have continued into this century, too.

It is nevertheless surprising that the inability of church plants to identify converts has not led to widespread discussion. For charismatics and for evangelicals, however else missional effectiveness is measured, conversion is as a matter of core belief; more important than the return to church of those who have opted out previously, or transferred from other less attractive congregations. The argument of this article is that giving greater attention to conversion, not only as missional praxis but from multidisciplinary perspectives, will be beneficial in a number of ways. In considering the direction of travel of evangelistic practice, it will raise issues of definition. It will also suggest fruitful areas in which psychosocial perspectives might illuminate strategy. It will lead to some suggestions for the causes of the issue identified by Dadswell, and make some small and provisional proposal of how data on conversions might be added to accounts of successes.

**Psychosocial perspectives**

Church use of the term ‘conversion’ has arguably become less frequent over a period when psychosocial interest has been increasing, even though ‘[c]onversion has been the classical topic in the psychology of religion and has been studied earlier and more extensively than many of its students realise’. For a while around the middle of the twentieth century, it is considered that interest receded, perhaps because of expectation of religious decline in the Western world. However,

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286 Ibid., 145, 236.


288 Interest in conversion overlaps at least psychology, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology. ‘Psychosocial’ is a convenient term to incorporate all these perspectives.

interest in the psychology of religion, and specifically academic publishing on conversion, is now judged to be increasing, with an ‘astonishing contemporary proliferation of books and articles’. While in part this is due to sociologically oriented interest in new religious movements (NRM) during the latter part of the twentieth century, those reviewing the field are convinced it represents a real and significant change.

In a recent survey of the field, Raymond F. Paloutzian makes a distinction between spiritual transformation, which occurs outside of any institutional involvement, and religious conversion. The latter is characterised by a distinctive change that is not accounted for by developmental process. The transformative process in conversion may take variable amounts of time, ranging from a few moments to several years, but it is the distinctiveness of the change in which he sees its central identifying element. In contrast to someone arriving at a point of belief through the process of socialization or other developmental mechanisms, the convert can identify a time before which the religion was not accepted and after which it was accepted. ‘This is a unique kind of change that has yet to be explained by a powerful model’.

Paloutzian identifies several changes that are each pertinent to the contemporary missional conversation. Both the individual and their context are of equal importance for an understanding of spiritual transformation, particularly the person’s fit with the religious institution. This latter issue and its missional relevance is briefly discussed in a recent review of Jindra’s sociological study of conversion. In this she highlights the differential attraction of both closed and open institutional environments, and the importance of the match between religious content and converts. These and others of her observations have implications for contemporary

291 Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill and Bernard Spilka, The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach (New York: Guilford, 2009), 209. Hood refers to a change within the social psychology of conversion from a psychological to a sociological focus.
and contextual church planting.\(^{293}\) He draws attention to renewed interest in the conversion career, and with it deconversion, adding new levels of insight to the understanding of conversion as process, and the possibility of a more sophisticated understanding of what it means to be ‘de-churched’.\(^{294}\) In psychosocial discussions about conversion ‘a strong preference for the semantics of spirituality’ is evident.

In a separate review of the field, Ralph W. Hood has paid particular attention to paradigm change within the study of conversion. He describes a classical research approach to conversion that is psychological in orientation, and tends to focus on a radical transformation of self. The coherence of these views over an extended period is such that it has been possible to describe an old conversion paradigm:

1. The prototype is Paul’s conversion.
2. The process is more emotional than rational.
3. The convert is a passive agent acted upon by external forces.
4. The conversion entails a dramatic transformation of self.
5. Behaviour change follows from belief change.
6. Conversion occurs once and is permanent.
7. Conversion occurs in adolescence.
8. Conversion occurs suddenly.

Nevertheless, alongside this endorsement of a Damascus Road archetype, with a consequent emphasis on crisis conversion, there have been alternative voices.\(^{295}\) Hood points to James Pratt, who alongside an emotional crisis conversion,


identified, across religions, a type that was more gradual and volitional.\textsuperscript{296} In some conversions ‘the convert is not likely to experience a single decisive point at which conversion is either initiated or completed’,\textsuperscript{297} nor is there an emotional crisis.

Against the dominant classic conversion paradigm, a contemporary version has developed, in which a number of changes, including those anticipated by Pratt, are notable. The initiative has moved to sociologists and anthropologists, focused on new religious and spiritual movements or Christian sectarian groups. Interviews have taken the place of a single set of measurements, research has focused on gradual conversion or transformation and, most recently, deconversion has been incorporated within the research framework. The main features in this emerging paradigm are as follows:

1. Conversion occurs gradually.
2. Conversion is rational rather than emotional.
3. The convert is an active, seeking agent.
4. There is self-realisation in the humanistic tradition.
5. Belief change follows from behaviour change.
6. Conversion is not necessarily permanent; it may occur several times.
7. Conversion occurs in early adulthood and continues.
8. No one experience is prototypical.\textsuperscript{298}

\textsuperscript{297} Hood, \textit{Psychology}, 232.
\textsuperscript{298} Ibid., 217.
TABLE 1: Classic and contemporary conversion paradigms compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASSIC PARADIGM</th>
<th>CONTEMPORARY PARADIGM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Conversion is sudden</td>
<td>• Conversion is gradual</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Middle adolescence to late adolescence</td>
<td>• Late adolescence to early adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Emotional, suggestive</td>
<td>• Intellectual, rational</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Stern theology</td>
<td>• Compassionate theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Passive</td>
<td>• Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Release from sin and guilt</td>
<td>• Search for meaning and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasises intra-individual, psychological processes</td>
<td>• Emphasises inter-psychological processes</td>
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</tbody>
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Hood draws attention to widely cited work by Lofland and Skonovd that had the potential to link these two paradigms (and the psychological and sociological orientations they represent). A series of conversion motifs were proposed as an integrative model: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. These differentiated motifs allowed for variation across a number of dimensions: degree of social pressure, temporal duration, level of affective arousal, affective content and belief/behaviour as a sequence of change. As well as attempting analysis in terms of ‘objective’ phenomena, this approach did make way for converts to describe different kinds of, and motives for, conversion. These narratives pointed to a ‘raw reality’, though the empirical data generated was understood to be in the nature of a ‘conversion account’ and the agency and reflexivity of the convert was understood to be flawed.

This approach contributed to complexifying conversion by making space for, albeit limited, recognition of variance and particularity. It included motifs associated with punctiliar conversion, and those that suggested a more extended process. It could accommodate the intellectual and the mystical (Damascus Road) conversion,

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299 Ibid., 216.
301 See Beckford’s understanding of stories of conversion within the Jehovah’s Witnesses as ‘account giving’, constructed according to guidelines which define appropriate conversion. James A. Beckford, ‘Accounting for Conversion’, *The British Journal of Sociology* 29:2 (1978), 249–262.
the revivalist, and the affectional in which belonging was particularly significant. For some converts, ‘personal attachments or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process’, and for others, conversion followed extended research and reflection. Loflund and Skonovd discovered in these novel ‘affectional’ and ‘intellectual’ motifs, increasing occurrences of new central meanings to conversion, reflecting the ‘reality construction of the sixties’ and the privatisation of religion. Their view was that the different paradigms were not just the result of changing investigator perspectives, but the result of increased variety and difference in conversions. Widely influential, particularly in relation to multidimensional and integrative models of conversion, they pointed the way to factors such as behaving and believing, and in their identification of affectional conversion, drew attention to the role of belonging – dimensions that have become the commonplaces of missional discourse and embodied within more recent integrative models of religiosity and conversion.

Paloutzian and Hood are largely positive in their assessments of these developments. The anthropologist, Gooren is less so. In reviewing some of the studies on which these and other researchers have based their analyses, Gooren identifies a number of enduring weaknesses in the current theoretical offering. Among other issues, an overemphasis on crisis and tension has left its mark on theory, even now. As well as a number of detailed criticisms including a continuing preoccupation with adolescence and young adulthood, he finds, more generally, that ‘reductionist approaches … reduce religion to social-economic or psychological factors’. Part of his answer is to develop a conversion career approach on a different basis to that of Richardson. He also recommends the extension of multidisciplinary co-operation. ‘The social science approaches to conversion would

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305 Ibid., 43–53.
benefit greatly from the import of theology and mission studies to balance their inherent tendency to reduce religion to societal, cultural, or individual factors’.  

**Missiological perspectives**

Among these developments within psychosocial enquiry, are pointers to areas with which missional theologians have already engaged, though with little interdisciplinary reflection, such as that evidenced almost 100 years ago in the challenge to the ‘Damascus Road’ event as archetypal conversion, so that even now an Emmaus Road alternative archetype seems surprising. Conversely, interaction with missional practitioners might have allowed Loflund to have recognised that the ‘affiliational’ and ‘intellectual’ journeys to faith, rather than being developments of ‘the sixties’, had a long heritage. Alongside Gooren, collaborative enterprise is endorsed by Paloutzian, who suggests that the most interesting questions may be at the edge of the disciplines and that ‘the most intellectually rich research in the future will occur at those boundaries’. In his seminal *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo describes a wide range of perspectives that informed his research, including that of ‘missiologists, who, concerned primarily with religious or spiritual dimensions of conversion, are frequently critical of secular academics, whom they see, not unjustly, as tending to minimize religious factors’.

However, the ‘astonishing’ resurgence of interest in conversion has largely gone unnoticed by mission practitioners within the United Kingdom; there is little evidence of current or recent reflection, specifically on conversion as a topic, at a level that affects praxis. There may be a number of reasons for this. The influential *Finding Faith Today* (FFT) research into conversion was conducted ready for the start of the Decade of Evangelism in 1990. Its purpose was to ‘examine the spiritual journeys by which people are finding faith in God through Christ at the

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309 This was an initiative of the Church of England that was widely adopted by other denominations.
present’ and ‘to draw conclusions from this research on the comparative merits of different evangelistic methods’. With a sample of 500 participants from the 1989 cohort of those making public professions of faith it found that more people came to faith gradually than suddenly; 38% had a datable, more or less sudden experience. All of these identified a time when they had not been Christians, and would have fitted Paloutzian’s characterisation. However, only those with a sudden experience were identified as ‘conversionists’ in the research; the others were ‘gradualists’.

There had long been a ‘gradualist’ evangelical understanding of conversion. Tidball notes that ‘it was not until after [Charles] Finney that conversion came to be mass produced’. 310 By the middle of the twentieth century, conversion had become associated with a particular kind of approach to evangelism, embodied in the Billy Graham crusades. Confidence in the effectiveness of large evangelistic events had always been limited to certain groups and, even among those, there was concern about their effectiveness within a changing society. A decade before, those planning Mission England had sought to supplement a new round of Graham crusades with small scale outreach methods, like Mike Wooderson’s *Good News Down the Street*, 311 and introduced nurture groups that it was hoped would increase retention. In the Decade of Evangelism there was no consensus supporting another round of large events; use of the term conversion was declining, even if more than a third of those who found faith from a non-Christian base had found faith more or less suddenly.

By 1996, at the halfway point of the Decade, it was possible for the Anglican Church to ‘identify enriching trends in evangelism’: from telling to living, from the search for truth to the search for identity, from declaration to celebration, from gathered to dispersed, from doctrine to spirituality, from speaking to listening, from event to process. 312 That latter shift was, in part, a response to a culture in which a background knowledge of faith could no longer be assumed, and where people wished to question and engage at the personal level. More importantly, this was

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310 Derek Tidball, *Evangelicals*, 120.
311 Training led by Gavin Reid and Eddie Gibbs, in which I took part. See: Michael Wooderson, *Good News Down the Street* (Bramcote: Grove,1994).
down to a shift of perception; coming to faith was a journey that took time, and in which belonging preceded believing.

Given the fact that FFT had ‘established this beyond doubt’, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been little further research in the area. In 2004, fifteen years on, the original FFT research team had decided that it would not be worth the investment to repeat the research. Their intuition was that the proportions had moved, perhaps, five percentage points towards the ‘gradualists’. The only direct follow-up study has been of theological college students at Cranmer Hall in Durham (CH). The major difference found, ten years on, was that a slightly higher proportion of respondents indicated a sudden conversion than in the FFT study. A separate study with a separate group of theological students, at the London School of Theology (LST), analysed answers to a question on student application forms and found that most offered a date for conversion though, on this occasion, an underlying extended process was discerned. The FFT participants were older than the students, and all of them experienced conversion in 1989; whereas for the student groups, if childhood conversions are excluded, it would mostly have occurred marginally later, in the 1990s. However, populations in the studies are substantially different for reasons apart from age. The authors of the CH study point out that prospective clergy may well have a different path to that of others in the churches, and both the student groups were more evangelical in tradition than the broad population of FFT. In the case of the LST students, when invited to tell how and when they came to faith, applicants to an evangelical college might well present their stories in terms that they thought might appeal to college authorities.

The CH authors point out that there was no theological discussion in the FFT report. In the intervening period, a discourse of conversion has been in many areas effectively eclipsed by a narrative of journey and discipleship, a changing evangelistic paradigm, described by Hollinghurst, in which the evangelist becomes a

313 Ibid., 65.
314 Interview with John Finney, 21 August 2015.
companion in the ‘process of conversion’. Effectiveness is no longer measured by people crossing a boundary, but by an evangelist’s ‘ability to relate the Christian message to people where they are on their journey’. A movement from point to process to pathway has become established in contemporary evangelical understandings. Day has identified a ‘turn to the social’ in belief – ‘believing in belonging’ – that sits uncomfortably with evangelical faith.

[PARTICULARLY WITH ADOLESCENTS, I FOUND BELIEF NOT ABSENT BUT RELOCALED TO A SOCIAL REALM WHERE IT IS … ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING. THE YOUNG PEOPLE I INTERVIEWED APPEARED GROUNDED IN THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS… THE PEOPLE IN WHOM MANY YOUNG PEOPLE BELIEVE, AND WITH WHOM THEY BELONG TO, [SIC] ARE THEIR INTIMATES: FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, ALIVE OR DEAD.]

Behaving has been added to belonging and believing, giving a degree of multidimensionality to conversion. However, it has sometimes been reductively understood as church attendance, or doing church rather than encompassing the ethical domain. There seems to be a clear and present danger of conversion as Paloutzian understands it, being supplanted by some kind of socialisation, resulting in nominalism if the focus is on belonging and engaging in church attending behaviour. Richard Peace has pointed out that whatever its advantages, the danger of that path comes with a danger of a return to nominalism; ‘that it calls people to community without sufficient focus on what it means to be a child of God whose primary allegiance is to Jesus’. Peace defines conversion thus:

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317 Hollinghurst, *Evangelism*, 185
318 Ibid., 185.
Christian conversion is conscious commitment to Jesus (by repentance and faith). Such a commitment is expressed in a variety of ways – through belief, via baptism and confirmation, in membership and participation in a Christian community, through participation in the sacraments. In the end, conversion is about the human experience of God’s saving grace – awareness, consciousness, commitment, deliberately turning one’s life around, coming to a whole new understanding of what life is all about.  

His understanding, with an additional focus on conscious commitment, fits well with the psychosocial contemporary paradigm and with the believing–belonging–behaving model of conversion, focusing on the cognitive, the social and, hopefully, the ethical domains. The emotional domain is marginal to both and the emphasis on experience of encounter with God is a potential casualty of a movement from ‘point’, to ‘process’, to ‘pathway’.

This movement together with the believing–belonging–behaving model has been placed in the context of a discourse of discipleship by Michael Moynagh, for whom the experiential dimension of conversion is not of the highest priority. He does make space for healing and for other answered prayer, but it is unclear whether these are meant to be more an intellectual or emotional experience. In support of his position, he cites Kreider’s view that, at least before Augustine, a low profile was given to experience, though he fails to notice that Kreider also finds that pre-Christendom conversion might be accompanied by a powerful experience. The conversion narratives of Justin and Cyprian, and Tertullian’s account of an unconverted husband who had felt mighty works, each include intense experiential encounter. ‘Liberation from demonic power was one of the chief benefits that the churches could offer its potential converts … Believing and belonging could thus

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322 Moynagh, Context, 334-337, 359, 419.
323 Ibid., 336–337.
324 Ibid., 341–342.
326 Ibid., 4–5.
327 Ibid., 13.
come about through experience in which people apprehended the superior power of the Christian God’. By his use of examples, Kreider appears to undermine his own model. Nevertheless in this apparent neglect of emotional experience, Moynagh is further aligned with the contemporary psychosocial paradigm in which conversion is intellectual and rational rather than emotional and suggestive.

**Measuring conversion**

Having reviewed both current psychosocial paradigms and missional understandings of conversion it is instructive to return to the presenting issue, that of measuring conversion.

- Is it to be characterised, as does Paloutzian, as being focused on change, on a clear division between before and after, with little evidence of developmental process?
- Is it a definite decision likely made in adolescence, more emotional than intellectual, consistent with the classical paradigm?
- Is it a gradual process with discipleship development, extending both before and after?
- Is it a step on a post-modern pathway?

Hood’s advice to psychosocial researchers might well be applied to missional investigation also. ‘Like sudden conversions, gradual conversions result in a major change … We must note in each case the empirical criteria used to assess conversion, and must keep these in mind when comparing individual empirical studies’. That caution resonates with Dadswell. ‘The language of planting is confused and not shared. Although this can be frustrating, we recommend clarity about shared meaning along with a willingness to live with overlaps and blurred boundaries’. If that applies anywhere, it applies to how conversion is to be discerned. For those leading church plants, the ability to identify numbers of conversions requires confidence and developed reflexive praxis. In the light of the

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328 Ibid., 17.
complexity of the contemporary missional conversation, it is less surprising that even those leading church plants, who might reasonably be assumed to be highly motivated to help people find faith, cannot readily quantify success in doing so.

As a practitioner, it is easy to empathise with the concerns of Dadswell’s respondents, and to imagine what the pressures must be on those who are recipients of scarce resources, diverted from other purposes, with some expectation of return on investment. Nevertheless, in this article there is a legitimate and compelling interest in considering conversion growth, though doing so is highly problematic. In the last two decades of the twentieth century I was closely involved in crusade evangelism, on occasion, as the person who introduced the evangelist and sat behind him as he invited people ‘to get up out of [their] seats’. In that moment, there was a clear criterion on which to judge success; it was only in retrospect that it became evident that professions of faith had all too rarely led to discipleship growth in many cases.

Some of Dadswell’s church planters ‘express[ed] tension/ambiguity around the concept of success. [This tension] appears to be between growth in numbers of members and/or converts and growth in depth of discipleship and, in many cases, impact on the community’.\(^\text{331}\) That was probably an unnecessary dichotomy and it did not affect all of the plants studied. One was able to clearly define the number of converts in a year. ‘The leader of the missional communities’ work in Sheffield declared, “In a 12-month period, 60 came to [Christ] and are being discipled in [MCs]”’.\(^\text{332}\) There are risks inherent in attempting to interpret a single line quotation, but it does raise some questions. In this context, what does it mean to come to Christ? Does discipleship only commence once conversion has occurred? Are there exceptions to this linear process? It seems likely that only a more or less punctiliar view of conversion, underlying if not overt, and characteristic of the classical psychosocial paradigm, would allow that degree of clarity.

\(^{331}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{332}\) Ibid., 68.
Another church planter ‘had a solid grasp on conversion numbers (“10 converts per year – 12 people on current Alpha of which nine are non-Christians”’).\textsuperscript{333} By reputation, Alpha has experienced more success with those already attending church and the 20 per cent who are ‘open dechurched’, ‘people who have left church at some point, but are open to return if suitably contacted and invited’.\textsuperscript{334} Any conversions, intensifications, or renewed commitments are to be welcomed as a work of God, but bald conversion figures give little information about whether those converts already attended church, were recently de-churched or had never been involved. Other strands of Anglican church growth research are at pains to distinguish between these categories, presumably for good reason.\textsuperscript{335}

The missional communities’ leader appeared to work with a model that expected discipleship to commence after conversion. Since the 1970s, the Engel Scale\textsuperscript{336} has offered hope of providing a conceptual progression to faith; more recently, Everts and Schaup have suggested a post-modern path to faith, with a number of steps.\textsuperscript{337} Moynagh relates these steps to scenarios in which knowing where people are on their journeys leads to clarity in being able to point to the next step; as a strategic support, it is easy to see its usefulness. Laying aside the value for practice of the image of pathways, it may in some ways seek to represent a process of the Spirit’s work in people’s lives. If so, that work should be celebrated, even in ‘the day of small things’.\textsuperscript{338}

A somewhat different issue is raised by Moynagh in \textit{Church in Life}. There, he explores a discipleship process that relies on companionship and is not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{333} Ibid., 67.
\item \textsuperscript{334} CofE, MsC, 37.
\item \textsuperscript{335} Claire Dalpra and John Vivian, \textit{Who’s There? The Church Backgrounds of Attenders in Anglican Fresh Expressions of Church} (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, November 2016), 4, 25–27.
\item \textsuperscript{336} James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton, \textit{What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest? A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism} (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1975), 45.
\item \textsuperscript{337} Don Everts, and Doug Shaupp, \textit{Pathway to Jesus: Crossing the Thresholds of Faith} (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2009); cited in an adapted form in Moynagh, \textit{Being Church}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{338} Lings, \textit{Small Things}, 9.
\end{itemize}
conditional on people making the next step or following the next signpost.\textsuperscript{339} That kind of relationship may construe measurement as particularly hostile, and eventually illustrates the sort of ‘open-ended pathway that never arrives’\textsuperscript{340}. If belonging-believing-behaving has staying power as a multidimensional model it will imply uneven and variable progression which may further complicate understanding of conversion, resulting in what Drane calls ‘messy discipleship’—flexible, unpredictable and ambiguous.\textsuperscript{341} Yong explores a more complex, but better defined, multidimensional scheme proposed by Gelpi, and comes to the conclusion that:

\begin{quote}
The dynamic, complex and interactive series of conversion processes mean not only that any theology of conversion will resist systematic definition but also that every conversion experience in any domain serves as a divinely gracious prompt for deeper conversion in other domains…\textsuperscript{342}
\end{quote}

It is not without significance that he has developed a theology of religions in which who is of God is only to be discerned in the medium term by the fruit of the Spirit and, ultimately, is deferred until the eschaton. If Yong is correct, attempting to measure conversion growth in the short, or even medium, term is a particularly speculative activity.

\textbf{Let me tell you a story}

As a missional practitioner I am left wondering; if I was asked to allocate numbers to attendance or conversion growth, to discipleship growth or to community impact, what I would say? The possibility of easily identifying converts is dependent on a view that conversion is best understood as a punctiliar decision. For Chan, speaking from an Asian perspective, this is ‘an entrenched part of [popular evangelicalism’s] belief system’\textsuperscript{343} which has produced a faulty doctrine of conversion. He sees the key initiative to a redefinition of conversion in a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{339} Michael Moynagh, \textit{Life}, 392–393.
\bibitem{340} Moynagh, \textit{Being}, 142–143.
\bibitem{341} Drane, ‘Messy Disciples’, 126.
\bibitem{342} Yong, \textit{Flesh}, 108.
\bibitem{343} Chan, \textit{Pentecostal Theology}, 87.
\end{thebibliography}
conversation between charismatics and evangelical Anglicans in the UK dating back to 1977, in which the more comprehensive term ‘Christian initiation’ is preferred to ‘conversion’.

Conversion cannot be considered a once-for-all event but a multifaceted single work, which is ‘apprehended and experienced by different individuals in different ways and time-scales’. It is not susceptible to an overarching theory.

My provisional proposal is based on a number of ecumenical insights, reinforced by those of multidisciplinary scholars such as Rambo and Gooren. Moynagh, an Anglican evangelical, has suggested that conversion is better considered as an individual pathway than a point. Gelpi (a Catholic and a charismatic), together with Yong (a pentecostal – his choice of lower case), has identified a complex system of interactive processes within conversion that defy definition. Chan has characterised conversion as a complex and probably unique work. The particularity of conversion in its many-sided intricacy presents a strong argument against its reduction to unqualified numbers. Conversion, as a work of the Spirit, is more suited to qualitative than to quantitative analysis. On the other hand, Luke did choose to record numerical growth on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), though counting converts did not seem to continue as a routine activity.

At the outset of his analysis, Dadswell commended both quantitative and qualitative evaluation. ‘A focus on numerical growth is important but it is not the only aspect of church growth to be acknowledged. We recommend a wider understanding of growth that takes into account more than just numbers’. To place numbers first, and to be vague about alternative measures, undermines both the contribution of psychosocial scholars and the missional conversation over the last quarter of a century, at least. It is important that narratives come before numbers. The empirical criteria used to assess conversion will vary between networks, churches and individual practitioners. ‘Clarity about shared meaning along with … overlaps and blurred boundaries’ sought by Dadswell is most likely be surfaced in

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narrative, in complex stories of the involvement of a transcendent God in mundane lives. Next time I am asked, ‘How many converts have you seen?’ I hope I will answer: how long have you got?
NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

Had the literature review or discussions with mission specialists identified successful contextual church plants within the tradition (i.e. that did not start from inherited forms) for adults, mixed method research on one or two sites would have been indicated. As it was, the methodological review was probably the most straightforward project within this portfolio. Once the growing literature on narrative inquiry was accessed, it was not difficult to recognize a strong case for locating the research within that family of methods. Narrative and experience are strongly valued across the P+c tradition and the choice of method was reinforced by the fact that practitioners would be more convinced by testimonies than by other data; stories of lives – particularly of those currently being converted. However, the extended stories of those whose conversions are mundane but make up the majority of P+c congregations are rarely celebrated. Consequently, the pilot study was guided by a hypothesis that encounter was likely to be an important element in conversion, even among those who had not experienced punctiliar or dramatic conversions. It was also hypothesised that in the contemporary era – for people who had little or no church background – both conversion and encounter may deviate from the conventional P+c narrative of conversion of previous eras.
3: THE PLACE OF ENCOUNTER IN CONVERSION – ESTABLISHING A METHODOLOGY

Conceptual framework

The goal of this thesis is, within the P+c churches, to gain insight into the frequency, range, salience and context of encounter in the conversion of people with little previous experience of church and to consider implications for mission. The role of field research is to identify the spread of encounters with God, the variety of such felt experiences, the contexts in which they occur and their salience compared to the commonplaces of contemporary conversion: belonging, believing and behaving. The quintessential location for encounter has been the worship event.\(^{347}\) If encounter in conversion is occurring elsewhere, and in other ways, then ‘finding out what God is doing and joining in’, seems an obvious thing to do.

The relevance of increased understanding of the role of emotional experience has potential to extend into the wider evangelical tradition and beyond. Neumann, in seeking to develop an ecumenical perspective on Pentecostal experience\(^ {348}\) has cited Gelpi\(^ {349}\) and Cox,\(^ {350}\) among others, in discerning a wide turn to experience in contemporary Christianity. Encounter is central to the evangelically inclusive Spring Harvest holiday conferences, which exist ‘to create opportunities for you to encounter God, be changed by that encounter and go out and change the world’.\(^ {351}\) On the other hand, the emotional dimension of conversion is less prominent within fx. Belonging, believing, and behaving are – in the contemporary era – the common dimensions of conversion and though experience is admitted it is less often mentioned.\(^ {352}\) Framing a more substantive role for encounter in conversion is the

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\(^{350}\) Cox, *Fire*, 304–308.

\(^{351}\) Available: [https://www.springharvest.org/about/](https://www.springharvest.org/about/) (accessed 23 October 2018)

\(^{352}\) Moynagh, *Context*, 337, 419.
model recently advanced by Vassailis Saraglou, which is likely to be heuristically useful. Specifically, he proposes that religiousness includes: (a) **believing** specific ideas regarding the transcendent entity and its relations with humans and the world; (b) **bonding** emotionally through private and collective rituals with the transcendent entity and then with others; (c) **behaving** in a way to conform to norms, practices and values perceived as established by the transcendent; (d) **belonging** to a group that is self-perceived as eternal and is filled with the presence of the transcendent. Bonding, the emotional dimension of religiosity, securely locates experiential encounter with God within an integrative psychological model rather than as option to be added or subtracted from the main agenda. While other models exist, both psychological and theological, this model has several advantages: it maps on to current missional practice with fx and the broader project; it is relatively uncomplicated by the multiplication and sub-division of factors; within the model, the four dimensions of religiosity correspond to ‘four major kinds of motivation for conversion’.

**Methodological options**

Within the P+c tradition – explicitly within CP praxis, but to a greater or lesser degree within other expressions – a dominant discourse of radical conversion has set the standard for an encounter worth sharing. That discourse neglects complexity, and effectively downgrades the less spectacular and more gradually transformative experiences of a significant proportion of converts across the tradition. If less dramatic stories of encounter are effectively suppressed, the task of recovering them is unlikely to be straightforward. Promoting previously undervalued narratives to centre field will undoubtedly complexify the account of conversion. Human encounter with God is multifaceted and the particularity of human experience is correspondingly diverse; it is necessary to challenge reductionist tendencies in charismatic practice along with essentialism and normativity in charismatic theology.

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353 See: 2a above.
Qualitative methods

Empirical research into conversion in the UK by Finney, Kay and Tidball has shed indirect light on conversion in the wider charismatic context, regarding encounter and conversion as process, employing a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Other multidisciplinary studies of conversion have also been briefly referenced above but these have often been opaque and theoretically driven and unlikely to offer methodological guidance. Corbin and Strauss consider that ‘research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons’ experiences with a phenomenon, like illness, religious conversion, or addiction\textsuperscript{356} is ideally suited to qualitative approaches.

Taves describes four kinds of data that can be gathered relative to experience: neurological, observable, unobservable and \textit{post hoc}, the last revealing experience that may not be confirmed by others.\textsuperscript{357} Focusing on those whose conversions have been unspectacular, and for whom process rather than crisis may have been the dominant mode of progression, implies retrospective consideration of previous experience. Hidden stories of mundane encounters are not publicly performed experiences that can be observed as they happen, though there have been observational studies in the wider field; Poloma’s work in Toronto has concerned itself with ecstatic encounter\textsuperscript{358} and Heard has sat through several Alpha courses.\textsuperscript{359} Neither provide an appropriate approach for this study.

The use of group interviews or focus groups offers efficiency in capturing a number of respondents in one place and quickly covering the ground. However, they depend for their effectiveness on members being willing to talk about the subject of interest, and are often more likely to produce impressionistic results than deeper insights. Where the intention is to discover the informal theology of groups of P+c Christians, a group approach may well be indicated. But the need in this instance is

\textsuperscript{358} Margaret Poloma, \textit{Main Street Mystics} (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003).
\textsuperscript{359} Heard, \textit{Alpha}, 85-86.
to invite recollection of tentative and highly personal experiences about which participants may feel sensitive, ambivalent, or uncertain, and that will not happen in a peer group.

**Narrative approaches**

Among qualitative methods, some sort of in-depth interviewing is required and the broad methodology of narrative enquiry stands out as being particularly apposite in the circumstances. Over the last forty or so years, there has been a major turn to narrative approaches in the human sciences. This has gained traction from renewed interest in oral history, acceptance of more subjectivist approaches within the social sciences, challenges to foundationalist perspectives in wider society and the increasing prominence of contextual, particularly feminist, studies.³⁶⁰ Importantly, the shift to story – to biography, to autobiography to life history, as well as to narrative – is a change of direction in which ‘personal and social meanings, as bases of action, gain greater prominence’.³⁶¹ That concern with everyday lives could hardly have a greater synergy with the ordinary testimonies that this research seeks to elucidate, nor with charismatic spirituality which is threaded through with stories, not just in discrete testimony but in ‘sermons, liturgies, Bible studies, prayer meetings [and] evangelism’.³⁶²

Narrative methods share a concern with temporality, relationality and place,³⁶³ each of which is critical in this investigation. While experience is the most common feature in attempts to delimit the scope of narrative inquiry, events and sequence also have a pivotal role.³⁶⁴ This is seen in the work of Anna de Fina, which chronicles border-crossing experiences of immigrants to the United States. De Fina


³⁶¹ Chamberlayne, *Turn*, 1.

³⁶² Daniel D. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1999), 229.


separates out story as a prototypical kind of narrative with ‘a sequential and temporal ordering’, ‘some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events’, and ‘some kind of unexpected action that provokes a reaction and/or an adjustment’. Disruptive events also provide the focus for Denzin’s biographical method, which captures ‘turning-point moments’ and studies ‘traces and evidences of problematic experience’. Denzin refers to these moments, often moments of crisis that alter ‘fundamental meaning structures’, as epiphanies – ‘interactional moments which leave marks on people’s lives’. These are contrasted with experiences, confronting and passing through events, whilst epiphanies are moments of revelation (his term): major, minor, relived or illuminative.

Compared to other forms of interview, oral storytelling ‘typically involves a longer turn at talk than usual’; the hope in capturing narrative is that, with minimal prompts, the subject achieves genuine participation, with their agency reinforced as they contribute to meaning-making alongside the researcher. Inevitably, not all approaches share the same epistemological framework and in some post-modernist narrative analysis, any ‘authorial subjectivity “behind” the material’ is denied, with a socially determined subject whose narrative is fragmented and whose account of experience is entirely processed by external forces. In 1984, David A. Snow and Richard Machalek critiqued reliance on stories of conversion as ‘valid and reliable accounts of past events and experiences’ because of the socially constructive nature of converts’ accounts, their temporal variability and their conspicuously retrospective character. Such rejection of authorial agency is embodied in the highly sceptical approach that appears to have been adopted by Gooren, among

365 de Fina, Identity, 12.
367 Riessman, Methods, 7.
others,\textsuperscript{370} and to a greater or lesser extent, as described below, some C+P theologians take somewhat similar approaches to accounts of conversion, even if in other respects they are ‘transcendental realists’ or, like Cartledge, engage a ‘standpoint epistemology’ of ‘charismatic critical realism’.\textsuperscript{371} Taves accepts that the most likely way for any investigator to access experience is through retrospective narration and within research into conversion there is space for more realist approaches that assume unity and agency and are committed to understanding the narrator’s intent, and testimony to experience, even if this is heavily circumscribed. Narrative inquiry engages with the issue of temporal variability; in fact, unrelenting congruence in retelling stories is inimical to the form. In many areas, the storyteller’s agency is an antidote to all-encompassing constructivism.\textsuperscript{372}

The story-as-told is constructed but its raw material is the clay of real-life events and experiences.\textsuperscript{373} With the passing of postmodernist preoccupations, research is being influenced by a developed critical realist philosophy combined with biographical methodology within the social sciences.\textsuperscript{374} Increasingly, theoretically driven approaches are themselves likely to be subject to critique. Snow and Machalek insisted on the right of sociologists rather than narrators to answer questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’. Contemporary biographical researchers are more likely to be ‘cautious about the possibility of producing overarching explanations. Instead, they stress the ‘situated, contextual and localised nature of explanation’ and respect the insights of people who are ‘actively experiencing, giving meaning to and creating their world[s]’.\textsuperscript{375} Anxieties about ensuring the validity of any qualitative work are heightened in narrative enquiry. Nevertheless, a robust defence of narrative

\textsuperscript{370} Gooren, \textit{Conversion}, 147 fn. 82.
\textsuperscript{372} Merrill, \textit{Biographical}, Kindle location 5498.
\textsuperscript{373} Novitz, David, ‘Art, Narrative and Human Nature’, in Hinchman, \textit{Memory}, 143–160 [146].
\textsuperscript{375} Merrill, \textit{Biographical}, 1577, 1558, 220.
methodology is appearing in the literature; though for this study the question comes down to, ‘Is this “the best available approximation to the truth”?’ As a small study of a sparse population, that will be far from representative across the P+c tradition, its conclusions will remain limited. Nevertheless it will be possible to consider whether, in the light of the verisimilitude of the narratives, and their resonances for practitioners, do the stories told provide a solid basis for reflection on praxis?

**Narrative inquiry as conversation partner**

A critical realist epistemology, leading to ‘cognitive empathetic engagement’ is followed throughout this work and is discussed below in the context of reflective as well as empirical method. Such an approach insists on the narrator’s relative autonomy and authenticity as a witness, though it accepts that any story told is a representation rather than a reproduction of reality. Any story is a social accomplishment needing an audience and the listener’s relationship with the narrator is part of the equation. The metaphorical ‘fourth wall’ – the congregation who sit below the pulpit – is significant even in the research relationship. It is not necessary to accept a constructivist approach in order to acknowledge that there is an element of framing stories of faith told to congregations (or researchers) – by expectation, prompting and the adoption of referential filters, let alone subsequent reflection – all of which may influence the recollection of an authentic encounter. The distinction between narrative, on one hand, as authentic account of experience and, on the other, as social construction is clearly an issue, particularly in the case of the more established Christian who has heard many testimonies and may have told their own story many times, albeit out of the public eye and in small cameos, and shaped for different audiences. This is not only a feature of Christian testimony; a

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recent study of Muslim conversion cited one young woman who acknowledged that she had about six different versions of her conversion narrative, which were adjusted according to her audience.\(^{380}\)

The use of narrative for conveying theology and praxis within many religions is commonplace.\(^{381}\) Across the human sciences, and in practical and empirical theology, narrative method is, to some degree, engaging with religious themes: in anthropology,\(^{382}\) congregational studies,\(^{383}\) sociology\(^{384}\) and psychology.\(^{385}\) One notable multidisciplinary example is the work done at the Research Center for Biographical Studies in Contemporary Religion.\(^{386}\) By far the largest body of conversion studies using narrative, across the human sciences, works with data from conversion narratives or from the sub-genre of testimony, the language of which is, according to Rambo and Farhadian, ‘not only personal, but is intimately connected to the community of faith or religious tradition into which a person is moving.’\(^{387}\) As examples of narrative approaches, they cite contributions to their Handbook of

\(^{380}\) Yasir Suleiman, Narratives of Conversion to Islam: Female Perspectives (Cambridge: University of Cambridge in association with the New Muslims Project, 2005), 23–24.


\(^{382}\) Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova, Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 45;


\(^{387}\) Rambo, Handbook, 8.
Religious Conversion from Stromberg\textsuperscript{388} and Hindemarsh, who both draw their data from conversion narrative as literary genre (the latter from historical prototypes, Augustine, and Sampson Staniforth).\textsuperscript{389} Later, Rambo and Farhadian do encourage consideration of more diverse stories, given that ‘virtually all religions provide people with a range of experiences that [often play a crucial role in the converting process] and are rarely mentioned in scholarly accounts or explanations of religion’.\textsuperscript{390} Nevertheless, the testimonies which are commonplace in conversion studies are most often quite different from the kind of narratives with which biographical researchers are concerned.

For many narrative enquirers the notion of gestalt is axiomatic to their analytic method.\textsuperscript{391}

Narrative analysis focuses on ‘the story itself’ and seeks to preserve the integrity of personal biographies or a series of events that cannot adequately be understood in terms of their discrete elements. The coding for a narrative analysis is typically of the narratives as a whole, rather than of the different elements within them. The coding strategy revolves around reading the stories and classifying them into general patterns.\textsuperscript{392}

Some researchers within the narrative enquiry field do employ content analysis at an early stage in understanding stories, considering that computer assisted coding is required to map complex interview material and is particularly valuable when research is done by teams.\textsuperscript{393} On the other hand, Rosenthal questions the logic of the disaggregation involved, and considers that content analysis falls short of being truly


\textsuperscript{391} Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, ‘Eliciting Narrative Through the In-Depth Interview’ \textit{Qualitative Inquiry} 3:1 (1997), 53-70 [60].


\textsuperscript{393} Merrill, \textit{Biographical}, Kindle location 3609.
qualitative, pointing specifically to the loss of gestalt and a tendency to ignore special cases.  

It is the contention of the current study that in studies of conversion too much focus has been placed focus on the dominance of present standpoints, and the impossibility of recovering perspectives close to the events that are described. Srdjan Sremac maintains that ‘the researcher is not in full control and cannot fully master or dominate the conversion experience’. ‘It is not possible to access the core experience of conversion.’ It is undoubtedly impossible to recover any previous experience in its totality, but it is difficult to see why historic perspectives and internal conversations close to the time of conversion should any more elusive than those in other parts of life. In this regard, Gabriele Rosenthal offers two significant examples. The first is that of an investigation into the experiences of members of the Nazi party during the Second World War and how they interpreted their experiences half a century later. She explains that ‘[i]n narrations, a growing closeness to the past thus develops during the narrative flow, and the narrator reveals past points of view that are very different from their present perspective, which is clearly dominant in arguments, and in quoted anecdotes.’ She also describes research in which past perspectives are explored from the viewpoint of patients with multiple sclerosis. ‘I may suddenly remember situations in which I dropped something and thought I was just being clumsy, but now realize that these were the first signs of [multiple sclerosis].’ Rosenthal, and a significant amount of policy focused research, considers narrative method capable of producing insights into past perspectives that will be accepted by policymakers as a contribution to decision making. In this they 

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397 Ibid., 161, 160.

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are less sceptical than many of those who study conversion regarding the possibility of accessing past perspectives on life events.

**Recent narrative method in conversion research**

During the course of the current research, two major empirically based works on conversion were published, by Ines Jindra,\(^{399}\) and by Grace Milton.\(^{400}\) These are selected as illustrative of contemporary approaches to narrative, alongside a slightly earlier study by David Smilde.\(^{401}\) Milton’s temporal perspective, arising from her focus on subsequent theologising, is to a large degree, different to that of Jindra and Smilde, each of whom are concerned with the sociological causes, and hence antecedent and proximate aspects, of conversion. However, Milton’s work is particularly significant because, unusually in this field, she identifies P+c experiences of encounter prior and proximate to conversion as a product of narrative interviews.

Smilde’s *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism* is concerned with how impoverished Venezuelan men address socioeconomic challenges through Evangelical (for which read Pentecostal)\(^{402}\) conversion. By deciding to believe, they engage in self-reform through an ‘imaginative rationality’ of belief and practice, in which issues of self, family and material survival are seen as spiritual issues.\(^{403}\) In this process they also minimise their own biographies by adopting narratives that maximise God’s agency. Their choice of conversion is accounted for by a ‘relational imagination’, which develops as a result of exposure to evangelical household members. Rather different relationships lead to others responding to widespread economic privations by criminal behaviour.\(^{404}\)

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\(^{400}\) Milton, *Shalom*.


\(^{402}\) Ibid., 29-32 (Smilde capitalises ‘Evangelical’ throughout.)

\(^{403}\) Ibid., 52, 98-99.

\(^{404}\) Ibid., 153-156.
Ines Jindra’s substantive purpose in *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism* is to develop an overarching sociological model, seeking to move beyond reductive accounts of the influence of networks and social forces to connect these with the convert’s active role and reflexivity.\(^{405}\) Her ‘key concept’ is background experience – experiences of disorganisation or excessive structure.\(^{406}\) These operate as ‘push’ factors with a compensating move to religious settings characterised by either structure or comparative openness. In addition she identifies differences in content, emotions and cognitions, that operate as ‘pull factors’, emphasising the importance of fit at the level of content between individuals and religions and churches, arguing for attention to individual biographies.\(^{407}\)

Both of these studies fall within the discipline of sociology and religious experience is marginal to their theses. By contrast, Grace Milton’s *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion: A Practical-Theological Study* is a work of practical and empirical theology that seeks to develop a distinctively Pentecostal theology of conversion and draws on the human sciences to frame her research. Her study is centred on a series of interviews with congregation members in which some recount experiential encounter prior and proximate to conversion.\(^{408}\) The practical theological model of conversion she develops is one of *shalom*, expressed in the dimensions of regeneration, identity, and destiny.\(^{409}\) Milton’s thesis is likely to resonate with ecclesial understandings of conversion across the tradition and her work is cited several times below.

Each of these studies speaks to aspects of the integrative model within which the current research is framed.\(^{410}\) Smilde finds, within cultural agency, roles for believing, behaving, and belonging in conversion. Jindra, seeking an overarching

\(^{405}\) Jindra, *Model*, 4-5.

\(^{406}\) Ibid., 80-86.

\(^{407}\) Ibid., 156-160.


\(^{409}\) Ibid. 219-233

\(^{410}\) See Chapter 2a. Believing, behaving, belonging, and bonding. (This last is the emotional dimension, bonding with the transcendent, within which encounter is located).
model for conversion highlights the roles of emotions, cognitions, and alterations in problematic trajectories, alongside the importance of networks. Milton is attentive each of these dimensions, but notably to beliefs and to ‘divine-human encounter’ in conversion.\footnote{Milton, \textit{Shalom}, 62-69, 174-175.}

**Methodological standpoint**

In each case, use of narrative method to investigate conversion aids reflection on the methodology proposed for the current study. Smilde makes limited references to the literature of narrative enquiry and employs ‘life history interviews’.\footnote{Ibid., 143-145.} From the perspective of biographical sociology, and working explicitly within a narrative enquiry paradigm,\footnote{As a ‘good overview of the field of biographical sociology’ she points to Chamberlayne, \textit{Turn}. Jindra, \textit{Model}, 5 fn.11.} Jindra explores individual trajectories to develop a comprehensive sociological model of conversion. Milton’s standpoint on testimony is that it is a theologically shaped memory, a reflection on the Biblical narrative, and a means of biographical reconstruction.\footnote{Ibid., 47-50.} Testimony is not intended to be a historical account and is overlaid with theological reflection of both ecclesial and ordinary varieties.\footnote{Ibid., 59, 111.} In this she concurs with other Pentecostal theologians whose perspectives are discussed below. Whereas Smilde and Jindra were intent on getting behind and beyond testimony, accepting it as a highly constructed form was unproblematic for Milton in analysing the ordinary theology of converts, some of whom had reflected on the meaning of their experiences over several decades.

While their interest was not in the religious content of the converts claims, each of the others employed a broadly critical realist epistemology to understand relationships between empirical, actual and real domains, and to discover past as well as present perspectives. Their purpose required something as close as possible to a ‘historical account’, less restricted by ritual constraints and theologising than testimony. In common with other biographical-narrative researchers, Jindra explicitly uses narrative theory to gain access to past events and problematic
trajectories.\textsuperscript{416} With caveats, Smilde concludes that his ‘methodology was highly successful in breaking through the more common elements of Evangelicals’ own narratives.’\textsuperscript{417}

**Sampling**

Milton’s interviewees were recruited from within an exceptionally large Elim congregation,\textsuperscript{418} initially from four existing small groups in which she had conducted focus groups.\textsuperscript{419} Jindra interviewed 53 converts, of whom nineteen were from seven Christian groups. Those who took part were recruited by asking leaders of religious networks in three cities whether they knew of any converts who would be interested in doing an interview.\textsuperscript{420} Smilde in order to avoid ‘an extreme self-selection bias [common] in Latin American studies of conversion,’ enlisted all the male converts from the previous seven years, aged between the ages of fifteen and 45, from two churches.\textsuperscript{421} Alongside these 56 men, none of whom were below eighteen years old, he interviewed a smaller control sample from the non-evangelical population, and returned to his original interviewees after five years in order to establish how many had continued to be involved in church life.\textsuperscript{422}

Snowball sampling is an acknowledged method for reaching sparse populations, and was used by both Jindra and Milton to develop their cohort, an approach that was explicitly rejected by Smilde.\textsuperscript{423} Milton recruited further participants to ‘reflect the multiple cultures, ages and balance of genders represented

\textsuperscript{416} Jindra, *Model*, 201-203. See also her discussion of participant self-reflexivity, 105-107.

\textsuperscript{417} Smilde, *Reason*, 231.

\textsuperscript{418} In 2013 Milton’s chosen congregation saw 5-600 attendees. The, now dated, 2005 Church Census indicates that this was larger than 98% of Pentecostal churches. (Brierley, *Nosedive*, 156).

\textsuperscript{419} Milton, *Shalom*, 156-158.

\textsuperscript{420} Jindra, *Model*, 207.

\textsuperscript{421} In this he achieved a 96% success rate.

\textsuperscript{422} Smilde, *Reason*, 225-227.

\textsuperscript{423} Snowball sampling ‘poses a distinct risk of capturing a biased subset of the total population of potential participants because any eligible participants who are not linked to the original set of informants will not be accessible for inclusion in the study’. (David L. Morgan, ‘Snowball Sampling’, in Given, *Encyclopedia* (Online edition), 816.
in the congregation’. Jindra sought to identify specific conversion trajectories to fill in the emerging theory, including recruiting two participants via the internet. 60% of Milton’s thirty participants were female; Jindra had 27 (of 52) female respondents. Smilde’s all-male sample were in the narrowest age range, between eighteen and 45. Jindra’s and Milton’s groups had similar age ranges (nineteen to 95, and twenty to 86 years respectively), though no clear information is provided about age distribution. While each study was attentive to age at conversion this was not described as a critical factor for inclusion by Jindra or Milton, though from descriptions of participants in Milton’s report it is possible conclude that up to a quarter of those may have been childhood (and others, adolescent) converts.

**Data collection and analysis.**

Both Milton and Smilde engaged in extensive participant observation prior to conducting interviews. Jindra and Milton encouraged extended and uninterrupted initial narration, whereas Smilde limited his temporal view by ‘using a month-by-month event-history calendar to track twenty-one variables from three years before their conversion’. As a second step Jindra asked ‘the interviewee for his own interpretation of recurring events and connections’. Milton completed the interview by asking specific theory-related questions and Jindra sought details of corroborative life events. Both Milton and Smilde used a computer programme to code for themes. Jindra, following a narrative approach, constructed a detailed biography for each participant before comparing between cases to identify problematic trajectories.

Each employed a narrative paradigm that included and was concerned with life story or life history. Their approaches differed, influenced by varying axioms and research purposes and among them, Jindra was notable in developing a coherent

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biographical narrative approach. Milton saw conversion as a process that issued from an initial commitment, whereas for the sociologists it was an extended process, in Jindra’s case a ‘career’ with active commitment somewhere along the line and with deconversion as an option. Smilde was assiduous in seeking to reach those who preferred not to be interviewed and returned to his participants after five years to obtain data on continuing church participation. Each of the others needed to supplement their original sample, because of emerging theory or to obtain greater balance. Among the three, only Jindra did not openly consider her own reflexivity. The others identified as Christian, Smilde as ‘believing, if not very observant’ and Milton as attending a ‘Charismatic Anglican church’.

Methodological relevance to the current research.

Given the particularity and narrow focus of each of these studies, it was notable that there was little discussion of the reasons for selection of specific site or group, or of the agency of gatekeepers. In the light of the increased interest in the role of gatekeepers as agents in social research, and the complex dynamics of access, this has been a factor in reflecting on the current research, as was Smilde’s concern that snowball sampling would restrict the breadth of any sample.

Smilde and Jindra have engaged deeply with narrative methodology to get behind the constraints of the ecclesial construction that is testimony, each using thoroughgoing, though quite different, narrative approaches. In terms of specific data collection method, Smilde employed the event history calendar, designed for collecting retrospective data, including that of ‘complex and lengthy working lives’, which merits further attention in conversion research. Jindra has not only adopted

431 Milton, Shalom, 7.
432 Smilde, Reason, 41-43.
433 For Jindra working across several faith groups, this would have been a more complex issue.
a biographical narrative method of data collection and analysis, but sees herself as ‘introduc[ing] it to (American) cultural sociology.’ Her methodology is rooted in the same theoretical approach to the narrative interview and analysis proposed for use in this research.

Milton’s research offers both support and challenge to this study at several points that are identified below, including observing that there is ‘shockingly little academic literature on the process of seeking/quest pre-conversion’. In fact, both Smilde and Jindra do address pre-conversion to the extent that they have been considered to be of missiological interest. More tangentially, Heard’s work on Alpha, relating conversion to Rambo’s process model, addresses conversion as process, and Smith and Denton’s research comments, could be considered relevant in its consideration of American teenagers as spiritual seekers. These are, for missiological purposes, minor contributions and it is to be hoped that the current research will suggest possible directions for further exploration of P+c conversion processes.

**Biographic narrative interpretive methodology (BNIM)**

BNIM has been adopted as the appropriate integrative tool for the present task, a method bearing a strong family resemblance to that employed by Jindra. In this research it is assumed to include the approach concisely described by Rosenthal

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as well as more extensively and discursively by Wengraf (including in frequently updated privately published documentation and facilitated email discussion). The BNIM interview, described immediately below, allows for past as well as present perspectives to emerge, and the case reconstructive approach to analysis respects each story rather than rapidly proceeding to its deconstruction and disaggregation. The latter, dependent on the BNIM interview, is complex and its application varied. It is explored as part of an account of this research.

The main principle of the biographic-interpretive interview is that of openness. Questions are not determined in advance; they arise from topics raised by the narrator in a guided monologue. In the first phase of the interview – the main narration, or initial narrative (IN) – Participants are asked, by means of a single question inviting narrative (SQUIN), to give a full extempore narration (as opposed to an argument or a theoretical exposition) of events and experiences from their own lives. The ensuing story, or main narrative, is not interrupted by further questions and is encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention. If the narrator loses their way or asks for help the goal is to make comments that help them to return to unspecified narrative until their story winds down.

In the second phase of the interview, that of narrative questioning, the purpose is to elicit particular incident narratives (PINs). The main narrative is fleshed out with further or expanded narrative elicited by carefully framed questions, using the words of the story-teller and in the sequence that topics or themes were raised. The questions are shaped to avoid detours into description or discussion because narration is the sort of text, rather than description or argumentation,

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442 Rosenthal, Interpretive; Wengraf, Tom, Qualitative Research Interviewing (London: Sage Publications, 2001); Email discussion available: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=BIOGRAPHIC-NARRATIVE-BNIM (accessed 22 June 2019)


through which the meaning of past experience is likely to emerge\(^445\) by integrating different events in a temporal and thematic order, rather than ‘trigger[ing] argumentations or legitimizing account’.\(^446\) Careful attention to the type of question at this second stage is further guided by the assumption that each story has a gestalt that condenses the latent as well as manifests perspectives and meanings in which a situation, an event or life phase has been experienced, recollected and accounted for.\(^447\) A third phase, of **external questioning**, or theoretical questions (TQ), is intended to address ‘further questions arising from the theoretical and practical concerns of the specific research project which the narrative interviews are designed to serve’.\(^448\)

**Methodological critique**

Narrative approaches and, specifically, a biographic-interpretive method offer the potential to identify hidden voices telling stories of conversion that merit full partnership in a transforming missiological conversation. The method is primarily concerned with analysis of the story-as-told and is not epistemologically restricted to either constructivist or realist approaches, though it has been claimed by both.\(^449\) Framing the interview by using a single question to invite narrative shifts power to the storyteller and subverts the intense focus of the conversion narrative and privileges the mundane. Narrators tell their stories released from the need to come up to expectation, convince inquirers, or glorify God.\(^450\) It is aligned to the heuristic position of this research that the experience of conversion is best represented by those who have experienced it, and recounted it away from the constraints of testimony or the expectations of a substantial audience.\(^451\) The invitation to provide extended narrative recognises the agency of participants, their

\(^{445}\) Breckner, ‘Discovering’, 295

\(^{446}\) Rosenthal, ‘Reconstruction’, 60 fn. 4

\(^{447}\) Breckner, ‘Discovering’, 295.

\(^{448}\) Wengraf, *Qualitative*, 120.


\(^{450}\) However, they did want to be helpful and include things that were interesting and useful.

\(^{451}\) Accepting that the interviewer, too, is an audience and point of reference.
ability to act freely and autonomously, and minimises the constraints of language, discourse and ideology even if, as in any social text, these hegemonic pressures are never fully absent.

Within the fx conversation, reviewed in previous sections of the portfolio, conversion as crisis, process and pathway is fundamental. While no social interaction has the capacity to exclude intersubjectivity, a biographic-interpretive approach has a good chance of minimising bias to either process or crisis accounts of conversion. A biographic-interpretive interview, like any other, is an ‘anxious, incomplete interaction’. By putting the story on the record, it becomes easier to identify defended areas even if a decision is taken not to probe further. Claims of access to participants’ undefended intrapsychic processes are difficult to confirm or to rebut, but it is likely that there is greater access to the subjectivity of those taking part, than is the case with more structured methods.

Narrative approaches are often less than specific about method, resulting in a process that is opaque and invites challenge to validity. This is not a danger with BNIM, which is highly prescriptive. The attention paid to gestalt and case reconstruction, both key to the biographic-interpretive approach, provides a degree of safeguarding through the generation of alternative hypotheses before testing them on cases. Postmodern theorists reject any narrative methodology, such as BNIM, that engages a realist approach to stories or any degree of agency devolving to narrators. The idea of a solitary individual unaffected by context is clearly untenable; nevertheless, though humans are embedded in context, they are not buried there. To listen to a story is to discover something real and true, as well as something shaped by other narratives and structures.

452 Wengraf, Qualitative, 235.
Some commentators argue that the use of a single question has the effect of making participants uncomfortable, whereas asking further questions has the effect of coaxing contributions from less confident participants.\textsuperscript{455} Against this, ‘telling stories is far from unusual in everyday conversation and it is apparently no more unusual for interviewees to respond to questions with narratives if they are given some room to speak’.\textsuperscript{456} The advantage of allowing participants to map out the boundaries of their narrative at an early stage, even in a terse statement, outweighs the disadvantages. However, BNIM provides an elaborated model for investigation in the interview and particularly in the stringency of case reconstruction and the hermeneutic model on which it relies.\textsuperscript{457} Greater emphasis is given to intersubjectivity and to questioning whether the researcher can be easily separated from the ‘object’ of his/her enquiry. Reflexivity and the capacity for detachment, then, become essential in building emotional as well as conceptual understanding.\textsuperscript{458}

In its prototypical form the methodology was shaped for capturing extended whole-life stories. In the current case, participants’ narratives were restricted in focus, and the number of themes emerging was, as expected, reasonably small; even then, only themes and topics concerned with encounter or conversion were pursued as PINs in the later phases of the interview. The participant’s attention was focused on becoming a Christian in the invitation to participate and by the request to construct an IN. By its end, the shape of the story-as-told was in place, even if the focus on encounter may have been discerned in the second sub-session with questions that sought to return to points of interest. The interviewer’s interest only became unequivocal when theoretical questions were asked at the start of the third phase. While a biographic-interpretive approach does not aim for free association, having pointed in a broad direction, it will allow the narrator’s subjectivity, rather than the theoretical interests of the interviewer, to map out the route to be taken.

\textsuperscript{455} Paul Thompson, \textit{The Voice of the Past} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 199; Merrill, \textit{Biographical}, 119–120.
\textsuperscript{456} Mishler, \textit{Interviewing}, 69.
\textsuperscript{457} Chamberlayne, \textit{Turn}, 19.
\textsuperscript{458} Ibid., 180–181.
Application of the biographic-interpretive approach to addressing significant social and human need has been noted. These studies receive attention and gain funding in liberal democracies, where the stories of ordinary people are judged by policy makers to be truthful and meaningful. By responding to a request to recount all the events and experiences that have been important in becoming a Christian, converts become conversation partners in a disciplined process of reflection as they tell complex and diverse stories\(^{459}\) that will become a worthy conversation partner with the tradition, and with contemporary missional practice.

**Implications of the pilot study**

To evaluate the methodology, a pilot study was conducted and a report is appended.\(^{460}\) While the pilot study pointed up issues at each stage, the exploratory work confirms the potential of the main research to make a valid contribution to learning within the discipline of missiology. Narratives of affirmation, of spiritual reality, of challenge and of guidance emerged from episodes of experience and encounter. The stories told were of complexity and particularity.

In the pilot study it proved difficult to identify converts of three years or less with little or no church background. Consequently it was decided that to avoid missing valuable participants, ministers would be asked to include those who have become Christians in the last five years and it was accepted that the time range would be treated by them as a guideline rather than a strict criterion.\(^{461}\)

Of the studies discussed in the article above, Kay found that, of his 930 Pentecostal ministers, between 55.8% and 81.4% had a mother who had attended church once a month or more.\(^{462}\) Among Finney’s 511 adult (post 15) converts, 6% attended church once a month or more.


\(^{460}\) Appendix B.

\(^{461}\) Hollinghurst has raised the possibility that while under the conditions of Christendom there existed a flow from Christian identity (at the lowest level) to belief and from there to practice. In the emerging context the reverse might be true. Hollinghurst, *Evangelism*, 53.

\(^{462}\) Between 43.2% and 72.7% of fathers attended once a month or more. Kay, *Pentecostals*, 213–215.
identified parents as a main factor and 13% as a supporting factor in finding faith.\textsuperscript{463} Of Tidball’s 180 theological students, 98 (54%) identified themselves as coming from Christian families.\textsuperscript{464} Looking more widely, Heard studied 51 Alpha group members and found that, of these, 31 were ‘christened, might have grown up in the church, but at some stage had left’ and only five ‘had no church experience’, were ‘non-believers’.\textsuperscript{465} Research on fx has sought to define those who are ‘non-churched’, by which they mean having ‘had no meaningful contact with the church community and its corporate life’. They consider that being part of a Sunday school or church choir was meaningful contact ‘on the basis that someone was experiencing something of the worshipping community of the church running that Sunday school and interacting with the adult congregation’.\textsuperscript{466} John Walker, from a wide survey of existing research, considers that any childhood attendance beyond 11–12 years is significant for subsequent church attendance.\textsuperscript{467} For this study, in which it would be possible to explore patterns of participation through PINs, it was decided that the critical factor in having little or no church background was more likely to be active and influential parental involvement in church, and that Sunday school attendance terminating before the teenage years should be discounted.

Thus the main research endeavoured to exclude those from families that were active in church life and those with a previous church attendance as an adult. However, in a narrative study it is possible to acknowledge complexity in order to do justice to the richness of individual spiritual pathways. Even Emily, interviewed for the pilot study, who had no personal contact, watched people attending the church opposite her family home and wished that she was ‘good enough’ or had ‘best clothes’ so she could join them. She had acquired enough awareness of God as a child to pray, in her favourite hiding place under the table, that her father would stop beating her mother. Growing up in the last decade of the twentieth century, in rural

\textsuperscript{463} John Finney, \textit{Faith}, 41–42.
\textsuperscript{464} Derek Tidball, ‘Construction’, 88–91.
\textsuperscript{465} Heard, \textit{Alpha}, 102–108.
\textsuperscript{466} Dalpra, \textit{Who’s There?} 27.
\textsuperscript{467} John Walker, \textit{Testing Fresh Expressions}, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 117.
England at least, church was, literally, just across the street and even school prayers could influence a young child.

It has been suggested that it might have been possible to distribute a sheet which listed topics of interest before the interview. However, given the experience with advance circulation of information sheets, it seems unlikely that extra information would have been read. More importantly, acquiring a largely unguided initial narrative is critical to the approach, and could only be undermined by prior guidance that did more than repeat the initial prompt. It is also worth noting that the illustrative sections of verbatim transcript reproduced from the pilot study were from the shortest INs, and each demonstrated useful, if thin, contributions to the central research question. Participants each said sufficient to reveal a gestalt in their initial interaction that allowed for PINs to emerge.

Listening to pilot interviews it was clear that often my style as interviewer was hesitant; starting and interrupting my own questioning, until an acceptable balance of prompting and openness was achieved. In discussing the role of the interviewer, Mishler suggests that such formulating and reformulating of questions is indicative of an interpersonal search for understanding that may encourage more reflective responses. He considers that a hesitant style of questioning is almost inevitable if the interviewer is listening fully to responses.468

Apart from the initial invitation to extended narrative, there were only two specified questions. Almost every other question is determined by the participant’s prior responses. The questions about spiritual awareness and about God had been understood but, in some instances, they were conflated so that the spiritual experience question may have been lost. The desire to follow the participant’s thoughtful, reflective process makes this kind of error very likely. To mark the change from narrative questioning and to maintain consistency across interviews, a

468 Mishler, Interviewing, 96–98.
simple showcard\textsuperscript{469} was prepared for the main study with one question on each side.\textsuperscript{470}

**Methodological summary of the main research.**

**Ethical Approval**

Prior to commencing any research, approval was sought from the University’s Committees in the Ethics of Research on Human Beings. Authorisation was given for the pilot study on behalf of the Head of School on 3 February 2014, and for the main research on 5 June 2015 and excerpts from the application are appended.\textsuperscript{471} The biographical narrative interview may touch on defended areas as it invites reflection on past experiences, relationships and internal conversations. Given the small number of converts in any church, particular effort has been made to preserve anonymity, including avoiding identifying the affiliation of individuals beyond that of a branch of the P+c tradition. Details of PINs which may cause embarrassment to participants have been referenced only in general terms. Strategies were put in place to respond to any disclosure which constituted a cause for concern related to mental health issues or criminal behaviour. Because of the participant’s observed levels of anxiety, one pilot interview was gently terminated, and one other participant was asked during the course of the interview whether he felt happy to continue telling his story.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

Purposive\textsuperscript{472} (or purposeful) sampling was applied with an ‘intensity’ strategy to ‘identify and select individuals or groups that are…experienced with a phenomenon of interest’, and are available, willing and able to communicate their


\textsuperscript{470} Following the pilot study, these questions were reversed in order and reformulated to include references to Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{471} Appendix C.

experiences in an ‘articulate, expressive and reflective manner’. While both the sampling method and the size of the study meant that it would be indicative rather than representative, maximum feasible variation was sought by engagement with ten churches within five classical Pentecostal and NC groupings. A high degree of data saturation in the key categories of variety, context and salience was achieved. However, similar qualitative research with additional P+c or demographic subgroups would be highly likely to provide additional input to these categories.

**TABLE 2: Participants by denomination and church**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DENOMINATIONAL AFFILIATION</th>
<th>NO. OF PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PENTECOSTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God 1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God 2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elim 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elim 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elim 3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEW CHURCH</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer 1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer 2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Level</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vineyard</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Churches supplying participants were in equal numbers members of CP and NC denominations. The Assemblies of God (AoG), and Elim are the main indigenous CP denominations and the three NC denominations approached were each at that time among the larger groupings. Contact was made with denominational gatekeepers for suggestions of churches to email. As appeared to be the case for each of the studies reviewed above, geographical proximity to the researcher was a factor in selection of site or participants. In the case of the Elim, Vineyard, and Pioneer groupings initial selection of churches to contact was made from provided lists, choosing those closest to my location in the West of England. The Ground Level Network has historically been particularly concentrated ‘between the Humber and the Wash’. In all research visits ranged in distance from 10 to 145 miles. As was the case for both Milton and Jindra it was necessary to identify further participants to complete the main sample and contact with two AoG churches that were known to have new converts was made through colleagues at Cliff College. It appears that the numbers of converts may be a more sparse population than optimistic reports suggest, given that some ministers, who initially expressed interest in the research, found it impossible to find candidates who met the guidelines.

A total of forty people were interviewed for the pilot and main research, and the 32 included in the main analysis were connected with ten churches, eight of which were members of the Evangelical Alliance. Seven married couples took part, which was seen as an opportunity to obtain data on joint narrative construction. Fifteen of those interviewed were forty or older, seventeen were younger. The two youngest were 20 years old. Nic placed his conversion five years previously, and one

475 Towards the end of the data gathering period, an opportunity was identified to increase the numbers of participants up to 30 years old. Two came from an NC that had already been involved, and two from my home church (NC). Neither of the latter had previously told their story of conversion within my hearing. This decision was consistent with the sampling approach though it contributed to an imbalance between CP and NC participants.

476 The original proposal was to recruit 15 participants from each of three networks. That target was modified with approval from my supervisory team. Based partly on estimates by churches and denominations, the average congregational net change in attendance (from all sources) over the five years to 2015 was: +10 for the three NC denominations; +5 for AoG; -4 for Elim. (Brierley, *Statistics*, Tables: 7.1.3; 7.3.1; 7.3.5; 9.1.4; 9.1.6.)

477 Listed in Appendix D.
was excluded after interview because her parents remained actively involved in charismatic Christianity throughout her childhood though they did not attend church. Amy located her conversion between six and eight years previously. Excluding her narrative was considered, but seemed unnecessary, particularly given that her story impinged on those of the three others from the same church.

Consistent with the ecclesial turn, younger participants had less experience of church, though almost all the participants had experienced a Christian service of some kind before their current involvement. For 21, this had been limited to school services, occasional offices, Christmas events, or short-lived attendance at Sunday school. Eight had attended Sunday school for longer periods, or been part of a uniformed organisation, and attendance had died out in almost all cases between the ages of ten and twelve. One had played in a Scout and Guide Band which involved monthly church attendance until the age of nineteen. Two others had been confirmed, but neither had regularly attended church beyond their mid-teens. For each of the three with experience of church into adolescence, there were gaps of between twenty and forty years between earlier church attendance and conversion. During recruitment, several possible candidates described a complex church background, with intermittent attendance at a variety of churches and were not invited to participate. Another (Olivia) queried her conversion status but was interviewed.

Congregational leaders who agreed to supply the names of possible participants may not be typical, for a variety of reasons. They have shown that they know their churches well enough to be able to identify converts, unlike leaders interviewed by Dadswell. Their open attitude to this research may indicate a higher level of reflexivity than others, and in particular a positive attitude to the benefits of research into conversion. They were willing to do the work to identify which of their more recent attenders fitted the research guidelines and to respond to emails and in some cases initiate phone conversations. These helpful characteristics may extend to

479 Their trajectories suggested an ‘intensification’ rather than ‘fuzzy fidelity’ pattern.
their engagement with missional praxis informed by theory and ‘research heavy’ reflection. As gatekeepers, they did act as filters. Some leaders said that they thought the participants they suggested were ‘likely to be interesting’. They were also mindful of the fact that those who took part would need to be articulate, and confident enough to talk to a stranger at length.

**Interviews**

Participants were invited to choose the venue for the interview. Most took place in their homes. Four meetings were in coffee shops. Four were in church offices. The two participants from my own church were interviewed in my home. Interviews were conducted alone, except in two cases. Hannah asked for her boyfriend to be present, who, a PhD candidate himself, studiously avoided offering more than passive support. John, who struggles with walking, needed to stay in their only downstairs room while his wife, Julie, was interviewed. After talking for an hour, he was happy to sit with his laptop. It was not possible to infer from Julie’s body language or her narrative that she was affected by his presence. With this exception, couples were interviewed separately. The research literature on interviewing members of couples is limited, but indicates that the decision whether to do so individually or together is determined by the nature of the research focus. PINs of spousal concordance and divergence, or influence on conversion, emerged from individual narratives.

In order to avoid storytelling before inviting the IN, it was decided not to test the participants’ qualifications to be involved at the start of the interview. Reliance was placed on gatekeepers for initial screening, and the guidelines for selection were repeated in all communication with participants, with the information sheet and consent form emailed in almost every case at least a week before. A few had printed hard copies of the sheets. More had chosen not to read them in advance. Time was

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allowed for each participant to read the information sheet, to ask any questions, and to initial and sign the consent form. 481 Demographic details and history of church attendance were collected at the end of the interview.

Following the experience of the pilot study where several of the initial narratives were extremely short, it was decided to give advance warning of the ‘single question inviting narrative’ (SQUIN) in the initial e-mail briefing, and at any subsequent opportunity provided by email or text communication. Given that the information sheet and consent form were largely ignored prior to the interview, and that only one candidate mentioned following a link to my church website, it was likely that little conscious thought had been given to the SQUIN beforehand. In the event the interviews were significantly longer than those in the pilot interview. Most were at least 15 minutes in length and some up to an hour. Other than giving prior notice of the question, the most likely reason for this is improvement in my passive-minimalist interviewing skills.

Interviews were recorded, except for one participant who asked specifically, before the meeting, for this not to happen. It is not possible to be certain for the reason for this, but given that he was a migrant from central Europe and the interview took place a few days after the UK referendum on leaving the European Community, any nervousness was hardly surprising. In all cases, minimal notes were made of cue phrases to prompt PINs at the second stage of the interview.

The SQUIN used in the main research, was unchanged from the pilot study.

Tell me in detail how you became a Christian, all the events and experiences that are important for you, starting wherever you like and taking all the time you need. I will do my best not to interrupt.482

481 Appendix C.
482 (Research quotations are italicised throughout). The retrospective focus of this SQUIN can be seen in comparison to that of Milton’s forward looking enquiry, ‘…tell me about your walk with God.’ Milton, Shalom, 159.
The invitation to take ‘all the time you need’ stood in stark contrast to the focus demanded in testimony rituals, or the piecemeal recounting of specific episodes that might occur in more informal contexts. Long-form narration in a more or less formal setting, with a recording being made and notes taken, did place its own constraints on the story. Nevertheless, inviting participants to engage in longitudinal narration in these INs effectively generated data on the extent of a conversion process, as well as the salience of each dimension of conversion, and in some cases demonstrated access to participants’ subjectivities in areas otherwise not thought of, forgotten, or suppressed.

In the second part of the interview, PINs were sought by reading back words used in the IN, and inviting further detail. Because few participants were concerned with dates or times, towards the end of the second stage in the main research it was often necessary to ask, ‘When did you first begin to think of yourself as a Christian?’ On occasion, this led to further PINs and, on several occasions, to reflection on what was meant by the word ‘Christian’. Much less frequently it was necessary to attempt to get behind what appeared to be theological reflection subsequent to the event, or to seek clarification. However, in order to preserve the participant’s narrative gestalt, there was no use of direct questions to unearth themes, or aspects of the conversion process, that had not featured in the first part of the interview.

Given the likely low status of less spectacular experience of encounter in the dominant P+c discourse, some PINs of encounter may have been dismissed as too unimportant to recount, or for other reasons might not surface in unprompted narrative. The TQs posed at a third stage in the interview were: ‘Have you ever been aware of God, of Jesus or the Holy Spirit? Have you ever had a spiritual

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483 Steve’s initial narration told how he visited his parents and told them ‘I’ve kind of given my life to Christ and this is what I now believe.’ When this statement was queried he responded that at the time he ‘would probably have said, “I now believe in God”’.

484 Wengraf discusses Rounding out the in-PIN detail – cautious pushing at the end? Available: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=BIOGRAPHIC-NARRATIVE-BNIM;bd0f47ed.1903 (accessed 3 May 2019)

experience? ’ Each involved operationalisation of the concept of encounter, and was intentionally broadly framed, though not as broadly as the, so-called, Hardy Question.\textsuperscript{486} ‘Awareness of God’ was also a narrower category than Milton’s ‘divine encounter’, which included experiences of angels or demons.\textsuperscript{487} In the current study, participants discussed ambiguous experiences, or those that featured evil presence, as ‘spiritual experience’. Rarely did participants ask for clarification of either of the TQs, though understandably several evinced surprise at the questions, given that they had spent up to an hour talking about just that. Both questions led to further PINs on a few occasions and to otherwise unprompted attribution of previous PINs as encounter. The first question was probed to see whether there was any specific attribution to Trinitarian persons. The second functioned as a broad catch-all.

\section*{Analysis}

The method of analysis for this research was similar to that employed by Jindra, but explicitly followed BNIM protocols. As discussed above, this method of working from the whole to the parts shares with deconstructive analytical methods careful transcription and identification of themes. Narrative analysis, according to its exponents, additionally requires intense reading and rereading,\textsuperscript{488} ‘immersion’ in transcripts and ‘a deeply intuitive, subtle, inter-subjective as well as a challenging process: intellectually, epistemologically and in terms of the researcher’s self-knowledge’.\textsuperscript{489} While the holistic approach of biographical-narrative researchers does not have a monopoly on humane and inter-subjective approaches, it is argued that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item ‘Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?’ Bettina E. Schmidt, (ed.), \textit{The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies} (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2016), 1; Sir Alister Hardy, \textit{The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience} (Lampeter: Religious Experience Research Centre, 1979), 17–30.
\item Milton, \textit{Shalom}, 174.
\item Merrill, \textit{Biographical}, Kindle locations 3612.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
such methods have particular value in understanding extended stories of journeys to faith.

(The method of analysis is summarised in FIGURE 1.) Two key sources of data were available at the outset. The main body of material was found in the IN and in PINs. Separately, small but crucial amounts of external material were available from: demographic data; field notes made after the interview; dates and temporal sequences in the narratives of other participants; and answers to theoretical questions (TQ). These two main sources were first considered together to develop a Biographical Data Chronology, which informed the Biographical Data Analysis, an understanding of the ‘life lived’ (conversion history), pointing to a likely terminus ad quem of the conversion process and the location of experiences of encounter within it.

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490 This was most often possible with spouses but on three further occasions narratives referenced events in the stories of other participants. This became a potential data source in seventeen of 32 cases.

491 This source included answers to the question, ‘When would you have begun to think of yourself as a Christian?’ as well as the questions about awareness of God and spiritual experience.
FIGURE 1: Method of Case Reconstruction

CASE SUMMARY

ANALYSIS OF PINS OF ENCOUNTER within story and life: salience, variety and context.

IDENTIFICATION OF THEMES: belonging, believing, behaving, bonding and conversion process

(LIFE LIVED)

(BIOGRAPHIC DATA)

BIOGRAPHIC DATA ANALYSIS

BIological DATA CHRONOLOGY

(OTHER SOURCES)

Demographic data field notes; other interviews; answers to theoretical questions

(STORY TOLD)

(TEXT STRUCTURE)

SEQUENCE through identification of text sorts and sequence of events

NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIPT AND RECORDING: initial narrative (IN) and particular incident narratives (PIN)

492 Following Wengraf, Qualitative, 237
Each narrative was also reviewed in order to understand the ‘story as told’. At this stage the primary task was to identify ‘text sort’: narration, description, and argumentation.\textsuperscript{493} Identification of narration – the recounting of experiences and events – was necessary to allow for a subsequent sequential analysis. Description, on occasion, provided valuable information about setting, including the context of experiences of encounter. Sections of argumentation provided potential access to internal conversations, though those that had occurred at a distance from the conversion process, encompassing theological reconstruction in community, were not germane to the research focus.\textsuperscript{494} Rarely, an overarching framework was revealed in opening statements that suggested the presence of more recent perspectives. The sequential analysis resulted in a story as told which could be compared with the life as lived – the Biographical Data Analysis.

When drawn together, the two sequences provided the basis for a case summary.\textsuperscript{495} Each experience of encounter was additionally summarised as a vignette\textsuperscript{496} to identify its main features, its context, and its salience. These documents provided for comparison between narratives both at the level of conversion process

\textsuperscript{493} Wengraf identifies five text sorts: Description, Argumentation, Report, Narration, and Evaluation. Wengraf, \textit{Qualitative}, 251-255. As Report is a compressed form of Narration, and Evaluation the output from Argumentation, the three major categories were used. Rosenthal follows this abbreviated pattern.

\textsuperscript{494} Constructionist scepticism about access to thinking at the time would result in suspicion about this project. Nevertheless, critical realists demonstrate confidence about access, albeit limited, to ‘internal conversations’ at the time of events in the past. Argumentation and evaluation were probed in the narratives and some participants responded that either they would have used different language categories at the time, or that evaluations were the product of hindsight. On other occasions, they affirmed that their evaluations occurred as a result of reflection at the time.

\textsuperscript{495} The selection of aliases was part of developing the profile implicit in the summaries. They were selected from online lists of the most popular names from the participant’s year of birth.

\textsuperscript{496} The term ‘vignette’ acquires nuanced meaning in psychosocial research. Here it is used in the general sense of a brief evocative account of a few sentences.
and of the particularities of encounter. With due regard for the potential loss of particularity, a spreadsheet provided a temporary checklist and aide memoire of these aspects and noted the presence of each of Saroglou’s dimensions. Together with verbatim quotes, these resources have been used as a basis for the research report.

**Conclusion**

While the attempt to ‘keep in mind’ 32 stories and more than fifty encounters was undoubtedly taxing, it was possible with the aid of immersive study of the scripts and the support of summary documents and occasional return to the original recordings. This is not to claim total recall but it is argued that thorough immersion in the particularity of each participant’s journey it was possible to hold in mind key aspects of each narration. In this way – without the disaggregation into fragments of unique life courses – it was possible to preserve diversity and detail which may be less accessible in studies which follow deconstructive approaches, or are pessimistic about getting close to experiential encounter. Gaining insight into internal conversations, ‘messy [at the] ontological level’, that had taken place around the time of the events and experiences that were recounted, was undoubtedly an uncertain process, which will invite further discussion.

Rosenthal has identified goals for case reconstruction.

1. insight into the genesis and sequential (i.e. diachronic) gestalt of the life history,

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497 These documents sought to preserve complexity and ambiguity. ‘[I]t is important for summaries not to iron out inconsistencies, contradictions and puzzles. To grasp a person through the 'whole' of what we know about him or her does not have to imply that he or she is consistent, coherent or rational.’ Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson. *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach* (London: Sage, 2013), 65.

498 On reflection this is not so far from the pastor’s day job that occurs without the support of recorded conversations or verbatim transcripts.

2. proximity to the courses of activities and experiences, and not only to the present interpretations, of the investigated persons, and
3. reconstruction of their present perspectives and the differences between these present perspectives and the perspectives that were adopted in the past.\textsuperscript{500}

The genesis and sequence of the life history and reconstruction of perspectives that were adopted in the past were central to the missiological focus of this project. Identifying present perspectives, other than those which illuminated internal conversations and processes close to the events and experiences narrated, would have been part of a different study, closer to the work of Grace Milton focused on congregational theology.

Several methodological themes have recurred throughout this discussion. Intersubjectivity is at the heart of the narrative project. As a practitioner who has accompanied people on journeys to conversion in my everyday life, I was conscious of being ‘for’ each of them rather than merely a detached observer. The current study is indicative rather than representative and particularity, rather than a drive to theological universalising, will inevitably lead to a return to specific cases before limited and tentative moderatum generalisation\textsuperscript{501} – suggestions of a number of ways in which, in the contemporary missional context, encounter may be occurring in complex conversion processes, alongside other dimensions, among at least some adults with little or no previous experience of church. Recognition of agency on the part of converts, as reflective partners in the research, is fundamental to this study and a common feature of narrative inquiry. Specifically, an attributional approach to experience undergirds the study rather than looking for manifestations that are \textit{sui}

\textsuperscript{500} Rosenthal, \textit{Interpretive}, 168.

generis legitimate encounters with God. Transparency in research method has been recognised to be critical in establishing the validity of the process and research conclusions. Hopefully, adequate detail has been offered to serve that purpose. Fundamental to the current project has been a critical realist epistemology that is recognised by some as having a good fit with biographic-interpretive methods. Finally, a concern has been evident to draw a distinction between the kind of bespoke personal stories told in the interviews and testimony. The latter is often characterised by the passive voice, reference to Scripture and theological concepts, and explicit concern for the glory of God. These participants told stories that were characterised by immediacy and detail, notable in their particularity, though sometimes meandering and ambiguous.
NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

The pilot study did not lead me to anticipate the problems of recruitment that would accompany the main research. However, once secured, the stories of contemporary converts provided evidence of the particularity of journeys, and in some cases a greater level of ambiguity than had been anticipated. They were also suggestive of a reflective operant missional praxis that did not in every respect fit easily with the articulated beliefs, or the accepted practices, of the P+c tradition. In order to work towards praxis it was necessary to reach around the normative and espoused tradition, to the current work of academic theologians in the area of pneumatology. This required extensive new reading but by doing so it was possible to affirm, in important respects, both the narratives of participants, and emerging practices of congregations.
4: SITUATING CONVERSION AND ENCOUNTER

The purpose of the empirical research was to indicate the frequency, range, salience, and context of experiential encounter in the conversion of people attending Pentecostal and charismatic congregations, who have little previous experience of church, and to consider implications for mission by those churches. It is framed within cultural trends that, according to missiologist Timothy Tennent, demand a ‘completely different approach to the discourse, conceptualization and execution of missions’.

Research into conversion and experiential encounter could have been pursued within a wide range of psychosocial and theological disciplines. As well as engaging anthropology, sociology, or psychology, it could have been approached from the perspectives of conversion studies, religious studies, spirituality studies or Pentecostal and charismatic studies. Rather than any of these, or the disciplines of applied, empirical or practical theology, concern to engage missional practice by charismatic churches has led to it being placed within a missiological framework, with its task of ‘investigat[ing] scientifically and critically the presuppositions, motives, structures, methods, patterns of cooperation and leadership which the churches bring to their mandate’.

Missiology is itself a hybrid discipline and, with further interdisciplinary input, offers the opportunity from a variety of perspectives to develop problematisation of the research topic by

[the unpacking, deconstruction and critique of concepts and categories that belong to the received cultural and scientific traditions and wisdoms and that also form the major import for our thinking and construction processes.]

In addition to identifying key conceptual issues inherent to the topic, methodological challenges and further heuristic possibilities are also brought to the surface by

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problematisation;\textsuperscript{505} it drives towards transformation and has particular utility in research hoping to contribute to reflection on practice. Thus far the main missiological perspective from which conversion has been considered is that of fresh expressions and the contextual church project. The research data on conversion processes and on encounter will be considered together with its implied missional praxis. These will be reviewed in the light of emergent P+c perspectives on minority world missiology together with the fx offering.

**Multidisciplinary perspectives**

Conversion attracts multidisciplinary attention because of the ‘monumental changes’ involved. New ways of interpreting religious conversion are warranted because it ‘encompasses religious, political, psychological, social and cultural domains.'\textsuperscript{506} The *Handbook of Religious Conversion* demonstrates that range by marshalling papers from seventeen disciplinary perspectives, including history, geography, semiotics and neuroscience. Religious experience may attract slightly more narrow attention but is of concern to students of anthropology, psychology, and sociology, as well as literature and neuroscience. A significant amount of reflection on conversion occurs in the interface between psychology and sociology. Psychosocial perspectives are well placed to contribute to the problematising process, though at times these offer reductive analyses that fail to take account of the complexity and particularity of the phenomena involved, particularly the religious aspects of conversion. In addition, because of the close association of anthropology with missiology and its concern with religious subjects, its contribution is also considered.

Among the potential partners for a missiological study of conversion, the theoretical contribution of Lewis Rambo’s *Understanding Religious Conversion* could be considered appropriate. His influential work, from 1993, offers a sequential model of seven stages: context; crisis; quest; encounter; interaction; commitment; consequences. In addition it identifies several types of conversion: defection;


\textsuperscript{506} Rambo *Handbook*, 2.
intensification; affiliation; institutional transition; tradition transition. Alternatively, and more recently, Henri Gooren has developed a conversion careers approach that the social anthropologist, Joel Robbins, considers to be ‘genuinely innovative’ and that ‘will join Rambo’s book as one of the very few recent standard and indispensable works in the field of conversion studies’. Gooren identifies distinct levels of participation in a conversion career: pre-affiliation; affiliation (without a change in identity): conversion; confession (becoming a core member); and disaffiliation. Gooren’s review of previous studies, discussed above, is useful in organising a vast array of material, though it remains to be seen how far his own comprehensive approach will lead to empirical studies that overcome the earlier weaknesses that he has identified.

Psychological and sociological studies of conversion are often considered to be reductive, and most often ignore religious aspects of conversion, both content and experience. In relation to the issue of content, Christian Smith has commented.

If the religious contents of religious beliefs do not matter, then religion is immediately reducible to more generic features of social life, and the study of religion can be readily subsumed into the fields that study them.

Among the few that shows an interest the religious aspects of conversion, Milton considers Rambo to be attentive to religious aspects, and Jindra includes both Gooren and Rambo among authorities pointing to the need for other disciplines to engage with researchers whose concerns are within the religious sphere. Certainly, Gooren calls for researchers ‘to recognise the importance of subjective religious experience in the conversion process’ and Rambo references several missiologists in his work. Nevertheless the account of religious factors in conversion offered by each of Gooren and Rambo remains quite thin, and it may be that Jindra’s work, as

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508 See Chapter 2b.


510 Rambo, *Understanding*, 238
well as studies like Milton’s and the current project will suggest lines of development.

Jindra turns to the anthropologist Gooren as a reflective partner, because of his ability to ‘take the interaction between personality and group variables seriously’. Central for Jindra is understanding why an individual turns towards a particular variety of religion belief, and she finds Gooren’s work to be exceptional in what she considers to be its ‘comparative analysis of conversion processes to different religious groups’, though she admits that it is not easy to compare her work with that of Gooren, and she seems to discover as many differences as similarities between the two. Jindra finds Rambo’s approach less helpful than Gooren’s for her purposes, regarding Rambo’s work, if brilliant, to be largely theoretical.

By contrast, Milton considers that Rambo’s model provides a more holistic and comprehensive framework for her purposes, and that the more recent work of Gooren on conversion careers does not seriously challenge Rambo, or break new ground. She finds that ‘any criticism [Gooren] makes of past conversion theories does not apply to Rambo’. This is too strong a position to take, both on Gooren’s substantive contribution and on his critique. While Gooren is appreciative of Rambo’s work, there are significant areas in which they part company. According to Gooren, Rambo shares with others a ‘certain determinism, implying [against the available empirical evidence] that crisis and tension are at the heart of conversion.’

Gooren suggests that several of the stages Rambo identifies are problematic, among them ‘context’, ‘crisis’ and ‘encounter’, and cites research that finds that encounter is probably not a distinct dimension of conversion. He comments that, while Rambo’s theoretical model is very useful to researchers, there are few empirical

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511 Jindra, Model, 1-2.
512 Ibid. 82-83
513 Ibid. 1.
514 Milton, Shalom, 85
515 Ibid. 41.
516 Gooren, Conversion, 40.
517 However, it did find empirical support for several of Rambos’s stages. Peter J. Kahn and A. L. Greene, ‘Seeing Conversion Whole”: Testing a Model of Religious Conversion’, Pastoral Psychology, 52: 3 (2004), 233-258 [241, 256].
follow-ups, though he is probably unreasonable to focus on Rambo in that regard, given that the failure of theoretical accounts of conversion to provide adequate focus for analysis has been considered to be characteristic of the field.

Within Rambo’s stage model, two issues are evident that are of concern to the current missiological study, each of which is identified and considered by Milton, though she does not find them overwhelmingly problematic to her purposes. Firstly, for Rambo, encounter is explicitly with a human agent, not with the divine. This has been noted by Milton and she proposes encounter with the divine as a second element in the ‘encounter stage’. However, divine-human encounter – what I describe as experiential encounter and have operationalised as ‘being aware of God’ – cannot easily be accommodated in a stage model of conversion, even one as flexible as Rambo’s. It is axiomatic for this research that encounter, in its religious sense, may occur at any stage in the conversion journey, precipitating a ‘quest’, or occurring well into the ‘interaction’ phase and hence that it is best understood as a dimension, not a stage.

Equally significant is Milton’s finding that, while she is able to find evidence of Rambo’s stages across her stories,

...this was primarily because his stages match a typical life story structure. For instance, if someone were telling the story of how they met their spouse, I suspect that the same stages would be present.

Milton’s impressionistic suspicion is quickly passed over, and she makes little comment on the fact that she does not find that specific stages were considered important or theologically significant by her participants – they were present but not

518 Ibid. 40.
521 Milton, Shalom, 195.
salient.\textsuperscript{522} If she is justified in her conclusion that Rambo’s stage model reflects more general narrative structure, which would be unsurprising in the light of narrative theory, then the usefulness of Rambo as a framework for conversion is limited. As Kox has pointed out in his empirical investigation of Lofland’s conversion model, ‘what we want to know is whether the findings apply to converts exclusively,’\textsuperscript{523} not equally to stories of marriage or, for that matter, to career change or to mid-life crises. This is clearly an important challenge to the distinctive usefulness of Rambo stage theory that merits further investigation.

Because of their limited interest in the emotional dimension and in religious experience, the work of both Rambo and Gooren is limited in its specific relevance to the current study, though they each provide necessary background. In particular, Rambo’s position that ‘conversion is a process, not a specific event’, is helpful in allowing for a broad understanding of progression in the current study. He suggests that conversion may occur along a number of continua: ‘sudden or gradual, total or partial, active or passive, internal or external’. Gooren’s highlighting of the absence of studies of adult conversions supports the current study, as well as the three reviewed above. Conversely, his sharp distinction between affiliation and conversion is less helpful, arguably increasingly so in the post-ecclesial environment described by missiologists, where longer journeys to faith might be expected.\textsuperscript{524}

Consequently, this study, rather than turning to Gooren or to Rambo as a multidisciplinary lens, has engaged the contemporary integrative model of religiousness proposed by Vassilis Saroglou that gives prominence to the emotional, as well as to social, cognitive and ethical domains.\textsuperscript{525} Some of these dimensions are evidenced in praxis as well as the psychosocial literature. Conversion has been described in multidimensional terms by theologians including Yong and Gelpi.\textsuperscript{526}

\textsuperscript{522} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{525} Saroglou, Religion, 5.
\textsuperscript{526} Yong, Flesh, 96-98; Gelpi, Turn, 134.
is axiomatic to the current research that conversion pathways are characterised by particularity and that experiential encounter is not restricted to a ‘stage’ in a conversion process. It would be difficult to superimpose a stage model like that of Rambo, and the borders between Gooren’s levels of participation would defy easy identification.\textsuperscript{527} A central research focus on the frequency, range, salience, and context of encounter across extended life histories is more likely to be understood as a dimension alongside other domains, rather than being sought as a distinct phase in a process. In fact, the restriction of experiential encounter to a point of conversion and subsequently has already been an aspect of the problematisation of the topic.\textsuperscript{528}

Furthermore the current interest with praxis is well served by Saroglou’s concept of four dimensions, once it is accepted that the emotional domain, and with it experiential encounter is under-emphasised in the literature. It has been demonstrated that the dimensions of belonging, believing, and behaving have become more prominent in the second decade of the fx project. Each of them are, to a helpful degree, used within contextual church praxis within the post-Christendom milieu, and discussed more broadly as domains within evangelism and conversion, as well as political and religious behaviour.\textsuperscript{529} A Pentecostal and charismatic contribution to a fourth dimension, which gives place to the priority of encounter, may provide an enhanced framework for supplementing a previously three dimensional fx praxis.

\textsuperscript{527} This was an issue for Jindra. Jindra, \textit{Model}, 11.

\textsuperscript{528} Chapter 2a.

The need for examination of a believing-belonging-behaving model of praxis has been identified in chapter 1, including the need for further work on definition. While not without its own problems of definition, Saroglou’s four dimensions have been operationalised in a *Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale* which has been used in a number of published works. ‘This four-factor structure has been confirmed across some European populations showing good reliability across different cultural groups’ and has been extended to Central America and East Asia.  

None of these studies are with P+c populations and it is likely that prior to such use the instrument would require modification. However, it does point towards potential areas for further research into the emotional dimension of conversion, including experiential encounter. It suggests that there may be a route forward for further theoretical input to conversion praxis, which is methodologically suited for empirical investigation at a quantitative as well as qualitative level.

Probably the closest interdisciplinary relationship with missiology is with anthropology, giving rise to its own sub-specialism of missiological anthropology. According to Gooren anthropologists have the potential to bring to research into conversion and religious experience ‘a long-term perspective, their ethnographic approach, focus on the cultural context, and their theoretical flexibility’. Each of these have contributed to an enduring constitutive role for anthropology within missiology, though the fit between the two disciplines is uneasy for those who see in anthropology ‘a closed natural system, [where] God is generally denied, ignored, or

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treated as a fleeting projection of human social construction.”533 Certainly, while phenomenological approaches claim empathy, the effective privileging of outsider discourse limits scope for a deep understanding. Even Gooren seems to embrace an anthropological hermeneutic of suspicion that necessitates an exclusive emphasis on ‘how people tell their story’, treating it as a social construction, and bracketing any consideration of the reality behind the representation of the events and experiences they describe.534

Against this tendency, the anthropologist Fiona Bowie, whose research interest is in the afterlife, has gone some way to identifying an ‘experiential lineage’ in anthropological research that goes beyond the intersubjectivity of other psychosocial disciplines, and of phenomenological approaches within anthropology. That may offer an alternative to the kind of paradigm critiqued by Tennent,535 and suggest a locus for P+C ‘transcendent realism’.536 ‘[E]xperiential’ anthropologists bring to their research direct personal experience of spiritual phenomena, integrating insider and outsider perspectives. Christian researchers in the multidisciplinary area, who acknowledge a supernaturalist sensibility are, as yet, thin on the ground. The sociologist, Margaret Poloma537 identifies as an evangelical and charismatic Christian, and her work is widely cited within the academy. Attention is less frequently drawn to Alan R. Tippett and Charles Kraft, anthropologists who have also received some recognition within the multidisciplinary academy.538

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534 Gooren, ‘Narratives’, 104.


537 Margaret Poloma, ‘Main Street Mystics; A Reconfiguration of Pentecostalism’ in Hilborn, *Toronto*, 99–107.

In Bowie’s view, experiential researchers bring a supernaturalist worldview to their research that has emotional, as well as cognitive, concomitants, allowing them to go beyond the limits of phenomenology, and resulting in an increase in empathy and a loosening of *a priori* scepticism. Such an approach is not restricted to believers; the work of Tanya Luhrmann is cited by Bowie as employing a learned skill, avoiding a level of detachment that undermines empathy. Poloma describes herself as an ‘involved ethnographer’. Hood, together with Poloma, takes an approach that ‘[h]uman experiences must be taken seriously, not simply as social constructions (which they partly are), but as actual ways in which God is experienced.’ They describe this as ‘methodological agnosticism’ rather than the ‘predominant approach’ of ‘methodological atheism’.

Bowie’s insights are based on a problematisation of the phenomenology of religion by Gavin Flood, and she proposes an inclusive methodology she describes as ‘cognitive empathetic engagement’. Her cognitive stance is that of openness, remaining receptive to different possibilities as long as possible, accepting that all perspectives are limited by their location. Empathy places the subject and observer in a ‘single ontological hermeneutical framework’, and tries to see the world as others see it. Both researcher and participant occupy the same frame. In drawing attention to engagement, Bowie may be optimistic about the degree to which empathetic engagement can close the gap between self and other in a research context. Moreover, in recognising ‘no objective reality outside our shared experience’, she co-opts P+c researchers like Poloma and Cartledge, and agnostics like Hood and Luhrman, to a position that some of them would be reluctant to occupy. However, with those caveats, as an approach to gathering (or generating) data, her method has

540 Margaret M. Poloma, *Main Street Mystics*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 254, 237-254.
strengths. It recognises intersubjectivity, it respects the agency and self-awareness of research participants, and it turns a sceptical gaze on the discipline of problematisation. Furthermore, such perspectives are amenable to use within broadly realist frameworks, including that of Jindra above.

Key terms

Later chapters in this thesis are devoted to the engagement of theology and missiology as problematising disciplines, and their constitutive role in the topic has been outlined in large part in parts 1 and 2. However, there is a need to consider problematic aspects of the key terms in the central research question, and to clarify their influence on methodology. In formulating the research question, ‘encounter’ and ‘conversion’ were employed as broad theological terms, though each ranges widely in ecclesial, popular and, in the case of the latter, multidisciplinary use which has been discussed above.

Conversion

It has been proposed above that P+c ecclesial theology shares a standard evangelical discourse of conversion that is also common to a substantial section of the fx movement, and several volumes of systematic theology illustrate the normative theology across the tradition. Warrington reserves explicit use of the term for a discussion of its relationship to Spirit baptism, but does effectively define conversion in a discussion of salvation. ‘Pentecostals subscribe to the need for individual repentance, the receiving of God’s grace and forgiveness, by faith and a determined commitment to an active following of Jesus by lifestyle and witness.’

In Stanley M. Horton’s *Systematic Theology*, conversion is briefly referenced. ‘Repentance and faith’ constitute the two essential elements of conversion. Rodman Williams spends several paragraphs on conversion.

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Conversion means a turning from sin and a turning to God… [It] may suggest even more vividly than repentance this idea of a total alteration… it is also a way of speaking of the totality of salvation. Accordingly, conversion may stand for both salvation and regeneration. Nothing else need be added.546

Wayne Grudem has a short chapter entitled ‘Conversion (Faith and Repentance)’ and defines conversion as ‘our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.’547

P+c definitions of conversion focus narrowly on repentance and faith. Missiological definitions of conversion range more widely, equally dependent on the author’s confessional position. However, they are of particular relevance in their attention to praxis, and their influence on fx missional practice. For Bosch,

conversion is a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and centre of one’s life… Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become a participant in the mighty works of God.

He is concerned to make clear that conversion is not ‘the joining of a community in order to procure eternal salvation.’548 Conversely, Tennent is at pains to ‘clearly state that biblical salvation encompasses much more than personal conversion… It inherently implies incorporation into a community.’549 He also observes: ‘In my experience of working in India, I have found out that discipleship often precedes conversion by many years.’550 Bryan Stone specifically seeks to link ‘God’s inbreaking reign’ to conversion, as ‘a radical change of the direction in which one looked and a radical change of the patterns by which one lived.’551 In these latter

546 J. Rodman Williams, Renewal Theology: systematic theology from a charismatic perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 2, 49.
549 Tennent, Invitation, 62. This is in agreement with fx commentators.
550 Ibid., 81.
definitions, regeneration is in the background, and behavioural change and relationships move to the foreground. Lesslie Newbigin describes it thus:

To be converted in any sense that is true to the Bible is something that involves the whole person. It is a total change of direction, which includes both the inner reorientation of the heart and mind and the outward real orientation of conduct in all areas of life.\textsuperscript{552}

Elsewhere, Newbigin summarises: ‘the call to be turned to Jesus thus included (1) a personal relationship to him; (2) a visible community; (3) a pattern of behaviour’.\textsuperscript{553} While it is possible to make too much of brief definitions, within much broader expositions of soteriology they can be taken to suggest differences of emphasis between normative theology and broader praxis. Among these perspectives, Newbigin’s is particularly useful as a heuristic in the context of this research, in that he, more than others, points towards multidimensionality by identifying bonding, belonging and behaving (though not, specifically, believing) within the call to conversion.

As described in the fx literature review, Moynagh and Hollinghurst found problems in the head counts of crusade evangelism or, in other ways, in the preoccupation with shallow numerical growth. Rejection of shallow conversionist spirituality would be aided by further discussion of the validity of conversion as a theological concept, perhaps seeking to place it in tension with regeneration, rather than seeing them as two sides of a coin. As it is, the contemporary focus on the continuities of discipleship, rather than the implicit discontinuities of conversion, creates its own problems. Anticipating and perhaps sowing the seeds of the later negative discourse, Newbigin questions, on one hand, a differentiation which he found in church growth thinking, between, on one hand, ‘discipleship’ and ‘perfecting’ that brackets the ethical demands of the gospel, and, on the other, the ethnocentrism that prioritises particular behaviours as litmus tests for true


discipleship. Tennent, from a global viewpoint outside of Christendom assumptions, places conversion at the end of a long period of discipleship. ‘Today’s emphasis on soul winning must become an emphasis on church planting (community building) and conversion must be broadened to include the end of spiritual exile and the inbreaking of the reign of God and the first fruits of the new creation.’

**Encounter**

For the purposes of this research, it is possible to bracket most of the problems inherent in the use of the term ‘conversion’; this is less so with the ‘encounter’. The ‘core concern of charismatics is for an experiential encounter with God’; that, more than tongues, prophecy, healing, or a particular style of worship, gives Pentecostals and charismatics their family resemblance. Cartledge’s short introductory text, subtitled *the charismatic tradition*, has as its main title, *Encountering the Spirit*. Keith Warrington’s *Pentecostal Theology* is subtitled ‘*a theology of encounter*’.

…central to [Pentecostal] faith and practice are the concepts of ‘encounter’ and ‘experience’. They aim to know God experientially, whether by it is via an intellectual recognition of his being or an emotional appreciation of his character, and it is this that often makes them functionally different within the Christian tradition.

Warrington admits to both intellectual and emotional experience here and elsewhere, but when he describes the Spirit as our friend, it is the emotional dimension which has primacy over the cognitive. Later, he uses the terms ‘encounter’ and ‘experience’ interchangeably, and others, across the tradition, connect the terms closely. Amos Yong describes the experience of God as ‘the in-breaking of the

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559 Warrington, *Encounter*, 37; Warrington, ‘Challenges’, 198–209. [204-205]
Spirit’s presence into our lives’, and across P+c discourse, ‘encounter’ is used to describe an experience that is more or less interruptive.

Warrington is preoccupied with encounter at, and subsequent to, punctiliar conversion. The evangelical, Robert K. Johnston, makes a significant contribution below in the development of praxis. While appearing to agree that conversion is more point than process, he seeks to extend the scope of experiential encounter to prevenient events. Johnston explores encounters in the midst of everyday lives, in which people are surprised by God’s presence outside the walls of the church. In doing so, he redirects common definitions of general revelation, so that ‘[r]ather than simply conveying new information that is then ignored, general revelation involves a numinous encounter, one that is often transformational.’

The typical experience, prior or proximate to conversion is ‘not that of being convicted of sin and moral failure. It is ‘the experience of being enveloped by God’s unexpected presence and surprised by joy, that graces us with goodness and simultaneously invites us to become more and better than we currently are.’ This evangelical viewpoint stands in contrast with the P+c preoccupation with encounter that is at, or subsequent to, conversion and, it will be argued, is considered most likely to occur in ecclesial settings. Johnston makes the case that the church has largely ignored the theological significance of these other encounters, mediated by creation, conscience, and culture. He is seeking to make room for ‘wide-ranging, serendipitous encounters with the divine’, including prevenient encounters, that bring transformative spiritual insight.

564 Johnston, Wider, 9.
565 Ibid., xxvi.
566 Ibid., 9. He accepts that ‘conscience’ is too restrictive a locus and suggests, ‘nature, the inner being of a person, and history’ as an alternative schema.
Johnston’s reviewers object that revelation, characterised in this way, is special rather than general, and that he privileges the pre-critical over the cognitive. More often, general revelation is considered to be that by which ‘all people possess a rudimentary knowledge of God’. The encounters Johnston describes are specific and particular and in their transformative impact, or at least potential, go far beyond this more common awareness. However, by framing conversion as process or pathway, rather than point or crisis, the distinction between general and special revelation becomes less significant. In his focus on intuitive, imaginative, and emotional aspects of experience, he has both thrown light on encounters that are less valued by Pentecostals and charismatics and demonstrated that within some parts of a broader evangelicalism, too, encounter is a significant area of interest.

While the phrase ‘experiential encounter’ may work rhetorically, it is in danger of becoming tautologous. However, James K. A. Smith, who places himself within the ‘evangelical, charismatic tradition’, identifies a potential value in having the two terms available. In responding to the challenge that God cannot be experienced (because only phenomena can be experienced) he suggests that Godself may deign to be encountered ‘in experience’ when the condition of faith is met. By providing a rudimentary grammar of experiential encounter, he adds the possibility of ‘encountering God in experience’ to ‘experience of encounter’, extending the scope of a term that is difficult to pin down. In this regard, the Catholic charismatic, Donald Gelpi is undoubtedly justified in claiming that ‘the term “experience” enjoys a certain pride of place among the weasel words of the English-language.’ Writing from a multidisciplinary perspective in 2016, the anthropologist Bettina Schmidt considered the study of (specifically) religious experience to be in its infancy, though it is unsurprising that there is an acceleration of interest. On one hand, the experiential turn in the culture and, on the other, growth in self-awareness and

569 Gelpi, Turn, 1–2.
priorities have given rise to an audience for theologians, like Neumann and Cartledge, and textual specialists like Levison, whose work on the Spirit is discussed below.

Within this research, experiential encounter is accepted as a subset of religious experience, a term which, operationally, Alister Hardy defined for his data-generating purposes as ‘a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self’.\(^571\) This definition is more restrictive than Johnston’s ‘numinous encounter’\(^572\) but it still falls short of the essentialist requirements for religious experience to be considered ‘Pentecostal’ described by Neumann, summarising Clark and Lederle.

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\text{[Pentecostal experience]: 1) includes salvation (i.e., conversion) and a transformed moral life, 2) is dynamic and observable, 3) leads to a deeper commitment to Christ, 4) affects one’s lifestyle towards freedom, 5) leads one to become more committed to the mission of Jesus (since this is the purpose of Spirit baptism) and includes emotion, in that the encounter with the Spirit involves the whole physicality of the person.}\(^573\)
\]

Even then, there is an additional congregational role to be exercised in establishing the authenticity of encounter.\(^574\) While this distillation of the espoused theologies\(^575\) of one branch of the tradition allows little room for manoeuvre, there is no reason to suppose that in its strongly Christological and soteriological focus, it is untypical of charismatic (or, in most respects, of evangelical) norms. Essentialism which restricts encounter, or tradition that limits expectation of encounter, to

\(^{571}\) Hardy, *Experience*, 1, 139–141.
\(^{572}\) Johnston, *Wider*, xiii, 35, 47, 47 fn.15.
\(^{574}\) Ibid.
\(^{575}\) ‘Theology in four voices’ (normative/formal/espoused/operant) is explored below.
punctiliar conversion and subsequent events, is key to the problematic of the research question.

Against this normatisation of encounter, which adds a role for the congregation in supplemental confirmation of validity, an alternative view from Kenneth Archer places the primary role in discernment with the congregation.

The community does not have to accept or validate [narrated testimony] as an authentic Christian experience, but it must decide if it is or is not an appropriate Christian experience. The experience may be an appropriate experience but that does not mean it should be a normative experience.576

In his view Clark’s essentialism is an example of ‘modernistic epistemological modes that are inherently hostile to Pentecostal practices of story-telling and testimony.’577 There is a difference between the normative theology of the tradition, and the ecclesial operation, which is tuned by pragmatic and experientialist sensibilities to affirm whatever experience appears to produce ‘good fruit’, or at least move people forward.578

The difficulty faced by normative theology in ‘keeping up’ with revivalistic trends is most starkly seen in hegemonic claims of the normative tradition seeking to restrict the legitimate range of encounters or their manifestations. These claims have been endemic to the historical tradition, but in recent decades have attracted a wider audience and that has led to academic and normative intervention with each new outburst of activity.579 This is not to suggest a uniform essentialist tradition which

579 See particularly with the so-called ‘Toronto Blessing’. Possibly the most coherent exposition of such a conflict is found in Jackson, Quest, 282–338. See also: Hilborn, Toronto.
sees some types of experience as encounter, *sui generis*, and others inappropriate or unauthentic. Warrington takes a broader view, though in relation to encounters in the ordinary rather than those generated in the heat of revival phenomena.

Increasingly, Pentecostals are appreciating the fact that the Spirit is encountered in a variety of ways, often determined by the personality, temperament or the current situation of the believer concerned. It is important that they do not assume that a particular event should be viewed as normative for all since the dynamic and creative Spirit has the capacity to encounter believers in ways that are most appropriate to them. Some encounter God in the presence of loud worship, others in silence; some in the cacophony of the city, others in the stillness of the countryside; some in the depths of their emotions, others in their intellect; some in prayer, others in the reading of the Bible; some often, others infrequently.  

Nevertheless, it is still the case that scholars across the disciplines often have an ideal type of crisis encounter in mind, and there is relatively little interest to date in gradual or quiet encounters, or those which are ambiguous and occur early in the journey of conversion.

**Epistemological considerations**

The broader question of epistemology has been discussed above when considering a ‘cognitive empathetic approach’ to ethnography. However, the specific need to discern the authenticity of experiences of encounter is part of the problematic at all stages of this thesis. Throughout the empirical phase, the decision as to what constitutes encounter has been left to participants and, by implication, the church communities that had heard their testimonies and decided that they were appropriate participants for inclusion. The research methodology: in its epistemology; the method employed; and its hermeneutic approach, endorses the authority of narrators to define their terms for themselves, accepting rather than dismissing the particularity of their developing faith even when the experiences they describe remain ill-defined, ambiguous, or unusual. Rather than always being contingent on existing beliefs, they are accepted as, at times, pre-critical and pre-conceptual, and constitutive of new beliefs, occasionally markedly so. Individual ascriptions of

significance, as ‘commonsense causal explanations’, will identify experiences as encounters or awareness of God in this research.581

A further problematic aspect of the topic, bearing on epistemology, is the issue of the mediation of encounter/experience at many levels, and from several perspectives. This has been part of continuing problematisation of encounter by charismatic scholars, in addition to Neumann and Cartledge.

The encounter is always mediated or interpreted by the receiving subject… So while Pentecostals may want to claim a direct experience of the presence of God and may even point to such experiences in testimony services, as soon as we begin to reflect in a theological manner on these experiences we understand the limitation of human language to carry the understanding of spiritual experiences.582

‘Our “pure experiences” are unavailable for reflection. Thinking involves interpretation all the way down.’583 Beyond intrapersonal mediating processes, by the time converts tell their stories of encounter to a congregation or small group, they have been shaped by and for the charismatic ritual.

Authentic testimony that speaks out of [daily life as well as spiritual] experiences seeks to discern the works of God in the life of the faith community and the world. Functioning in this way, testimony narratives provide a way of doing theology.584

This understanding is consistent with Milton’s approach to testimony, and community attestation has already been identified by Archer above, by Albrecht, and by Lederle. Explicit or implicit attribution to the Spirit of emotional responses, theophanies, or altered states of consciousness, provides an important service in outlining the range of phenomena that are considered acceptable.

581 Taves, Experience, 9–11, 181.
583 Amos Yong, Spirit-Word-Community, 247.
584 Albrecht, Rites, 229
In public testimony, there is clearly a degree of social construction taking place that is likely to be of a stronger kind than in extended personal narration. It seems reasonable that it is impossible to get closer to the reality of specific experiences of God, than in the narration of those who tell us their stories. Nevertheless, by the time a story of conversion is told it has been shaped, not only by the story telling skills of the narrator, but also, to varying degrees, by the charismatic tradition in which the convert is nurtured. Their narrations are, more or less, undergirded by a (developing) web of belief, and (becoming) embedded in tradition. While that view is incompatible with a strong view of autonomy, it does not remove the reality of agency, and with it an ability to recognise the particularities and dilemmas of their own journeys. It is where narratives recall initial responses and reactions to events and experiences, and often where they deviate from or adjust the tradition, that they are most of interest.  

**Methodological implications**

With multiple layers of interpretation wrapped around the events and experiences of each narrative, there is little choice but to engage in some kind of hermeneutical approach to the narratives generated by the research process without denying knowability of the phenomena. Among narrative approaches, BNIM has been adapted to both constructionist and realist epistemologies. It fits within the same family of methods as Jindra’s biographical sociology and, while it has not been possible to discover applications of BNIM to studies of conversion or to religious experience, there are studies, in addition to that of Jindra, which claim to use similar narrative methods. In the context of social policy research, Turk has described a specific aspect of a critical realist approach to narrative. 

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We take the spontaneous minimally directed autobiographical narratives from our informants as perhaps reflecting (not perfectly but with some degree of accuracy) their internal conversations at play during the experiences they narrate.\textsuperscript{589}

Much more than narrative constructions, they offer a privileged way to listen in on the work of God in real lives that is enhanced in the cumulative impact of numerous overlapping voices. Knowledge becomes beliefs about which we are reasonably certain – there are phenomena that exist independently of our claims about them. Our claims may represent that actuality accurately or not, and research aims to represent, rather than reproduce it. While the supernaturalist worldview which undergirds this thesis asserts that God may be encountered in experience,

\begin{quote}
[i]t does not mean, however, that there are no performative aspects in the autobiographical narration. Undoubtedly, we can find some attempts of presenting oneself in the most favourable light or avoiding a detailed account of painful experiences, but such attempts can be identified during the interview and further during the analysis and taken into account in the interpretation.\textsuperscript{590}
\end{quote}

The current approach is appreciative of the reflexivity of research participants, accepting that they engage with the ontological issues that arise from their journeys of conversion. When encountered through the mind and the emotions, God is ‘both immediately present and profoundly cloaked’, but those who took part in this research, as did Luhrmann’s respondents, sometimes demonstrated ‘an acute consciousness that their belief has a complicated relationship to the everyday world in which they live.’\textsuperscript{591}

That appreciation of high levels of reflexivity and insightfulness extends to the leaders of denominations and churches who were willing and found the time to introduce me to possible participants. Forty people were interviewed, including eight

\textsuperscript{589} Turk, \textit{Realist}, 14. That assumption is not without problems as it does not account for subsequent layers of reflection. There is skill involved in a process that seeks to reach back to internal conversations at the time of the experience.

\textsuperscript{590} Ibid., 27–28.

\textsuperscript{591} Luhrmann, \textit{Talks}, 314, 315.
at the pilot stage, significantly more adult converts than many P+c churches would see over a number of years. A story of conversion, even if told briefly in a congregational setting, is a ‘big story’; it is a narration of a lived life that will thematise the narrator,\textsuperscript{592} influenced by a small number of theologically tethered testimony plots. Long form narration can, to some extent, break free of such emplotment; in fact, it is almost guaranteed to challenge the assumption of clarity and simplicity inherent within the testimony format. Nevertheless, ‘[t]elling others about oneself is, then, no simple matter. It depends on what we think that they think we ought to be like – or what selves in general ought to be like.’\textsuperscript{593} Both agency and construction are involved, and each are involved in shaping the narrative for the researcher as opposed to, say, a non-Christian friend, or a home group. Some narratives which demonstrated aspects of typicality within their particularity have been considered in detail. Across the stories, the salience of the emotional, ‘bonding’, dimension was assessed by its prominence in the narrative, in comparison with belonging, believing and behaving.

While each story demonstrated particularity, the research showed some degree of saturation in aspects of the conversion process, including the variety, contexts and salience of encounters experienced. With that background, it is possible to introduce several more or less typical participants in the research narratives, and outline the scope for analysis of all the stories gathered and, from there, to reflect on theology and praxis.


5: INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES WITHIN A CONVERSION PROCESS

Conversion in the context of life

The goal of the fieldwork for this research was to gain insight into the frequency, salience and context of experiential encounters in the conversion of people with little previous experience of church, to provide a platform for considering implications for mission. To outline the range of stories told in this study, biographic outlines of several of the more typical examples have been initially presented, in a way which would not be possible across 32 cases. In this way, the constraints experienced by participants are revealed – both to condense, demonstrating the underlying logic of their stories, and to go into details. Juxtaposition of a few cases in some particularity facilitates the identification of emergent similarities, before analysing themes across the whole group by engaging in constant comparison which will require movement backwards and forwards between cases, to reflect on short segments of narrative.

To achieve this, the narratives of two married couples are sketched in some detail. These are considered in the light of both a process model of conversion, and Saroglou’s four-dimensional model of religiosity and conversion. By interviewing separately each member of a couple, for whom lives and stories overlap, it is possible to identify shared, as well as individual, stories, and thus find evidence that may confirm or raise questions about the life history (as lived), as opposed to the life story (as told) and also to find evidence of joint construction. Both couples were married and had blended families, though beyond those similarities there were differences in age, socio-economic context, and denominational allegiance. Consistent with the epistemological approach described, the narratives were empathetically engaged; the participant’s interpretations of events were generally not challenged, and incoherence was accepted. Where inconsistencies were evident between the stages of the interview, participants were invited to reflect on the

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594 Wengraf talks in terms of writing up ‘psycho-portraits’ as well as biographies. Wengraf, Qualitative, 343–358.

595 A single question (SQUIN) inviting initial narrative (IN); return to particular incident narratives (PIN); theoretical questions relating to experiential encounter (TQ).
competing narratives and their preferred version of events and experiences were carried forward.

Christopher and Catherine

Catherine and Christopher were members of a NC congregation. The interviews occurred on a Friday evening in February at their home, a substantial, detached new-build in a commuter village a few miles from a provincial city. Catherine’s story was recorded while Christopher went off to a retirement celebration, and their youngest son watched a DVD in the adjacent room. By the time Catherine had finished, Christopher had returned, and changed from his work clothes, ready for pizza and the start of the weekend. Conversations took place at the kitchen table, with a photo wall for a backdrop – a striking feature of their home, with family photographs covering metres of space both in the kitchen and the cloakroom. Christopher was a university-educated design engineer, aged 53, working in the same company as Catherine, ten years younger and a chartered engineer. They had both been married previously and had met at work when they were each alone and caring for young children. After marrying, they had a fourth child together.

Both INs started by pointing to early experience of church. Christopher and his sister were sent to Sunday school, up to the age of ten or eleven, by their parents who were not church attenders. Christopher commented in the opening sentences of his initial narrative that he was ‘never really spiritually awakened at that time’, and at the end of his narrative he returned to the theme of spiritual awakening, hinting at it several times on the way. By the time Catherine reached that age, her parents had stopped attending church in favour of playing squash, and she resented the fact that they and her older brothers were having fun while she was in church. Her involvement in Girl Guides continued for a year or two until the embarrassment of the uniform proved, at least temporarily, too much. Playing in a Scout and Guide band maintained a link to church until she moved south at the age of nineteen.597

596 Direct quotes from transcripts are italicised throughout.
597 Catherine’s church involvement was the most extended of any participant.
Other than Catherine’s continuing involvement with Guiding, neither were involved in church life until four years before our meeting.

Their stories converge in explaining when – on top of being the mother of a teenage daughter with issues, a full-time chartered engineer, a Brown Owl, a Bollywood dancer, and a trumpet player – Catherine signed up to join a church-led trip to India to refurbish a health centre. Christopher remembered,

_She thought there was something missing in her life and she had a feeling that she needed to do some voluntary work. And I mentioned that [my colleague] had been out to India and I think he’s thinking about going again. ‘Is that something you would be interested in?’ _\textsuperscript{598}

This episode does not form part of Catherine’s narrative, but she does explain that after signing up she had second thoughts about being involved in ‘slum tourism’ and traveling with an unknown group of people. She was ‘in bits’, but discussed her feelings with Christopher ‘over a nice cup of tea’ and the trip went ahead. That trip was central to Catherine’s narrative and she returned to it at each stage of the conversation.

She summed up her experience of India by pointing to a photo on the wall in which she was wearing a T-shirt with the slogan, ‘I’m ready’. At the second stage of the interview, in a PIN, she explained,

_On the very first day of the trip I was ready to receive God. I didn’t go looking for him but he absolutely found me. I didn’t know it. I’d just got a T-shirt on. During that trip God found me and just did this thing. You know, it all makes sense now; all lining up._

When she returned from India, she was,

_not converted, but I did think it’s a bit weird …that all my worlds …have just collided in an upstairs room in a slum in_

\textsuperscript{598} Verbatim quotations from interviews are italicised throughout.
Christopher remembered that she was ‘really enthused and feeling like something had awakened inside her’, though Catherine found it difficult to remember when ‘weirdness’ evolved into being aware of God. ‘There was no, like, epiphany. It was a slow realisation’. Other events, after her baptism, were much more definite in their impact. The closest she got to an epiphany was months later, in what was, for her, an amazing coincidence when helping to organise another Bollywood ball, which involved the exact number of side plates needed being found in the Scout hall. On returning to the India trip as a PIN, she explained that she was so busy, ‘cracking on’ with the task in hand, that she didn’t recognise God’s presence; she only experienced her artistic skills, Bollywood dancing and work with children all coming together as ‘weirdness’. However, when asked, ‘Have you ever been aware of God?’ (in a TQ), she concluded that during the India trip she had experienced awareness of God.

Each of them recollected that they were the one who made the initial suggestion of attending the church to which Christopher’s work colleague and Catherine’s new friends belonged. The trip occurred in the autumn and they were regularly attending by Christmas. Catherine’s IN jumped forward at that point, describing events which evidenced ways in which her life had completely changed since her trip, with a possible implication that there was more of a watershed than she realised. Consistent with a narrative of gradual development, she described how her beliefs were changing during that period.

You can ask Christopher. When we first got together, I used to say things like, ‘You’ll only get to heaven because you know me.’ In a sense, while I say I wasn’t living a Christian life, I really did believe that doing good things would get me to heaven ...because that’s how I was brought up, rather than, ‘I’m actually doing this in your name, I’m actually doing this to bring your kingdom.’

599 This episode exemplifies the way in which the PIN, requested at the second stage of the interview can access an internal conversation.

600 At this point in his version of their story, Christopher reflected that in all the time they had been together they had never discussed religion or spirituality.
She differentiated between always having been a Christian and now being a ‘fully-fledged Christian’, which was how she defined the term ‘converted’.601

After India, it’s like... all right, I start to get it, and I start to get it a bit more, and I start to get it a bit more... and now when I’m reading I sometimes have to put [the Bible] down and think, ‘Stupid! Why didn’t you get that before?’ So there’s not been one massive epiphany.

Catherine’s final PIN was about baptism, which provided her with an end point.

The baptism fitted in. With starting going to church I realised, and said to Christopher, ‘I’d been in this situation all my life and it’s just bringing me to this point. I can’t ignore it – the point that God has done something with me. He’s put me in a position where I can’t get out of it; that I’ve got to start listening to, and that was India. When I came back... but I wouldn’t say I was [converted then].

Christopher’s opening sentence was, ‘My journey has been a fairly long one’; he described himself as somebody who, while he believed in the existence of God, and ‘wanted to be a good person and do the right thing’, he thought he was ‘above spirituality [and] Christianity’. His initial narrative featured several PINs about a colleague who he came to know over twenty years as they travelled on business, and who provided the link for Catherine’s trip.602

I became aware that he was a Christian and on those long nights in foreign hotels and in airport lounges I started to question him and talk to him about his religion and his spirituality. I started to get interested and question in myself, why I thought I didn’t need anything and realising, actually, that there was a need there that I wasn’t acknowledging... I

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601 Catherine was the only participant to use the term ‘converted’.
602 The only reference made by Catherine to this period of Christopher’s life was that he had been talking to somebody (presumably his colleague) ‘over about a year’. 
must admit that I didn’t feel an aching chasm, but I started to feel that [he] had something that I didn’t.603

A few months after starting to attend church, an Alpha course was announced, and Christopher enthusiastically signed up. He was out of the country for the introductory event and for the second session had to drive straight from the airport, arriving half way through.

I had lots of questions. I was sceptical at first. I intellectually thought that some of the things that were written in the Bible couldn’t have taken place and, you know, I can believe it a bit, and maybe I don’t believe it a bit.

Alpha turned out to be ‘game-changing’.

I was waiting for something to tell me that I was on the right path, in answer to my question. I was starting to pray. I was getting no response and I couldn’t understand why; if I was praying and if I was asking for direction, why I wasn’t hearing anything and why I wasn’t getting the message.

On the Alpha weekend, he was disappointed that ‘nothing spiritual’ happened to him. Nevertheless, from then on, he started to see echoes of Pentecost in talks in church and on the radio, and asked a church leader why he was not experiencing the encounter he had expected at the course. The message he got ‘wasn’t a direct phone line to God, but it was a number of things that were all connected’.

...it’s as if somebody’s telling me something because they are repeating it to me. I’m hearing ‘Holy Spirit’. I’m hearing ‘Pentecost’. I’m hearing ‘tongues of fire’. I’m hearing, you know, God coming down. I’m hearing it repeated at me. Why am I not listening to it? What am I waiting for? God is saying, ‘Open your ears, you silly fool. I’ve told you once, this is what I want you to do’.

603 This would have been during the period of the break-up of his marriage and his divorce. While Catherine talked of their family circumstances, Christopher made no reference to children or to his divorce.
It was ‘a marvellous time; a sudden dawning’. Christopher completed the course, and his IN – ‘Gave my heart to Jesus and asked him to be with me and to be my saviour. And that’s my story, I think’.

Amy and Andy

The differences in context from the previous couple were stark. Amy and Andy lived close to the heart of an industrial city, in terraced housing which they were renovating inside and out. The house was cloaked in scaffolding and dust sheets covered part of the living room in which the interviews took place. Andy was self-employed as a builder; Amy worked as a charity volunteer. They were both 35 years old, had three daughters, one from Amy’s previous relationship, and were members of a Pentecostal denomination. While Amy told me her story, Andy sat in the kitchen preparing invoices for his customers.

Like Catherine and Christopher, both introduced their stories by mentioning church attendance, though for Andy that ended by the time he was five years old and his only subsequent religious involvement was in school assemblies. Amy attended Sunday school as a child, and was involved in Girls’ Brigade up to her early teen years. Like many of the participants in the study, she had always identified herself as a Christian. She also described herself as a ‘sex addict’. She started to smoke marijuana at age 15, was pregnant at 17 and split from her partner at 19. Amy and Andy met when they were about 22 and were married in a local Anglican church about four years later, by which time, according to Andy’s narrative, Amy had started to attend church.

Amy had welcomed the chance for a Sunday lie-in when her sister took her eldest daughter to the Pentecostal church. Having never previously thought about going to church, she went to a Christmas lights switch-on in which her daughter was taking part. Rather than carols, contemporary worship songs were being sung and, to her ‘shock’, Amy found herself crying at the lyrics. Subsequently, she started to attend church herself and shortly after was invited with Andy and the children to a Christmas meal. With the promise of an evening in the pub with a meal and a pint, Andy was persuaded by Amy to join her at an Alpha course. For both of them it was
a good evening out, though Andy, who had looked forward to the event as a chance for a good argument, remained unconvinced.

During her early days at church, Amy lost a business she owned, they had two children and, during the second pregnancy, they experienced problems in their marriage. At the most difficult point in the relationship, two women from the church spent an evening with Amy, talking through the situation and encouraging her to pray. When Andy returned that night from a late shift at work she explained that, having ‘not spoken or touched my husband for a few weeks before that, I just gave him a hug, told him that I still loved him but give me a bit of time’. Later, while trying to get to sleep in a separate room, and still struggling to understand Andy’s behaviour, she prayed out loud as suggested by her visitors. She had an experience that she subsequently recognised, with the help of the women from church, as a ‘huge Holy Spirit moment’. In a PIN, she described feeling that somebody was there and had rocked her to sleep.604

Andy briefly mentioned this ‘bad patch’; he was clearly embarrassed about it and the way it had become central to Amy’s testimony, and identified the visit from the church members as the first of a series of coincidences that he began to notice. Andy’s father died of cancer on the day their third child was born. Three months later the baby was diagnosed with blindness and later, after prayer, miraculously healed.605 Andy, while admitting to being initially overwhelmed with the news when they visited the hospital, insisted that it had nothing to do with God. Amy recalled:

So, for me that was a huge turning point. Obviously, I knew that God was real... and I [already] believed that there was a God, but that’s where I believed in God. I believed in what he could do, in his power. Even at this point my husband still

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604 Amy talked in terms of physical sensation, though appeared to understand that she was engaging in metaphorical construction. ‘I turned round to see how someone had got into bed and gave me a hug. No one was there. That’s how it felt. It just felt peaceful. I just didn’t have a clue. I just slept and slept’.

605 This healing played a significant part in the narrative of Anthony, another participant.
didn’t believe God. I’m, ‘Right. Are you real? Are you for real?’

By this time, Amy identified herself as a Christian, though is unable to locate any single watershed event, placing it within a two-year period, a year either side of the child’s birth and around three years on from her initial emotional experience at the Christmas event. Nevertheless, she was already well connected to the church community by the time she felt the comforting presence, as she was invited to the front of the church service to tell her story. Towards the end of her initial narrative, about 36 minutes in, Amy described Andy’s gradual increase in involvement in church life, doing odd jobs around the place, in words which were almost exactly parallel to his own recollection. During this period, he left his existing job to become self-employed and, while that brought financial pressures, it freed him from shift work and he could more easily attend church. When their daughter was about a year old, Andy chose to attend the dedication service of the child of church members with whom he had developed a friendship; after this his attendance became regular.

In a series of PINs, he placed the job change as a marker within his spiritual development.

As for becoming a Christian, there isn’t an exact defining moment of when I actually believe I became a Christian. Everyone said to me, ‘We saw you as a Christian before you actually saw it yourself’, because of the way I was talking, because of the way I was being. But the one thing that played on me most was what happened.

Andy listed several accidents at work, each of which was down to some unsafe practice on his part, culminating in an occasion on which a jack collapsed while he was repairing the brakes on his van. A reflective process was taking place.

And again, it’s like, ‘Oh! What’s going on?’ You talk about God being good, and this and that and the other, and I’m thinking: ‘Crikey me!’ And you know, you look at it and you say, ‘Why has God let this happen?’ ‘And I’m thinking, ‘What have I learned from it?’ And you question, ‘Well?’ ‘And I’ve learned: make sure that you test the electrics; make sure that you’re wearing goggles; make sure that you have adequate strapping (to attach steel sheets to the roof rack of a van).
I'm a big firm believer now in coincidences being God incidences because ... a coincidence is a coincidence for a reason. Because it’s almost a fluke that it’s happened. Well actually, a fluke is a fluke but if somebody is there controlling that fluke, then it’s something else. That’s the way I see things.

Later, trying to pin down how his thinking developed, he described himself as being ‘intrigued... in the fact of there could be something, other influencing factors, rather than yourself or the world, or what you can see’. This was happening up to two years before he was able to identify himself as a Christian. Beyond the initial reflection shaping the conversion process, his thinking had refined over time to the point where coincidences became ‘God-incidences’. ‘Looking back, you can see God, where God has played a part in your life, more than you can actually at the time’.

Similarities and differences

Neither couple made much of dates and times, but Amy’s and Andy’s narratives of their journeys to conversion covered years rather than months. They both needed to work hard to place their journeys in the context of major life events, illustrating the difficulty of recalling sequences of events, common to anybody who does not keep a detailed journal. Catherine and Christopher were more recent converts and shared an apparently short and straightforward route to faith, first attending church in November and being baptised the following July. Even so, their ability to pin down dates marked them out as unusual among the participants, and was perhaps a result of their tightly managed lives.

While each started their account in childhood, there was considerable variety in the process of conversion. Andy’s was long and slow, and if his gestalt is accepted as a hermeneutic focus, Christopher’s took a lifetime. Seeing conversion as a watershed does not work for Catherine. However, she does see a focus to her process, marked at one end by the India trip and at the other by her father’s death, with her own baptism in between. Amy’s journey had three waymarks, spread over at least three years: an encounter through lyrics at a Christmas event, an experience of being comforted by the Holy Spirit, and the healing of their child. Andy found it impossible to locate his conversion in time.

Twice during the interview, Christopher asked whether Catherine had confirmed his view of what was happening for her, and in drawing his initial narrative to a close, he reflected that he had never asked Catherine about her story. However, some degree of co-construction was evident for the second couple. Amy had evidently given her testimony within Andy’s hearing often enough for him to know some of the PINs she would have included in her conversation with me and, on a few occasions, each suggested points at which the other recalled facts or interpreted the significance of events differently. Amy also told me that Andy would talk about ‘God-incidences’. The latter couple frequently referenced events from their shared life history. Nevertheless, they rarely concurred on the salience of any of their shared experiences, suggesting weaker limited joint construction.

**Conversion in a multidimensional framework.**

Both Amy and Catherine identified as Christians prior to conversion. In each case, this led to reflection on the behavioural dimension, drawing attention to mismatches between an ideal and their lives as lived. Catherine described herself as, on the one hand, exercising Christian values through her involvement in Girl Guiding and, on the other, failing to do so in her work and family life, specifically citing problems in her first marriage. Aware of the dissonance, she was able to mock

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607 Amy is an exception among the participants in that her conversion occurred at least six years before the interview. See: Appendix D.

608 Encounter will be framed within Soroglou’s multidimensional framework below, but at this point it provides a useful lens through which to review these four conversions.
the way she thought in her earlier life; she showed understanding that, in evangelical terms, she needed conversion, even though she could offer no watershed moment. Amy referred to previously ‘lashing out’, and enjoying the opportunity that her baptism provided to show her friends how she had changed. Andy finished his initial narrative by explaining that since becoming a Christian he was no longer worried about his business finances. As well as talking about how she handled her father’s death, Catherine brought her story completely up to date by listing how she had found spiritual resources to cope with her teenage daughter, and two job interviews with the CEO of her company, either side of having an operation that had been delayed several times. Only Christopher failed to mention change emerging from the process, beyond starting to attend church, possibly because he was the most disciplined in interpreting the brief.

Belief was significant for each of the narrators. At Alpha, Amy enjoyed the opportunity ‘to be open about our thoughts, open about our feelings and just ask questions’ and mentioned several areas that had been discussed. For Catherine, since her conversion, which she still sees as a continuing process, small group Bible study, and taking courses has been important in ‘getting it’. Both of the men needed convincing, though it appeared to be less a point of resistance for Christopher than for Andy who had clearly marked out his position: ‘I don’t think anybody was ever going to talk me into being a Christian. I just wasn’t going to have it.’ It relied on a series of coincidences, not given the status of encounter at any point in the interview, for him to emerge as a Christian.

The emotional dimension, bonding, was important for each of the other three. Encounter was a strong theme in Amy’s narrative; she cited several occurrences and generalised about its importance in sung worship. Christopher experienced a ‘sudden dawning’ during the period he was attending the Alpha course and while not prominent in Catherine’s initial narrative, it did emerge in later reflection on her India trip. For Christopher, coincidences were salient emotionally rather than cognitively. Repeated messages about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit in sermons and

609 ‘After India it’s like all right I start to get it and I start to get it a bit more and I start to get it a bit more. And now when I’m reading, I sometimes have to put [the Bible] down and think: Stupid! Why didn’t you get that before.’
on Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* provided the components for his sudden dawning. Andy can think of no experience of encounter until after his conversion.

Clearly, for all four, the climate of acceptance and support that they found in belonging to church was key in the process. Andy was building strong relationships – attending a small group, and helping out on practical tasks in the church – while still self-identifying as an atheist. Amy enjoyed their acceptance within the Alpha group and found support from women in the church. Christopher values relationships greatly. He talked of his friendship with his church-attending colleague, and is enthusiastic about their church. ‘*We have just fallen on our feet. We’ve found the most perfect church with some fantastic people, without having to look*’. Catherine’s IN focused most on the work with which she was involved in India, though Christopher added, ‘*I can remember. Almost as important were the people that she’d gone with.*’

Amy’s story of personal transformation and her child’s healing was exceptional and dramatic, and included PINs which had clearly been well rehearsed. However, throughout an IN lasting for more than 45 minutes there was evidence of an ongoing internal conversation, and trawling through memory, to add detail to stories that had been often told more briefly. In most respects, these four stories were not of outliers or extreme cases, though each story demonstrated considerable particularity: in narrative gestalt, in the conversion process, and in incidents of encounter. They have been selected because they illustrate narrative features and themes that were distinct but discoverable across the cases. Taken together they go some way to mapping out the spread of stories for this group of converts. Having provided four sketches, the analysis of narratives will rely on selecting particular incidents and small elements of overall stories to continue the analysis.

**Conversion Process**

Like the four above, most narrators placed their story of conversion in the context of a ‘life history’ by opening with a statement about their childhood connection to church, or lack of it. Only a few had an overarching narrative concept in mind, ‘pieces in a jigsaw’ or ‘the long game’, or like Christopher who started and finished his story by talking about ‘spiritual awakening’. Though absent for some,
unprompted stories of encounter occurred frequently, and few were dramatic or obviously ‘supernatural’. Even where the conversion process showed punctiliar aspects, change was part of an extended journey rather than characterised by sudden discontinuities.

**Locating conversion in time**

While, theologically, it may be appropriate to see conversion extending across a whole life, or being accomplished in a moment of time, for the purposes of locating encounter within, or outside of, the process, some operating criteria are needed. For the greater part, these are provided by the narrators and, in many cases, a starting point and end point are suggested in the IN. While most participants chose not to be precise, they often mark the terminus quite neatly by saying something like, ‘That’s it, I think’, or by referring to baptism. During the second stage of the interview an attempt was made to construct a timeline of the conversion process.

Nic, at 20, was the youngest participant, and when we met was studying at university. He had no contact with church before being invited by a friend at secondary school and was the only person to offer a date when he decided to become a Christian. He was impacted by a girl’s testimony at a house party, but chose not to respond to an ‘invitation’ there and then, and made an appointment with a friend to do so after the weekend.

> I spoke to Zach...and I said, ‘Okay. I think I want to become a Christian... What do I have to do? ...And he said, ‘Okay. On Tuesday – that was 5 April – come round my house, we’ll chat a little bit and then we’ll pray and that’s when you can call yourself a Christian’...So I said that prayer and it was that point that I considered myself a Christian. So that’s the day when if anybody asks me when I became a Christian, I say, ‘That’s the day.’

In none of the other cases was there any evidence that identifying a watershed date and time was a priority. Amy (from the same church as Nic) could get as far as saying that somewhere over the course of three years she would have begun to consider herself as a Christian, though struggled to pin it down much further. Anthony, another participant from that church, established the year he saw the process completed by recalling the ages of his children and grandchildren.
Identifying the terminus ante quem for conversion is complex, methodologically as well as theologically, but important if the purpose of this thesis is to distinguish between the role of encounter in conversion and in later stages of Christian life. This is most evident when, at the end of the interview I asked the question ‘Have you ever been aware of God’? While some revisited encounters already described, or past experiences dating back to childhood, others recounted more recent events such as Spirit baptism, in the case of Nic, or increasing experiences of guidance, like Andy. These events were sometimes separated from the conversion phase by years and could be excluded where clearly subsequent to the process. In seeking to construct a timeline, one marker was the decision to be baptised. For instance, Michael worked back from baptism.

I would have said that [I understood the implications of Christian commitment sufficiently] by the December, coming up to Christmas, because we had had time to bed in, get to know people. It hit me a month before we went through the waters [of baptism]. This is what I want to do.

Sometimes there was a lengthy interval between conversion and baptism because planning a full immersion baptism service is a significant logistical undertaking. Richard and his wife, were baptised more than a year after the nine months of their shared conversion process. Perhaps because of such delays, participants in this situation mostly attributed no particular import to the event in terms of their conversion.

A decision to be baptised, on occasion, marked the end of a reflective process, on one occasion by an encounter. James, recovering from treatment for drug abuse, made a prayer of commitment a few weeks into his second try at attending church.

So, I started attending regularly, talking to people, meeting people, getting involved in the church. And for me it was on one occasion in worship where it felt like my stomach overturned. Really different experience. Experience that I’ve

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Where no antecedent experiences had been related, these PINs were useful in demonstrating the criteria that were used to mark an incident as encounter.
not had before and after speaking to people they say that that’s the movement of the Holy Spirit, can be the movement of the Holy Spirit. And it was quite extraordinary how strong it was, the presence I kind of felt within. So that drew me in a bit closer and give me a bit more hope and faith that what I was getting involved in was something that’s good for me and seems to be good...[T]hat’s what prompted me to get baptised as well’.

In the cases of the two couples described in detail above, only Christopher told of a definite decision to embrace faith. For most others, it conversion months or years, punctuated by several points of encounter or opportunities to make a commitment. Gemma, a mother of older children, who was one of two participants who most closely fitted the definition of a spiritual seeker, reflected:

So [the time I was invited to a friend’s baptism and first attended church] was a couple of years ago, you know. It’s very difficult to decipher the time I became a Christian. Was it the point at which I said yes to God [following a ‘near miss’ when driving]? Was it the point I walked into that church and started crying, or was it the point when Jesus came in and washed me [during a dream]? I mean, I think that [latter incident] was baptism in the Spirit for me – or was it when I was baptised in church? I don’t know. Somewhere along there was the point at which I became a Christian.

She, like Amy, was quick to provide a list of significant episodes (in her case of emotional encounter) offering a punctuated pattern, the first of which predated church attendance. Others offered insight into both durative and punctiliar aspects of their stories which marked the intellectual, ethical, and relational dimensions of their conversions, as well as the emotional. Gemma had clearly thought about her punctuated process before the interview, whereas Simon adjusted the timeline of his conversion during the interview. Simon had attended the same Narcotics Anonymous group as James and his wife Jasmine, and had been instrumental in introducing Jasmine to church. Simon, in his IN, positioned his punctiliar conversion early in attendance at church, but in a PIN he returned to an earlier story of how he

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611 Like Amy, she had been involved in discipleship formation which included developing communication skills.
made a commitment, while alone. That event remained significant for him, through an overdose, hospitalisation, and six months of rehabilitation, during which time he had no support for his emerging faith. Richard identified the end of his conversion process by a social media post. ‘I put something up on Facebook, “Be still and know that I am God”. Then I put up a couple of songs. I nailed my colours firmly to the mast’.

Punctiliar aspects

The narrative in which the punctiliar aspect was overwhelmingly dominant was provided by Steve who, as an atheist, read Nicky Gumbel’s *Questions of Life* and, on reaching the prayer of commitment, had a dramatic encounter with God. While his story loses nothing in the retelling (he is now training as an evangelist), there is nothing to suggest that his account is less than authentic. Until that point, his only contact with Christianity had been with a triathlon buddy. His wife recounts that immediately after this life-changing incident, their roles ‘flipped’. Where he had been an argumentative atheist, he became an equally argumentative convert. In Steve’s case, the emotional dimension was dominant. Equally punctiliar, but with uncertain evidence of encounter, was the conversion of Hannah, a postgraduate student and a ‘funky Muslim’.

She had been brought up within her father’s religion but had a Christian mother. On a visit home to Nigeria, unhappy with her father’s behaviour towards her mother, she decided to convert to Christianity.

*I was just sitting in my mum’s room gazing at the ceiling. And she has a Bible. It's always on her bed. And I just kept looking at the Bible and I sighed really deeply and I picked it up. I read some chapters and I was like, ‘I want to be a Christian’. That was it… It was weird how it happened. It happened really fast… I can be a bit indecisive, but with something like this I was very sure that I wanted that... I was reading, like, randomly and I prayed to God and that was just it. I don’t have a big story.*

Sometimes, in the second part of the interview, which sought further PINs or more detail, participants told of prayers of commitment which did not feature in their

She uses this term to describe her spirituality. ‘I prayed but I did not cover’, meaning that she did not wear the *hijab.*
initial narrative; overall a particular point where a decision was made to become a Christian only emerged in a small number of cases. Steve prayed while reading; Hannah prayed alone. Three participants prayed in response to a talk from the pulpit, and three more made a response as part of the Alpha course.\textsuperscript{613} Even so, with the exceptions of Steve and Hannah, their commitment prayers marked the end – or at least a waypoint approaching the terminus – of a more or less extended journey.

**Durative process**

The underlying process of conversion could extend over a few months or several years. Amy’s process was sparked by the impact of Christian music; her husband’s took rather longer. It was about three years after the healing of Andy’s daughter that he eventually decided to be baptised. Christopher had become intrigued over twenty years by the faith of a work colleague, but did nothing about it until Catherine returned from a life-changing trip. There are two dominant trajectories evident in the narratives, though some stories like that of Christopher, exhibit both. One is that of connecting with church life, exploring faith through courses or conversations and making a decision to be baptised within less than a year. The other more extended journey inevitably has more scope to demonstrate particularity and, even from the examples so far, it can be seen that the shorter trajectory may obscure a much longer trend. Paul, a doctoral student from the Middle East, made an explicit decision to come to the UK to study for a master’s degree and to change his religion. Not attracted by the quality of community he experienced in several churches, he only made the decision to be baptised when he was part way through a PhD. Charlotte, whose experience of encounter occurred at the age of fifteen in a school Christian Union, only started to explore Christianity at university; she emerged as a Christian a few months after graduating, when, having experienced answers to prayer, she reflected on the process that had taken place. Daniel and Susan, who each connected with church through parent-and-toddler activities, became Christians within approximately three and five years, respectively.

\textsuperscript{613} Given that a prayer of commitment is part of *Alpha*, the other nine who attended probably did make that commitment. The point is that it did not reach the level of significance to be included in their IN.
Like Andy and Christopher, Matthew, Alistair, and Anthony became involved in church to support their wives. All except Andy had a belief in God from church attendance in childhood. Alistair’s active process took months rather than years, though he described events which had prepared him for that time. Matthew, then in his late twenties, responded to an invitation at the end of a talk after some time attending church (probably about a year). Anthony, in his fifties, took the decision to make a commitment and be baptised after more than ten years, when he experienced an encounter through the healing of Amy and Andy’s child. Lauren and Karen, each with no previous experience of Christianity, attended different small groups in the same church. Lauren, then in her late twenties, joined a group of women she met through a parent and toddler group. She prayed a prayer of commitment at the end of at least two courses, one of which was Alpha, before responding to an invitation after a Sunday morning talk probably more than a year later. Karen, aged fifty, also spent an extended period attending groups, in the same church. She first attended an Alpha course, which she ‘stuck out’ and then a breakfast group established on the back of that, where they used Nooma resources and eventually worked through Freedom in Christ. ‘And slowly, I kind of was beginning to get it. It was a very slow process. I was beginning to get what it was that these ladies were experiencing through God. I became a member of the church and participated’, though it was again an extended period before she recognised herself as a Christian and opted for baptism.

Punctuated process

The notion of conversion as a process, punctuated with significant events along the way, has been proposed by Wakefield and Cartledge. ‘The reason for choosing this image (apart from alliteration!) is that a process is nearly always punctuated by significant events or moments’. This is a useful way of

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614 However, at the final stage of the interview he recalled and felt again, an encounter in nature three years prior to that.

615 Nooma is a series of short films, for small group use, that explore aspects of spirituality from a Christian viewpoint.

616 Freedom in Christ is a discipleship course, focused on emotional healing. See: Ben Pugh, Bold Faith: A Closer Look at the Five Key Ideas of Charismatic Christianity (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017). 32-34.

617 Wakefield and Cartledge, ‘Ministers’, 53; Wakefield, Conversion, 26.
understanding the stories of many of those who experienced an extended conversion process over several years, and of some whose journey was shorter. Within the durative process Karen was able to identify salient steps, in addition to resolving intellectual issues, as she struggled through Alpha: a point at which she felt she was a Christian, a family crisis in which that decision was cemented, and a series of events during the year before she recounted her story, in which she became confident that God was looking out for her.\textsuperscript{618} It was after this last cluster of events that she decided to make the ‘public affirmation’ of baptism.

Richard’s active route to conversion was much more compressed, though he started with some parental church background. He was invited to a Christmas extravaganza at a NC with his wife and daughter and from that point on regularly attended. In his initial narrative, he recounted PINs which he described as ‘defining moments’. He signed up for a meditation at the cathedral, on the evening of Maundy Thursday. On Good Friday morning, he attended the NC where the sound of a wooden cross being hammered together also had a strong impact. Easter Sunday was ‘a riot’ and soon after he attended an Alpha course,

...During the first session, [I was] sitting on the floor, just down here, when this thing of the Holy Trinity was just revealed. It was a very condensed period, possibly between that Maundy Thursday and the end of the Alpha course that should have finished in the June–July time. But, for whatever reason, some of us couldn’t make it and ended up doing it in the September.

His baptism was delayed for about a year and, while ‘the whole thing was really special’, it clearly came after his punctuated conversion process. Instead, the delayed completion of the Alpha course functioned as \textit{terminus ad quem} though, unlike some other cases where Alpha is a key component in the narrative, he doesn’t mention any awayday, weekend, or prayer of commitment.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The idea of conversion as crisis is institutionalised, not only in in Rambo’s stage model of conversion and other theoretical approaches but also in P+c

\textsuperscript{618} In her description of retrospective evaluation of the process, her story is similar to that of Charlotte.
discourse. Under these circumstances, there is a likelihood that an extended process is presented as implicitly second rate. The widespread use of the Alpha course by CP and NC churches and its appearance in the stories of these participants, makes it an example of this tendency. The *Alpha Film Series*, which post-dates most of these narratives, contains a two minute long sequence in which guests report their experience of the Alpha weekend. After expressing prior uncertainty, their comments feed into a crisis conversion narrative. ‘*It was night and day*’. ‘*I told everyone*’. ‘*I was just telling every single person*’. ‘*Right away my entire family were like, “Wow! What happened to you?”*’.619 There is no alternative offered to the dominant narrative of watershed experience – of the delayed expectations, questions that took time to resolve, or ambiguity evident in this research. While a short documentary film is undoubtedly a particularly compressed format, it is arguably the case that any research relying on published or performed testimonies is at risk of overemphasising the punctiliar aspect of conversion.620

While many of the conversions in this study have punctiliar aspects, these often remain implicit in the extended narrative – they are not emphasised and few would merit the use of the term ‘crisis’.621 While some, like Amy or Karen, were coping with serious issues in family life, the conversion process was well advanced when crisis came. Most of the other cases, even the seven where a commitment prayer was mentioned or inferred, were decidedly undramatic and often the punctiliar aspects mainly serve as markers within the durative process. To that extent the data confirms the fx expectation that in the current era conversion processes will be extended and be characterised by several steps. Nevertheless, the pattern of conversion for these P+c converts is complex. For some, like John and Julie, Gemma and Anne, much of the journey took place without the benefit of church – fresh expression or inherited. Steve’s encounter was punctiliar without the benefit of mediated stages, though both he and Christopher had the benefit of long term


620 On this see below: Packer, *Means*, 64, 77-78.

621 Julie and John, who had life threatening illnesses, are the most obvious exceptions.
friendships with Christians. On the other hand, Daniel, Michael and Michelle, and Susan each built relationships with church leaders through contextual mission (centred around children), and initially explored faith in the context of these relationships. None of these seemed to find difficulty in integrating into existing P+c church expressions, though Richard, Anne and Amy found that the worship style they met was already well adapted to their needs.

Within this complex picture, there are some differences revealed in this study when compared to earlier research relating to the relative lack of importance of punctiliar conversions. This may in part be due to the fact that the converts studied by Kay, and by Tidball, and a proportion of those in Milton’s research came from church attending homes and found faith up to forty years before the non-churched converts in the current study. Participants in this study felt no pressure to fix a time and date, where Kay’s and Tidball’s Pentecostal ministers and theological students may have felt the pressure of expectation to do so. Of Milton’s thirty respondents, 24 recalled making a personal and conscious decision to become a Christian. Ten responded to a call at the end of a sermon. ‘Other [commitment decisions] took place in private, on their own or with one or two other people.’ Given that some of these conversions would have occurred some decades previously, the lack of connection between preaching and a public decision for most of her converts could be considered surprising. In the current research, there were only two who, in an IN, chose to describe a response in a corporate context. However, Christopher ‘invited Jesus into [his] life’, John, lying in a hospital bed, and Steve, at a moment of encounter, prayed a prayer following the lines of the Alpha course or some other book or tract. Richard ‘nailed [his] colours to the mast’ on Facebook after a series of ‘defining moments’. In narratives that specifically explored the period leading up to conversion, it was evident that the ‘personal and conscious decision’ was, in many cases, a ratification and reiteration of multiple decisions and steps of discipleship.

622 However, the group that were responsible for ‘Finding Faith Today’ met on the twentieth anniversary of the original study and decided that too little had changed to make it worth updating the work. Interview with Bishop John Finney, 21 August 2015.
623 Milton, Shalom, 166-167. Milton does not say whether this information emerged during initial narratives or in subsequent discussion.
that had already been taken over an extended period, though that is not to say that ‘invitations’ at the end of a talk or in ministry time are not beneficial.\textsuperscript{624}

In considering the place of encounter in conversion and its location within the process, it will be necessary to accept complexity in establishing the \textit{terminus ad quem}. Participants had found faith in a credobaptist environment; where baptism is remarked on within the narrative (and has not been unduly delayed) that can be considered an acceptable endpoint for including incidents of experiential encounter. In other cases, it will be necessary to make provisional judgements about the extent of the process and to include incidents of encounter wherever it is reasonable to do so. James Packer, speaking to the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation, illustrates the case for embracing the emerging complexity.

I affirm a moment of regeneration and spiritual animation underlying the sinner’s first true act of faith. But since the event occurs below the level of consciousness…and since in any case the first exercise of real faith cannot usually be identified to the minute, this moment of animation is characteristically elusive.\textsuperscript{625}

This view is not inconsistent with fx praxis, where it is possible to ‘begin to disciple people before they have explicitly entered the faith’.\textsuperscript{626}

\textsuperscript{624} Some narratives from the current research support Hollinghurst’s suggestion that outside of a Christendom context, for people with little or no church background, consciously adopting a Christian identity may be a late stage that follows, rather than initiates, the changes of conversion. Hollinghurst, \textit{Evangelism}, 53.

\textsuperscript{625} Packer, \textit{Conversion}, 74.

\textsuperscript{626} Moynagh, \textit{Life}, 392–395.
6: EXPERIENTIAL ENCOUNTER IN LIVES

Sources of complexity

Most stories of encounter emerged in the IN, fewer in response to the direct TQ at the end of the conversation. At this latter stage, participants sometimes looked to the penumbra of the conversion process, either to childhood or to recent experiences. The question on spiritual experiences added some PINs of evil, occult or ambiguous presence. In the main research few new experiences of awareness of God were added, though some experiences that had previously been described but did not reach the standard of encounter in the IN were described as ‘spiritual experiences’. A number of factors add complexity to identifying and giving weight to these wide-ranging experiences.

- Emotionality was not exclusively associated with awareness of God, nor with spiritual forces or entities. Often new friendships or developing understanding gave rise to positive emotions. Events involving the emotional domain appeared in the initial narratives of all the participants, varying not only in frequency and intensity but in location within the conversion process and in the significance attributed to them. Not all feelings experienced met the participants’ criteria for self-transcendent encounter. Andy, while initially overwhelmed by his daughter’s healing, considered it ‘just one of those things’ at the time. On the other hand, Daniel (though perhaps only in retrospect) was aware of God in the welcome that he felt from a parent and toddler club.

- The criteria for ascription of experience to encounter are complex. Some experiences significant in the trajectory towards conversion did not result in awareness of God. Ben recounted several PINs that had cumulatively provided sufficient evidence of God’s reality for him to become a Christian. However, for him, to describe them as encounter would have required that he had ‘felt God was in the room’, or that ‘he had a conversation with him’ or

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627 For Ben and for Andy, these were significant unexplained events that did not result in felt awareness of God.
had ‘felt his presence or thoughts’. Others, like Christopher had a lesser threshold for attribution.

- Unsurprisingly, encounters gain significance with hindsight. Catherine’s complex reflections on her India trip at all three stages, (IN, PIN, TQ) are an example of continuing internal processing of experience. In his IN, Daniel talked of feeling the presence of God at a parent and toddler group. When asked in a PIN whether he would have talked in those terms at the time, he said ‘Possibly not’; he concluded that he would not have understood his experience until his conversion, which he placed more than a year after his son had graduated from the club. These PINs suggest informal learning to pay attention to internal experience, which ‘from an anthropological and psychological perspective [is] the central act of prayer’ and is further considered below.\(^{628}\)

- All story telling can be understood as performance with intent, demonstrated by comments such as, ‘I’m trying to think what you would be interested in’. Anne, for whom the experience of conversion was very recent, had assembled notes and artefacts to support her story. A few INs left me feeling that I was in the congregation, listening to a ‘public’ testimony.\(^{629}\) This was the case throughout the story told by Daniel, who brought a Bible and notebook to the interview. Steve – whose story was remarkable enough with its encounter while reading – was training to be an evangelist and showed some evidence of retelling a story that had been developed for public consumption. Similar structuring, noted above, could be also be identified in conscious thematization that framed some stories of extended process.\(^{630}\) Nevertheless, the long form of narrative in which they were engaged and the

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\(^{628}\) Luhrmann, Talks, 158–161.

\(^{629}\) The experience of the narrative interview has been described as being like sitting in the stalls while the performance takes place behind the proscenium.

\(^{630}\) It is possible that these themes, of ‘The Long Game’ or ‘Pieces of a Jigsaw’ had been adopted in preparing a formal testimony to be shared at the time of baptism.
necessity to add detail in PINs allowed participants to become more tentative and reflective as they explored their experiences in depth.

- Complexity arises directly from the methodology employed – by having three phases of storytelling. As each storyteller recalled ‘all the events and experiences that are important’, they focused on salient episodes that provided a narrative gestalt. The return to PINs allowed for additional detail and, occasionally, the inclusion of missed experiences. TQs that asked about awareness of God and other spiritual experiences sometimes led to trawling back through memory, sometimes to childhood experiences, or awareness of evil or ambiguous phenomena.

- It is likely that the salience of any encounter will vary according to where in the conversion process it occurred. Given the complexity and diversity of the process demonstrated by these converts, there is a heuristic need to find a means of expressing a temporal relationship between encounter and that process, particularly when seeking to understand the salience of encounter. It is proposed that encounters should be conceptualised as within the penumbra – towards the outer reaches of the process as either prior or subsequent, or towards the umbra, the centre of the process, as proximate. The few encounters occurring after the terminus ad quem revealed in the gestalt were identified as outside the conversion process.

**Absence of encounter**

In almost all cases, the initial narrative included unprompted reference to encounter in experience, though sometimes the significance of these episodes was only developed within subsequent PINs. Ben, the most recent convert, was one of three participants who had no experience of awareness of God, though he described several significant experiences that fell short – of a sunset, of personal physical healing, and feeling his hands raised outside of his control – each of which contributed to his growing awareness of God’s existence and a need to become a Christian. Paul was highly articulate and had intimate experience of war in the Middle East, which formed a part of his IN. He offered no experience of encounter with God before or after his conversion. Some years earlier he had rejected Islam.
and, because it was ‘illogical’ in an Islamic culture to have no religion, he decided that his best option was to spend time in the UK and return to the region as a Christian. He described his baptism as the happiest day of his life, but that appeared to be because he had achieved his goal, rather than as a result of any encounter. In fact, he was sceptical about the emotional domain, drawing parallels between Christian experiences of encounter and the folk Islam practised by his mother.

When Nic was asked in a TQ if he had ever been aware of God, he pointed to an event that occurred eighteen months after his punctiliar conversion, when he first spoke in tongues. Andy’s narrative of a slow, drawn out conversion seemed to be designed to counter his wife’s enthusiastic presentation, which he had evidently heard many times before. He cited awareness of God through intuition which developed over time, but did not occur before he self-identified as a Christian. Both Nic’s and Andy’s stories of encounter only emerged in response to TQs and, for each of them, these stories of subsequent encounter demonstrated that they had operating criteria for attribution, which, even with hindsight, experiences within the conversion process had not met. This was also the case for Matthew. He and his wife had received prophetic ‘words’ that they would become pregnant naturally, though they had subsequently conceived through IVF, and he had made a commitment at the end of a Sunday talk sometime during the treatment and pregnancy. It was probably a year later that he experienced encounter through a ‘word’ while praying alone. This was important enough to be included in his IN, but I judged it to be outside the conversion process.

Inevitably, where such subjective processes are involved, there are borderline cases. Hannah, like Paul, was brought up within Islam and, when interviewed, she was only six months beyond her punctiliar decision to convert. Asked whether she had ever been aware of God, she did not point to her punctiliar decision to convert. Instead she suggested that awareness occurred when she prayed and cried. ‘I feel I’ve got nothing left in me and I just want to shut it all out. But at the end I end up smiling, more like it’s going to be okay, and I smile’. However, she said this with a questioning intonation, suggesting a lack of confidence in identifying her tearful experiences, which in any case had occurred some months after her conversion, as encounter. Jack felt he had been manoeuvred into making a Christian commitment
and being baptised in his mid-teens, and subsequently would not have identified himself as a Christian. Having spent several years in the forces, he attended church with his new girlfriend; after some weeks, during which he had felt increasing tension during the regular appeals for converts, he responded. In his IN, the critical outcome of his decision was that his girlfriend’s parents were happy about their relationship. However, in a PIN he described his own feelings on the day as relaxation and peace; for him, awareness of God only developed in a new ability to cope with being ‘wound up’ by other service personnel.

**Frequency**

Among the remaining 27 participants more than fifty PINs of encounter during the conversion process were recounted. In addition, there were some references to spiritual experiences that were ambiguous or connected with evil. Seven narrators recounted a single incident of encounter. This was the case with Steve, whose conversion had been precipitated by a dramatic encounter; also with James, who was looking for a spiritual connexion in support of his recovery from drug addiction, and whose encounter in sung worship is described above. ‘I’ve only had it happen once. I’m waiting for some more. Hopefully one day some more will come along.’ At the other extreme is the extensive experience of Susan, now 50 years old, who from being young had been aware of an invisible friend, but whose companionship had only recently been understood as the presence of God. Most participants were not quick to give incidents the status of encounter, with ten participants offering more than two PINs.

**Variety**

Among these encounters, one dream was described, and a single instance of healing was reported by two people. Experiences of signs appeared in just a few other stories. Several, like Amy, told of episodes of feeling supported in difficult circumstances. More frequent were moments of insight such as those described by Christopher as a ‘sudden dawning’, and by others as ‘getting it’, ‘a light bulb moment’, an ‘epiphany’, or ‘a defining moment’. Saroglou refers to feelings of awe

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631 Gemma’s dream was probably outside the conversion process. She considered that to be her ‘baptism in the Spirit’.
and emotional well-being; participants spoke of ‘peace’, ‘cleansing’, ‘weirdness’, being ‘in floods of tears’, or going ‘Wow!’ For Steve, encounter was like a ‘rush’. Michelle explained what she meant by the ‘weirdness’ she experienced.

I have this thing and I don’t know whether it’s right or not. [...] Have you ever heard a song that makes you go cold from the tips of your hair to the tips of your toes? [...] It started when I first started coming over here to church. Oh, my days! It could be anything at all. I could ask somebody a question and they would say, ‘Actually is it this?’ And if it’s right, I get really, really cold shivers.

**Experiences of signs**

Stories of signs are distinct and particular. Having been given notice to move out of the house they were borrowing, Michael and Michelle went to look at a rental property. In his IN, Michael said, ‘As we looked at the property the sun broke through the clouds and literally just illuminated our house, and to me that was a sign saying this is the right place for you’. Michelle recounted this incident in much the same words, but with additional detail about other houses they had looked at. At the time of that occurrence they were in the early stages of their relationship together, and it sounded like the kind of shared romantic story of which couples remind themselves from time to time. On returning to it in a PIN, Michael emphasised its significance in terms which suggested subsequent reflection and possibly challenge. ‘I’ll still testify to the day I die that it felt like it was a sign that you need to be here… It was almost as if we were being told, “Look at this place. Look how happy you could be here”’. In September, they made contact with the church opposite their new home, and were baptised the following January.

While for Michael and Michelle the experience at the house was important in connecting them to church and, arguably, prior to the conversion process, some of the encounters sit closer to the centre of the journey, proximate to conversion. John suffers from cerebral palsy, and had been hospitalised with what the doctors told him was a terminal condition. One night, with his wife Julie at his bedside, the call button beside his bed kept sounding without his intervention, to the point that the nurses

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632 Saroglou, ‘Big Four’, 1326.
tried to immobilise it. ‘But it didn't stop it. And it appeared to [the nurses] that every time it went off, it was at the stage where I needed help... There was nobody there to touch the buzzer apart from Julie and she said she was nowhere near it’. Initially, they thought that this event might have been instigated by her mother, who had recently died. However, as Julie talked and prayed with the hospital chaplain, and with the wife of a fellow-patient, she felt, and John came to agree with her, that God had been ‘controlling’ the call button; this gave her ‘a start’ in becoming a Christian.633

Anne, a married woman in her late fifties, struggled with the loss of her father. Her attempts to get help included visiting a medium to try to make contact with him, and watching Christian TV.634 When walking the dog, she saw a connexion between a china butterfly that had belonged to her father and several butterflies that flew up and down in front of her. A few months later, with her husband, she was visiting the San Salvador monastery in Majorca and was impacted by the caption on the statue of Christ.

*It said, ‘These arms are open to everyone’ and that really touched my heart and it made me just, just cry. [...] I started thinking about my dad and at that precise moment, yet again, actually at that precise moment a butterfly came and it landed on my hand... And I just wept and I thought, ‘What is going on? I don’t know’.*

**Awareness of presence**

Feelings of support or closeness that achieved the status of encounter were about as common as encounters that involved signs. Both Amy and Catherine cited such experiences at difficult times in their lives. Karen, who had taken an extended path to belief, found the conversion process rounded out by such experiences.

*I was already looking before this crisis hit, I suppose. But that was the real pinnacle. That was a real turning point of,*

633 However, in a PIN she said that it was after she had started attending church that she realised God was involved.

634 Talks by Joyce Meyer were a significant source of encouragement at that time. For a brief introduction to Meyer see: Pugh, *Bold Faith*, 81–84.
'Yeah. I get it’! I get it why everybody, why people, do turn to God [...] Following on from that [...] a year ago my husband had a heart attack [...] And again, my mother took seriously ill while on holiday. I had to fly out to nurse mum. And that point, that was my decision. I took then to be baptised, myself, and turn to Christ as my saviour.

Susan had always been aware of a presence which she understood as an invisible friend as a child, and an inner strength as an adult. However, she never spoke to anybody about her experience until in her mid-40s when she worked through the Christianity Explored DVDs.635 ‘It was only talking to the pastors that slowly, and very slowly, I realised who that friend was’.

In the same year that Julie had experienced the hospital call bell repeatedly ringing, her own operation ‘went wrong’. At a point where she thought she was dying, awaiting further surgery, Julie explained that she saw God (IN). He was in the bed next to her, and while she couldn’t see most of his body, it was ‘like’ having God next to her. He told her that she was already cured and that she was waiting for the healing to come. Julie was one of the few participants who specifically identified Jesus or the Holy Spirit. When returning to the episode, in a PIN, she identified the figure in the bed as Jesus, rather than the Holy Spirit or God, even though she could not see a face, because he was wearing sandals and a robe that came to his knees.

Charlotte first experienced awareness of the reality of God as presence, during a session of sung worship at a school Christian Union house party. That episode did not result in her becoming a Christian, but she remained open to the possibility of faith. Among the few who encountered God in sung worship, Charlotte described her experience in intellectual more than emotional terms. James described a feeling in his stomach, and Olivia, whose story is considered later, also told of strong sensations.

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Awareness of God is at the heart of charismatic understandings of encounter, and consistent with the self-transcendent awe that characterises Saroglou’s bonding dimension. Most of the encounters outlined described that central element in some way, though its significance often only later gained definition. A few participants told their stories, with tears or evidently feeling again, to some extent, the excitement of that moment. Lauren recalled,

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\text{I felt like I felt God but I didn’t understand him and I didn’t understand what he was all about. I just didn’t get it but I felt it. So, I felt his presence and I must have known it was God but I just didn’t understand it... I just felt emotional, really emotional about things. Things like crying a lot, because things really hit me... I think recognising it was God, actually going back, now you’ve asked [when I was aware of God] was during worship at church, I think.}
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It was during this last episode that a church member suggested a connexion between Lauren’s prayers and the Spirit’s presence. Her conversion was punctuated with encounters more than most, and at least three prayers of commitment spread over several years during which two of her children were born.

**Moments of insight**

Moments of insight were salient for some and overlap with the previous category. Christopher experienced his ‘sudden dawning’ over the last weeks of the Alpha course. Richard was aware of the significance of the feeling he had on hearing the sound of a cross being hammered together at a Good Friday service, and also the ‘lightbulb moment’ of ‘true revelation’ about the Trinity at the first Alpha session. Steve’s moment of insight and punctiliar conversion has already been described as an example of punctiliar conversion. While reading the book *Alpha: Questions of Life*, he had an experience of encounter when he came to the prayer of commitment.

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\text{And I said the prayer and, I must admit, I have never ever as yet had the kind of experience I had that day. It was phenomenal. The only way I can describe it was like a rush}
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636 This supports the operationalisation of encounter as being aware of God in a TQ.

of heat and energy and love at the same time. It was so compelling, so kind of warm and comforting. It was amazing and the only thing I could think of afterwards was that I just felt... I did feel cleansed.

Steve’s encounter is quite unique in this study, in that it came out of nowhere. It has points of similarity with that of his wife, Sarah, though hers occurred after a period of seeking and some frustration. Steve was ‘talking about God all the time’ and ‘so into God that he was a bit argumentative’. She had felt the Holy Spirit at the age of sixteen on one of four visits to church with a friend; her mother had previously made a short-lived excursion into faith when Sarah was a child. Now in her late thirties, she started praying and looking for evidence, seeing signs on supermarket bags and on the backs of vans, but still not experiencing the encounter she sought. She laughed, with some embarrassment, when she explained that Steve booked her onto an Alpha course without her permission. However, she was willing to attend, though she came away from the Holy Spirit weekend ‘a bit upset’ because many others experienced the Holy Spirit and she didn’t. Steve was also upset at this failure, and went to visit his Christian friend for advice on the Monday evening following the weekend away, while she remembered, vividly, doing the ironing and watching television. When he returned, she was relieved to know that Steve’s friend, who ‘was so into God’, had experienced nothing when he had, himself, attended the Alpha course. The following day, she was cleaning the stairs, not thinking about God, and suddenly had ‘a complete release’ from ‘bitterness’ towards her mother.

The stories of both Steve and Sarah are, on balance, considered ‘moments of insight’ rather than ‘awareness of presence’ in response to the narrator’s gestalt. They were probably both.

**Childhood encounters**

Apart from Susan, only a few others cite experiences of awareness of God as a child. Sarah and Gemma both told stories from childhood when questioned about awareness of God (TQ). Gemma explained:

> *I think I was aware of God as a child, actually. I was, I had – because my relationship with my mother wasn’t that good – we had a Portuguese maid who used to come and clean […] So I can actually say the rosary in Portuguese.*
Sarah also located her first awareness of God in childhood.

Yes. Definitely. It’s a bit personal. I was only one when my mum left my dad. So, the man who brought me up, who I thought was my dad, they divorced when I was about nine. And I think mum said I was depressed. And I can remember doing my ‘colour by numbers’ thing and I did it in the shape of a cross. And I would pray every night to help me. I can remember doing that. And my mum had this boyfriend and I can remember looking up at him, and he had these amazing big brown eyes and I can remember saying, ‘Marry him, mum. He’s got Jesus’s eyes.’

In these two cases, early experience was connected with difficult circumstances.

**Contexts for encounter**

**Encounters in church events**

For charismatics of all kinds, the quintessential location for encounter continues to be the worship service. While other traditions might find God in the Eucharist or a prayer room, the corporate gathering is where encounter is conventionally most expected. Re-styling with subsequent charismatic waves – from hymns and altar call, to ministry time and contemporary worship – has impacted the whole tradition and, arguably, increased the pivotal role of sung worship. A substantial minority of the fifty occurrences of encounter occurred in collective contexts, including small groups and courses; six of these were specifically associated with sung worship. For both Lauren and Amy, sung worship had developed as a favoured environment for encounter. It was in that setting where Lauren was helped to make the connection between her tears and God’s presence, and where Amy found that the words of the songs were more important than those of the preacher as she began her journey. The recently married couple, Jasmine and James, also each encountered God in the context of sung worship, though for James it was on just one occasion. Charlotte first became aware of God in the context of sung worship, and Olivia experienced physical sensations of connexion with a ‘higher power’.

Richard experienced ‘defining moments’ over the Easter weekend in contemplative contexts: firstly, in the quietness of a cathedral vigil, then in creative
worship at a NC as the cross was hammered into place on the following morning and on Easter Day.

[The] Easter Sunday service in particular was just an absolute riot. The noise, it was wonderful; people hugging each other and suddenly I realised. I got how important Easter was. It wasn’t just an excuse to wolf down chocolate. Yes, that Easter was a very defining moment, especially when the Alpha came very close on the back of it as well.

Preaching was even less frequent as a context for encounter than sung worship. It was a source of one of the echoes that contributed to Christopher’s experience of the Holy Spirit; Alistair and Gemma mentioned preaching as a wider context for encounter, though the PINs were centred, respectively, on receiving an encouraging personal word from the preacher during a ‘ministry time’, and an unusual physical occurrence that mirrored the preacher’s narrative.638 Jack and Lauren were aware of God as they responded to the preacher’s invitation. On the other hand, Matthew made a similar response with no accompanying encounter.

Among those who included baptism in their narratives, three included PINs of it as a context for encounter. Simon cited baptism as his first experience of Jesus and the Spirit; Michelle and Michael had parallel experiences of encounter at their baptisms, which occurred just five months after they had commenced their active journey to faith. Thomas also mentioned baptism as significant but could not offer any further clarification. He was a 30-year-old migrant from central Europe,639 working in England, and described seeking self-development throughout his adult life by reading motivational authors. His journey to conversion started when he attended a Pentecostal church in Germany for about six months. Within a week of moving to the UK he found, on the internet, a NC where he continued the process. He experienced episodes of awareness of God in church services that were connected with both music and being part of a group but, once again, did not offer

638 A bangle she was wearing fell off as he told a story which featured a bracelet, though this was subsequent to her conversion
639 Thomas did not wish to have his interview recorded and, while he gave no reason, it is notable that the interview occurred a few weeks after the UK European Union referendum.
well-defined (PINs), though this may have been due to a lack of the vocabulary to do so.

Twelve participants completed the Alpha course and, of these, two experienced encounter at a Holy Spirit awayday. Alistair had been invited to attend the course with his wife, Anne, who had experienced significant encounters over the previous eighteen months. Having thus far led in their church involvement, she was both taken aback and embarrassed by her envy at the effect that day had on Alistair. In his initial narrative, he explained the events that had occurred a couple of months before the interview.

And the other thing that amazed me was when we did this speaking in tongues bit and [the group leaders] could do it. I suddenly thought there's something quite real about this ... This is something that is going to change your life ... I thought, 'Yeah. Now my life is going to change and God could come in my life and I'm going to live my life in a godly way'.

Deborah too reported an encounter on the awayday. When prayed for, she felt a presence that she concluded was the Holy Spirit. This was an important moment of insight for her as it corresponded to the comforting feeling that she had experienced as a young child, and had until then assumed was the presence of her deceased grandmother. Richard experienced ‘a defining moment’ at the first Alpha session that he later (TQ) identified as encounter. In contrast, as well as Anne, Christopher, and Sarah each expressed their disappointment at failing to experience encounter at the Holy Spirit event; however, for both of them, the course intensified their interest and was soon followed by an experience that satisfied them. Lauren attended a small group over an extended period which, among other resources, had used the Alpha course as study material. In group sessions, she often found herself in tears, though at that point she attributed her experience to being an emotional person, rather than the Holy Spirit.

**Encounters in individual contexts**

In more cases, for these participants, encounter occurred away from groups and congregational events. Four encounters occurred in bed. Gemma had a
significant dream, Amy felt comforted while trying to forgive her husband and get to
sleep, and both Julie and John were in hospital. More occurred in the context of
nature. All of Anne’s landmark experiences took place outdoors while alone. Her
husband talked of awareness of God while cycling, and Christopher also mentioned
nature. Both of these (PINs) emerged in response to direct questioning about
awareness of God (TQ), as did Anthony’s account of his first encounter, more than a
year before he observed a miraculous healing.

[T]here was a promontory, a bit of rock sticking out, and
there was a bit of a tricky path up to it... There was me and
the world; nobody else. And I kind of felt God’s presence at
that point, when I was alone.

(PINs) of encounter in the natural environment generally were reported by older
participants who were unencumbered by children, suggesting that context may to
some extent be determined by opportunity.

Among a variety of individual contexts, which included painting walls in
India, and cleaning a staircase, the most frequent setting for encounter was that of
personal prayer or conscious reflection. Included here were cases where the
individual was hoping to find experiential evidence of God’s reality, as well as those
where prayer concerned difficult family circumstances or personal distress. Only
Steve’s encounter occurred while engaged in spiritual reading. Nobody mentioned
Bible reading as a context for encounter. In the main research only one encounter
occurred in the context of a dream, and this was outside the conversion process;
though several particular incidents were suggestive of ‘dream-like’ altered states of
consciousness. Thomas described beginning to speak in tongues, which was
subsequent but still very close to the conversion process. There were no examples of
encounter through public art or film, a particular focus of Robert K. Johnston whose
work is discussed below.

The dominant narrative of the worship event as the quintessential locus for
charismatic encounter in the conversion process is not supported by these stories, nor

640 On the occasion her husband was present, he was taking a phone call when her
encounter occurred.
by Milton’s Pentecostals. While the absence of references to Holy Communion is not surprising, given its generally low profile in charismatic churches, the limited references to sung worship, to preaching and to the altar call/ministry time – each core activities of the charismatic ritual – run counter to expectations, though it does mirror Milton’s data. Among her Pentecostals, only one experienced encounter before or associated with conversion through preaching, and none at all through worship. None experienced encounter because of healing. For participants in the current study, with little or no church background, much of their journeys occurred away from P+c worship events. Individual moments of prayer or quiet reflection, sometimes connected with developing Christian understanding, are more characteristic. The more contemporary narrative of conversion, as a process mediated by small groups and developing relationships, is equally inadequate to account for the breadth of the data.

**Salience of encounter**

The integrative model provides an effective framework for comparison across the narratives. Alongside believing, behaving and belonging, Saroglou defines the role of bonding (the emotional dimension) as including ‘self-transcendent experiences that bond the individual with what it perceives to be the transcendent “reality”, with others, and/or with the inner-self”. This corresponds well with the current operationalisation of encounter as being ‘awareness of God’; though, working across religions, he locates such encounters, most often, within a ritualised framework, whether private spiritual practices or public worship. Encounters identified by participants in this study were most often prior to, or separate from,

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642 It is assumed that the ‘closed table’, restricting participation to church members, would not have been a factor.
643 Walker found that some of his participants talked of encountering God in ‘worship that was an intense expression of a sense of God who permeated all of life, not as something experienced in a moment of consumption.’ John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 211.
645 Saroglou, ‘Big Four’, 1326.
engaging in such ‘prescribed practices’ and were commonly a cause of surprise to those experiencing them, in the form and contexts within which they occurred. Nevertheless, their transcendent characteristics, and the awe they produced secure a good fit for these episodes of encounter within Saroglou’s model.

Several episodes that did not reach an attributive standard for encounter would have met Saroglou’s criteria for inclusion as emotional/bonding experiences. Ben was the most recent convert among the participants, and his criteria for encounter have been described above. A professional engineer, aged 29, Ben had been drawn into the social networks of the NC attended by his wife for the previous four years. He had regularly played football with some of the men and, while he admitted to admiring the quiet confidence of those he met, he felt they were ‘pretty mad’ to believe. He began to attend a ‘not very deep’ small group hosted by his wife, which included some of football players. While he gradually came to think they were not deluded, he felt that he could not believe in God. He was not an emotional person and liked to see things proven to him. ‘I didn’t feel like there would be a way of God showing himself to me’. Subsequently, he was drawn into an Alpha course which challenged his mindset. He particularly cites the argument posed early on in the course, that Jesus was either ‘liar, lunatic or Lord’.

I got to the point where my reasoning mind could see how God could exist, but I couldn’t see how I was going to finally believe, without some experience of God... One of the Alpha course evenings was about healing and, at the end, one of the guys on our table sort of asked if anyone wanted any healing praying for... I had a sore hip at the time. It wasn’t anything major, a running injury. I said, you know, ‘You can try and heal my hip’. So, he prayed for it and I did feel like the tightness immediately went away. That gave me something to think about over the next couple of weeks. I did feel like it was healed – by God. And I guess that was kind of the first moment where I felt, I guess he is real now then.

There was, like, a Spirit day at the end of the Alpha course. We went and did a few talks and things, and then we stood round in a circle and did some worship. [...] they talked about speaking in tongues and things which I didn’t actually do, but I did think while I was standing there, ‘Well, if you are real God then show me something’. And he did – I did feel my hands being lifted up, which I’ve never felt since,
actually. But I did find that quite a pressurised environment because there were only three or four people who had done the Alpha course as non-believers there, and quite a few other people who were regular church-goers...I was amazed that that happened; it kind of reinforced that I couldn't deny that God was real at that point.646

Despite his reticent and laconic style, Ben’s response to his healing is a useful example of the kind of awe produced within the bonding dimension. His requirement for experience, returning to the issue of ‘God being real’, ‘amazement’ and subsequently being surprised are all constitutive of the emotion of ‘respectful admiration when facing a higher, more important or deeper reality’.647

While these experiences met Saroglou’s criteria, and were understood by Ben as spiritual experiences, they did not for him constitute encounter as awareness of God. As Ben recounted each episode as a PIN, he returned to an internal conversation he recalled from the time between those two experiences, in which he had considered whether the pained hip had been ‘that bad’, and whether a placebo effect had been operating. In so doing, he demonstrates engagement with the hyperrealism that is characteristic of charismatic praxis identified by Luhrmann. He is experiencing a God who is ‘so real that it is impossible not to understand that you may be fooling yourself, so real that you are left suspended between what is real and what is your imagination’.648 This reflective process was evident in Julie’s story; having initially described Jesus as a ‘real’ entity, she explained that it was ‘like’ having somebody beside you.

**Encounter within a multidimensional framework**

Following the IN, episodes that suggested experience of bonding/encounter were pursued in PINs. In addition, INs also highlighted the dimensions of belonging, believing, and behaving, helping to establish the gestalt of each case. Some narratives showed evidence of an implicit, if uncertain, multidimensional understanding of conversion. Several participants talked of endeavouring to be good

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646 The source of pressure turned out to be that he was made to sing. The other elements of the awayday were unproblematic.

647 Saroglou, ‘Big Four, 1326.

648 Luhrmann, *Talks*, 301.
people; pursuing an ethical lifestyle and seeking virtue. This was not in order to gain favour with God, but because doing what they felt was right overlapped with Christian ethical standards. Others recounted Christian beliefs that required little conversion, while describing the need for ethical conversion to achieve consistency. A number had already made strong connections with church when conversion in other areas caught up with their developing community relationships and practices. For some, the use of the term ‘Christian’ was problematic because they felt themselves to already merit that description in some dimensions but not others. For all of these, evaluation of the salience of encounter in the light of at least one other dimension of conversion was part of their internal conversation.

**Belonging**

Only a few narrators showed no evidence of developing relationships with Christians early in the conversion process. Both Anne and Gemma had encounters over an extended period before attending church – Anne for over a year, and Gemma for up to ten years. Charlotte’s encounter occurred at a Christian Union house party and, until she went to university four years later, she made only a single subsequent visit to a college CU. Thomas had spent a number of years on a quest for self-improvement before he was, like Gemma, invited to church by friends. Anne decided to find a church by herself. Of the rest, Richard, Michael, and Karen were drawn into church in response to the needs of their children. Karen’s teenage daughter had begun to attend a charismatic church and her friend invited her to an Alpha group, suggesting it would help her to understand what her daughter found so engaging. Hannah saw her sudden decision to convert from Islam to Christianity, in solidarity with her mother. Simon experienced encounter, while still abusing drugs and alcohol, during a week-long visit to Christian friends. Seven – two women and five men – engaged with church to support their spouses and were drawn into community. Two men were more specifically introduced to church by their partners.

Ministers were an important main point of contact only for Michael, Michelle, and Susan, who became members of the same small church, and for Amy. The experience of being accepted, of friendliness and, specifically, of not being judged by individuals or whole congregations featured in the stories of several. Michelle described the appeal of the church they found. *It was like walking into*
your auntie’s living room. It just... it felt right’. Her experience was echoed by Michael. ‘It felt as comfortable walking in here and shouting to [the pastor], “Do you want a brew?” and putting the kettle on, as it did walking into my family home.’ The parent and toddler club attended by Daniel and run by a father and daughter reminded him of family. ‘To me the ladies in the kitchen were, like, just reminded me of my aunties in my youth’. When John attended church for the first time, after finding faith during extended stays in hospital, he found a welcome that might have been overpowering for some. ‘People were coming up, talking to me, asking me how I was, how I was feeling, and I didn’t know any of them’.

Believing

About half of all participants mentioned belief in God that pre-dated the conversion process. For some this did make for complexity in the way that the word ‘Christian’ was used. Anthony and Alistair, among the oldest participants, conversion involved doing something about belief in God. For others, ‘Christian’ was what you ticked on a form. Both Catherine and Amy, in different ways, pondered on the complexity of the word. Catherine was able to use the term Christian to encompass both her previous self, with its inadequate beliefs and behaviour, and her new status as ‘converted’, and a ‘fully-fledged Christian’. Some of her apparent ambivalence could be best interpreted as an attempt to avoid rejecting her previous history. Fewer participants said that they started with no belief. Karen, Ben and John had never considered the possibility of God. Among these ‘non-believers’, the case of Steve’s sudden conversion experience is somewhat of an archetype: an encounter with God appeared to come complete with belief. Richard had dismissed the possibility of God’s existence following his grandfather’s painful death from asbestosis, though he was emphatic that there was too much evidence to reject the existence of Jesus as a historical figure. Most of those in the younger cohorts had no prior belief.

With one exception, discussed below, there was little evidence of people struggling to accept church teaching. Most participants were more than ready to be convinced, though Ben, Andy, Charlotte, and Karen each described a trajectory of

649 He was the only participant who mentioned human suffering as a barrier to belief.
developing belief that took at least two years. Karen spoke of ‘getting it’, suggesting a parallel development of the believing and bonding dimensions. She wanted God to speak to her but it was a very slow process.

[In the Alpha sessions], I brought up numerous doubts and queries. I was quite – you know. I contributed, and said what I thought about things [...] but I was learning. Although I say I stuck it to the end… I didn’t dislike it. I was learning all the time.

Neither Andy nor Anthony found Alpha helpful in shaping their beliefs, but most of the rest recounted PINs that highlighted the salience of the believing dimension. Matthew’s was the only narrative that gave prominence to the cognitive role of talks in church services. Even before he responded to a call for commitment, ‘[I] felt that what they talked about made a lot of sense … applying it to the real world, saying what does that mean to us, and what are the actions that should come from it’?

Spiritual experience, including encounter, opened up the possibility of God for Charlotte, Steve and Ben. For Ben, it was a critical requirement for belief and, in a somewhat similar way, for Sarah, Christopher, and Richard, it confirmed that they were on the right path. Charlotte was the participant for whom the cognitive dimension was most dominant throughout the narrative. Once at university she began an extended process of weekly Bible study with a friend she made. This was supplemented by attendance at university evangelistic events which focused on the intellectual credibility of Christian faith.

Both of the Muslim converts expressed some difficulty in understanding the role of Jesus, though this did not appear in their INs. It was a greater issue for Jasmine, who was brought up as a Jehovah’s Witness in Jamaica by people who, at age nine, she found out were her grandparents rather than her parents. An out-of-control twelve-year-old, she came to the UK and later spent time, while pregnant, in prison for violence. As an addict with mental health problems, she attended Narcotics Anonymous and was invited to church by Simon, where she had a variety of encounters in the context of sung worship. Jasmine still struggled with the idea of

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650 Described above.
the Trinity but, though she feels different to the rest of the congregation – sometimes ‘they giggle’ at the questions she asks. However, she does not feel judged and is encouraged to ‘just keep coming along’.

At 32 years old, Jasmine was a similar age to the one other participant who was exceptional in facing serious issues in accepting Christian belief. Having been recommended by a pastor, before the interview, Olivia emailed to say, ‘My story is not particularly “normal”, if there is such a thing, in the sense that I am still not sure I would identify myself as a Christian, and have always believed in a higher power’. In a short initial narrative, she explained that she attended a ‘Rudolph Steiner’ school where her parents taught. ‘[For] the majority of my life I’ve always felt that a higher purpose or a higher being was guiding me through. I’ve never felt alone in it.’ After their marriage, her partner decided that he wanted to return to church. Olivia reflected,

During my time [at church], I think I've had [...] a number of different kind of encounters with higher power, and my faith has gone in kind of waves... I've got really excited and really believed that Christianity and the Bible and Jesus was the way for me... And through reading the Bible, I would quite often get disheartened by where I was going [...] It felt like I was being pushed into corners. And then I would stop reading the Bible and question ‘why was I doing that?’, and go back to the way I was brought up [...] And I'd have another encounter. It would be amazing. I've done that five or six times, I think, over the period. So, I think the hardest thing for me with Christianity is reading the Bible [...] It always brings up more questions than answers and makes me feel more uncomfortable than less. And that's where I am at the moment. I think.

Olivia’s CP encounters were similar to those she had experienced earlier in life but, unlike others who had revised their understanding of ambiguous presence, she did not see the Holy Spirit at work in those earlier experiences. Consequently, the

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651 As do the ex-Muslim participants. Paul referred to Christ in TQ as ‘only the son’.
652 A decision to make the gatekeeper’s introduction the main operational criterion for inclusion in the research was critical in this case, and her self-identification as an outlier was helpful in exploring tension between bonding and believing.
emotional and the cognitive had pulled in opposite directions, and her punctuated conversion process was stalled at the time of the interview.

**Behaving**

The integrative model is explicit about the religious nature of ‘behaving’, defining it as conformity to ‘norms, practices, and values that are perceived as established by the transcendent’. The ethical dimension of conversion is recognised theologically as ‘moral conversion’ by Gelpi and missiologically by Murray. However, Moynagh emphasises practices, going as far as suggesting that, at least in some contexts, ‘behaving might be seen as synonymous with being church’. If behaving is accepted to be the ethical dimension of conversion, it was to some degree the least salient dimension of the narratives. Participants were more likely to describe their pre-conversion behaviour as being ‘Christian’ or ‘good’.

Karen, with an atheistic father and a mother who was frightened by religion, was brought up with ‘Christian values’. Andy, characteristically, put it bluntly.

> I used to tell people that I wasn’t a Christian but if you wanted to call it Christian morals, I was a nice person. I like to help people and be nice and what have you. And you don’t have to be a Christian to be nice to people.

Anthony would always have identified himself as a Christian, ‘because that’s the way I was brought up. Practising it? No! Believing it? No!’ Both Alistair and Catherine did talk about the need for change in the way they approached their professional lives, and Catherine admitted that her Christian beliefs had only affected her behaviour as a Brownie Guide leader. Amy wanted her friends to attend her baptism so that they would see how she had changed, even though she had brought her drug taking and promiscuity under control following the birth of her first daughter, and presented that part of her life as outside her conversion story. Michelle

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656 Murray, Christendom, 57-58, 111, 225.

657 Moynagh, Context, 334, 216.
curbed her serious dependence on alcohol and prescription drugs in the few months before her baptism, but this was not important enough for her to mention during her IN. Each of the three drug users had already stopped using by the time they connected with church, and James was specifically looking for a spiritual connexion which would help him stay clean.

Sin was not mentioned at any point in the narratives. Steve and Sarah did speak of feeling cleansed as a result of encounter; in Steve’s case, at least (in a PIN), it was evident that the initial emotions felt were less clear, and that cleansing was a later interpolation. Sarah spoke of being cleansed from feelings of bitterness towards her mother and was one of two women who mentioned feeling guilty. Lauren attributed some of her tears to feelings of guilt that she connected with the internal pressure of behaving according to new values.

*Everything changed. I think it was in relation to my old friends. They are still friends but I realised, actually, how different I felt and how different I was. I had this big thing at the very beginning that if I became a Christian I was going to have to stop doing things. I couldn’t be the person I wanted to be without having to give up. And then it was actually then that I realised that actually I was already changing. It was because I wanted to.*

A number of people described change in their emotional resilience. Anthony’s route to commitment was one of the most extended and one in which significant changes occurred along the way. His story, which he introduced as ‘The Long Game’, extended over ten years, and began when he supported his wife in her move from an inherited church up to the point when she was settled. After this point he would attend occasionally and, when conflict emerged in their marriage, they went to the pastor for advice. Later, to help his wife who was, by this time, struggling with the menopause, he joined her in following a devotional resource

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**658** In contrast to the pilot study.

**659** Referencing a *Dr Who* story line.

**660** Approximately four years ago.
online in order to find something to give her comfort. He would phone or text from work to ask whether she had seen particular entries, and even built her a prayer room in the garden. During that period, he changed work roles and was, himself, experiencing feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

And then, all of a sudden, these readings started to speak into my life [...] and suddenly I started to become more relaxed. I wasn’t so angry... And my manager actually noticed as well. ‘What’s happened to you?’ And the only word I could use to describe it was ‘grace’. I said, ‘There’s a grace upon me but I don’t know where it’s coming from.’ I liked the person I was then. [My wife] noticed the difference... I started then to go to church [...] the thought that went through my mind was, I’ll pretend to go along with this but whenever I want I can walk away....and I kind of said to the pastor, ‘When you’re next doing some baptisms’, thinking may be in two years’ time, ‘I might be interested in participating’. He said, ‘Well, we’ve got some coming up next month, and why not do it now’.

The act of making a public commitment fits most naturally within the behaving dimension of the integrative model. Anthony’s narrative, who continued to vacillate until he was confronted by the child’s healing, included a decision to commit; though the punctiliar aspect of his ten-year-long pathway seemed less significant than the durative, in the context of an extended IN. Within the framework of Alpha, Alistair ‘made his vows’ and Christopher ‘gave his life to Jesus’. Jack, Matthew, and Lauren each responded to calls for commitment at the end of a talk.

Conclusion

The four dimensions of religiousness give rise to four motives for conversion: intellectual, emotional, ethical and social. Across the cases, belonging (the social motive) is the most significant of the four dimensions. Many of the initial narratives described being drawn into the church community to support a spouse, or because of a child’s connection. It was in this context that prior experiences acquired

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661 This was United Christian Broadcasters’ online devotional *Word for Today*. Available: [http://www.ucb.co.uk/word-for-today](http://www.ucb.co.uk/word-for-today) (accessed 30 October 2018).

662 This is a surprising term to use but Anthony was sure that it was used in conversation with his manager.
greater clarity, and new encounters took place. It was also the context in which issues of believing were explored. For some, encounter was primary in the narrative. In the case of Anne, it led to finding a church to attend; for several others – Gemma, who had been aware of God over an extended period, and John and Julie, who each experienced encounter in hospital – it led to accepting invitations to attend church. It is possible to attribute the connection to church and conversion as motivated by behaving for each of the recovering drug addicts. However, this is such a particular group of cases that, while significant, they should probably be flagged and due weight given to the fact that they were each drug-free before connecting with church, and that Simon had previously experienced encounter.

Having explored the data from the current study it is useful to consider the similarities and differences between these experiences of encounter and those uncovered by Milton among her Birmingham Pentecostals. In that research occurrences of encounter prior or proximate to conversion were identified by twenty respondents in varied contexts. Observing that ‘little is written about [encounters] in the build-up to or at the time of an initial conversion experience’, the absence of prior encounter may suggest that ‘experiences of God are increased at the point of conversion...because a believer is more likely to put themselves in a position to experience God post-conversion.’ This is undoubtedly so, and resonates with the anthropological proposal that the act of prayer is paying attention to internal experience and that recognising encounter is a skill, learned after conversion. However, there are methodological factors that are likely to be in play, too. The conversions in the current study were more recent than many of Milton’s, and by that token may have been more easily recalled in their historical context. Though there

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663 Narcotics Anonymous is a non-religious fellowship, encouraging each member to cultivate an individual understanding, religious or not, of a 'spiritual awakening'. Available: [http://ukna.org/content/what-na](http://ukna.org/content/what-na) (accessed: 5 June 2018).

664 Angels and Demons – 5; Art and Media – 3; Audible voice – 1; Scripture – 2; Dreams and Visions – 2; Healing – 0; Preaching – 1; Presence of God – 2; Prophecy and Knowledge – 2; Spirit Baptism – 2; Worship – 0. (Milton, *Shalom*, 174.)


666 Ibid. 175.

was no prompting or priming, the probing for PINs may have given space for the emergence of those events. There is also the likelihood, discussed below, that current P+c praxis may desensitise converts to authentic encounter in the mundane, making such events more likely to be dismissed or forgotten, focusing on more recent post-conversion encounters that conform more closely to expectation.

Certainly, the data from these two studies does empirically evidence the failure of the ‘belonging – believing – behaving’ model to account for important aspects of P+c conversion. Once encounters with angels and demons are excluded from Milton’s results, there were fifteen reports of encounter prior or proximate to conversion. By comparison at least fifty reports in the comparable period were noted in the current research by 27 individuals, and of the twelve CP participants in the research, at least eight experienced prior or proximate encounter.668 While the frequency is less, Milton’s data and commentary provides support for the early occurrence of encounter prior. Only one of the Birmingham encounters occurred in the context of preaching and none were prompted by healing or in worship. Some encounters, prior and proximate to conversion, were probably in individual or small group contexts, given the relative importance of these for commitment decisions. She also states that, ‘[w]hile some identified the Spirit’s protection and guidance, prior to their conversion, it is only through the hindsight brought about by their current faith they can see this activity.’669 Milton’s data on encounters with angels and demons, and ambiguous spiritual experiences reported in the current research and in some cases subsequently reinterpreted, resonate with an element within early fx discussion.670 That conversation seems stalled at the present time,671 and it may

668 if Hannah’s uncertain experience in her mother’s room is excluded.
669 Milton, Shalom, 194.
well be that perspectives on discernment praxis such as that discussed below may provide a useful stimulus to further reflection.
Reflective methodology

It is unlikely that the stories that have been told are of exceptions or extreme cases. The narrators and their accounts have been validated at some level by the churches from which they come; gatekeepers – denominational officers, pastors, and others – have provided access. Emerging evidence of a mismatch between the dominant narrative and an evolving, alternative version, points towards a reflective approach that pays attention to inherent dialectical tensions. Among possible reflective frameworks, it is proposed to engage a method from within academic practical theology – theology in four voices (T4V). This identifies

- normative theology, found in the Scriptures, creeds, official church teaching and liturgies (and, by extension, statements of faith and values)
- formal theology – the theology of theologians, including dialogue with other disciplines
- espoused theology – the theology embedded in a group’s articulation of its beliefs
- operant theology – the theology embedded within the actual practices of a group.

Inevitably, in its multipolar approach, T4V makes each voice rather more distinct than might be the case in reality in order to expose the tensions, conflicts and inconsistencies between the voices. The method discovers the operant voice in the practices of the church, and these will be tentatively inferred from the narratives of converts. Formal, academic, theology is often seen as set at some distance from the normative voice, and perhaps this is particularly so in the experiential P+c tradition, though often the experience on which espoused theology is based is that of past generations.

‘Ordinary Theology’, a perspective originating with Jeff Astley that seeks to uncover ‘non-scholarly and non-academic’ theology,’ was also considered as a

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Cameron, Practice, 52–56.
reflective method. It has been employed widely and successfully, including by Mark Cartledge in his study of conversion and discipleship within a Pentecostal church. That research employed focus groups in which theological reflection was encouraged, and this local discourse was compared with that from ecclesial sources. Astley’s approach is valuable in differentiating between higher level and local, informal, beliefs. In the current research, the SQUIN was designed to steer participants away from reflection in favour of story-telling. In PINs, some access was gained to the internal conversations of participants, and in two TQs at the end of the interview there was only a brief opportunity, taken by some, to engage with theological categories. The field research was designed to elucidate what happened rather than why it happened; ordinary theologising is generally understood as a wholly more conscious and reflective activity than that facilitated by this research.

Ward considers that academic practical theology, which includes both of these approaches, has placed itself in the liberal camp by privileging experience, in contrast with those kinds of applied theology that work from the doctrine of the church towards practice. He considers this to be a false dichotomy as ‘most reflection on practice takes place through a deep engagement with the Scriptures … reflecting on the Bible in sermons, Bible studies and personal study.’ From that perspective, consideration of the missional implications of the data has also been guided by an approach proposed by the late Ray Anderson: ‘… that begins in the context and crisis of ministry seeks to read the texts of Scripture in light of the text of lives that manifests in the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.’ This, a variety of practical theology that Anderson describes as Christopraxis, goes some way to illuminating tensions arising ‘in the context and crisis of ministry’ but it does fail to acknowledge the centrality of the interpretive process. The discussion, in the light of T4V, regarding which parts of Scripture remain unaccounted for, or should

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continue to be prioritised in the tradition, will be a consistent contribution to the ensuing conversation.

The use of T4V is an attempt to engage in an appropriate level of complexity. This is particularly so in an environment where it is acknowledged that the tradition’s pneumatology is not yet ‘full-orbed’,\textsuperscript{677} where P+c missiologies are relatively undeveloped,\textsuperscript{678} and where the conditions associated with the decline of Christendom are incompletely understood or, most likely, yet to be discovered – not just by Pentecostal, New Church and renewalist Christians, but by all seeking to join the mission of God.\textsuperscript{679} T4V was developed within Christian traditions quite different from those represented in this study and, while the P+c denominations that supplied participants would be deeply committed to creedal Christianity, it was considered something to be remarked on in a recent study of charismatic worship that in one innovative congregation ‘a regular attender would not be caught off guard by a public reading of the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed.’\textsuperscript{680} Reference to a statement of beliefs, denominational or pan-evangelical was found, but hidden deep within the websites of most of the churches from which participants were recruited. Much closer to the ‘landing page’ were vision statements and lists of core values.

A major source for normative theology in many denominations is ministerial training, something that has been arguably less highly valued in the denominations studied than in many others, and preachers will be expected to draw on their education in formal and normative theology. For the P+c tradition, rather than seeking to implement normative theology, the starting point for preaching is the


\textsuperscript{679} Amos Yong, Missiological, Kindle locations 4177–4471.

speaker re-experiencing the text and assisting the audience to do the same. That is not to say that all P+c preachers ignore their own or the wider tradition. It is to note that the voice of normative theology will often be in the background, blending with that of espoused theology. They will be found together in the somewhat ephemeral world of the conference or Bible Week, and in a slightly more durable form in popular level religious publishing. The consequence is that in many of its manifestations, normative and espoused theologies of the tradition will tend to converge to such an extent that, for the purposes of this review, the two can be treated as just one voice.

The voices of the charismatic tradition and the espoused voice of the dominant missional consensus, have been listened to above, in the early parts of the portfolio and the consideration of concepts central to the research. The reflective conversation below will be with academic theologians who have highlighted dialectical forces at the interface between normative and formal theology. Once that voice is clearly heard, the task will be to draw attention to the operant theology revealed by the cases and the contexts of the research participants, most of whom had been involved in P+c congregations for more than a year. The willingness of gatekeepers to include these participants in the research has been assumed, in Archer’s terms, to confer some degree of approval on the experiences and the stories they have told.

**Pneumatological Focus**

All those who contributed narratives found faith in the third millennium, most in the second decade. With few exceptions, any prior church involvement had ceased in childhood. There were elements of durative and punctuated, as well as punctiliar conversion process. Encounters were as likely to occur in individual as in group contexts. Explored in the third phase of the interview, in a direct question, the common discourse was of awareness of *God* – in only a few cases were participants aware of specific Trinitarian persons. Under these circumstances, the lenses of Christology or soteriology were likely to prove ineffective in offering a theological

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perspective on the role of encounter within conversion. Habets has made a case for employing a developing approach known as Third Article Theology (TAT) as a response and counteractive to ‘Christomonic myopia’, evident elsewhere in theology. In an early presentation of the concept (in 1998), D. Lyle Dabney made the case for a theology of the third article on missional grounds. ‘Starting with the Spirit is precisely the step we must now take, if we are to give account of faith in Christ in an appropriate and authentic manner today’. Liston has recently identified themes within TAT – ‘particularity, relationality, and transformation – that closely align with the leitmotifs of post-modernism’. The relevance of TAT to the multidisciplinary approach of the current missiological research is exemplified by Pugh who draws attention to these key components of TAT methodology.

*Particularity* leads to ‘the ultimate contextual theology’, its results ‘almost syncretistic’; *transformation* offers a ‘retroactive hermeneutic’, that has the potential, it will be suggested, to acknowledge the Spirit’s work by observation of the fruit produced throughout the conversion process; *relationship*, that starting from the Spirit, connects with the belonging as well as believing dimensions of conversion. Amos Yong, a prolific pentecostal theologian, whose work in the area of third millennium missiology will be considered later, bases his pneumatological theology of religions on a TAT approach and on ‘the Holy Spirit as the universal presence and activity of God’. For this research ‘starting from the Spirit’ thus becomes a methodological, and missiological, choice. ‘In our Christian experience, we are ‘moved by the Spirit, who leads us to Christ, who reveals the Father.’ In this

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687 Ibid., Kindle location 1438.
explanation, Kirsteen Kim suggests a hermeneutic framework ‘from below’ that provides additional grounding for the attributional approach to encounter in the current study. The naming of the Spirit by Dabney as ‘the possibility of God’, together with his interpretation of ‘the doctrine of creation in terms of the priority of the Spirit and the priority of possibility’ and ‘creation as a premonition of God’, provides an understanding of the variety of encounter prior to conversion, and the frequency of creation as a context for spiritual experience. Kim’s image of starting with being ‘moved by the Spirit’ provides an appropriately extensive description of the conversion process revealed by the data in this research; by identifying the Spirit as the agent of Trinitarian activity, and the manifestation of Trinitarian presence, it becomes possible to apply a pneumatological hermeneutic across the stories told.

In the light of a broad pneumatological reading it will become clear that this evidence challenges a narrow view of conversion/initiation that uses the text of the Acts of the Apostles as a ‘norm against which to measure the normative text of Scripture’. This criticism, of employing ‘a canon within a canon’ was made against ‘Pentecostals generally’ by Yves Congar, the Catholic charismatic theologian. His observation was made in 1979, and is offered again by one of the conversation partners below. The ensuing discussion will illustrate, and to some extent employ, that mode of thinking but will suggest that a broader canonical reference for the work of the Spirit in the pathways of those coming to faith might encompass more of the data and contribute to a more coherent missional praxis. The discussion will proceed on the assumption that operant theology and missional praxis may be ahead of essentialising normative and espoused voices, in offering a more holistic way forward. The academic voices of developing pneumatologies may be more in harmony with what is being discovered from the ground up, at least on the evidence of the missional practices revealed in this research.

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As the theological contribution to praxis, initial conversations will take place with three scholars from different disciplines. Mark Cartledge is a practical theologian, with substantial empirical work on the tradition to his name, who has recently written on *Mediation of the Spirit*. He is an Anglican priest and a renewalist; an ‘insider to the spirituality of the Charismatic movement’, but not that of classical Pentecostalism. J. R. (Jack) Levison is a biblical scholar and a Methodist who describes himself as having one foot in the ‘mainline Protestant church and one foot in Pentecostalism … that has never quite landed’. He writes from outside of P+c commitments, some would say outside of the evangelical tradition. His major work on the Spirit, proposing an extensive view of the Spirit’s activity and a new understanding of subsequence, caught the interest of Pentecostal journals and led to a fruitful exchange with a number of scholars. Within that dialogue, Frank Macchia, a systematic theologian from within the Assemblies of God, earns a place in his own right as a partner in this conversation, surfacing important aspects of normative/espoused theology as well as developing Levison’s thesis in a P+c direction. Finally, and separately, as a way to draw the strands together, and as a bridge to considering the missiological implications of the research, the sum of reflection will be placed in a consciously TAT framework offered by Yong. He writes as a pentecostal (noting the lower case), and though, like Macchia, from the AoG, he often works at some distance from the normative tradition. These main inputs will be linked with others to the operant theology emerging from the research.

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data, and with that ‘theory laden’ input in hand, attention will eventually turn to praxis.

**Mediation of the Spirit**

In *Mediation of the Spirit*, Mark Cartledge has made an intervention in practical theology from a P+c perspective. After discussing the role of scripture, experience, and the Holy Spirit in practical theology, and in particular the mediation of the Spirit, he spends a chapter engaging with the espoused pneumatology of the tradition. He does this by examining Spirit reception narratives in Acts, focusing on the Day of Pentecost. His interpretive lens is the concept of mediation of the Spirit, both as subject (mediating the Trinity) and object (mediated by Christ, creation, and the church. The Day of Pentecost narrative is selected ‘as the key passage for Pentecostals’, and he follows Congar in noting that,

> Luke’s two-volume work (Luke-Acts) has often been regarded as the ‘canon within the canon’ of Pentecostal theological hermeneutics. While this might be problematic at one level (it excludes other significant biblical texts), at another level it provides a focus for an enquiry such as this one.

His articulation of the normative voice of the tradition, the methodology he employs, and his reflections on P+c pneumatology – particularly in relation to pneumatological mediation and experiential encounter – is highly relevant to the current enquiry. He develops a scriptural understanding of the relationship between religious experience and pneumatology. He demonstrates that this relationship is ‘inextricably connected to ecclesiology’; to worship and other corporate practices. He points to a more varied mode of operation for the Spirit, and the possibility of more varied contexts for encounter. In these ways, his pneumatological reflection provides assistance in finding a place for experiential encounter that occurs prior or proximate to conversion, and particularly that occurs without obvious ecclesial mediation.

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698 Ibid. fn.1.
Cartledge examines the prototypical charismatic encounter in Acts 2, where the disciples were ‘located in close proximity in a single space’ and ‘the impression is given that all those present (both men and women) experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon them’. ‘The Holy Spirit is mediated via the intermediary of the community’, 699 Primacy is given to the communal context as a locus for encounter, consistent with Kärkkäinen’s identification of a quintessential praxis of encounter within the P+c worship event. 700 He notes that, additionally, ‘the Spirit’s presence is intensified in space and time of the created order’ and the particularities of the Day of Pentecost lead him to highlight ‘places where people gather to meet with each other and the Spirit in prayer’. 701 In this regard he cites Inge in support, whose theology of place includes sacramental events (experiential encounters) in spaces ‘offered by the world in all its diverse aspects’, suggesting contexts for mediation that go well beyond the P+c idealisation of Acts 2. 702 He also draws attention to the experience of the Spirit in a ‘punctuated process’ in which significant events are specific to place and time. 703

From verse two, a series of analogies is employed to interpret what is happening. For Cartledge, it is the sound of the wind that creates an impact, though it may also have been felt. There are resonances with the Spirit of God as breath in Genesis and elsewhere; in its heavenly source, with theophany, and as eschatological fulfilment. The accent is on discontinuity. Those in the upper room ‘saw’ tongues of fire, either externally and literally, or internally and imaginatively. Moreover, in the reference to ‘each one’ there is an indication of particularity in encounter that might have been affected by a range of factors, including personality and disposition. That mediating tongues of fire were directed to individuals, is an important balance to the

699 Ibid., 92 (original italics)
701 On page 93, Cartledge observes that Pentecostal hermeneutics has recovered a strong sense of connectedness in believing, though the operational implications have yet to be researched in detail. This observation may offer a basis for the theological grounding of missional practices that foreground ‘belonging’.
703 Cartledge, Mediation, 93.
community emphasis of the first point, and suggests what Cartledge sees as a developing role for less well-known people alongside high-profile individuals as intermediaries of the Spirit. Following the initial corporate, and subsequent individual, encounters with the Spirit, experience is intensified via the intermediary of glossolalia, which is further defined as ‘praise and worship’ or ‘doxological speech’. Mediation is extended as worship leads to a further intensification of the Spirit’s presence, and extension into the public environment.\(^{704}\)

In summary, the passage suggests that the presence of the Spirit was mediated by distinct intermediaries – both the community and the particular space and time. Cartledge notes that these two factors are often conflated in espoused theology into community but, by failing to acknowledge their distinctiveness, the potential range of ways in which the Spirit is experienced is unnecessarily reduced. He points out that even moving between revivalist locations (and, it could be added, between denominations within the tradition) appears to influence how the Spirit is experienced.\(^{705}\) The Spirit is mediated by the familiar theophanic symbols of wind, fire, breath and tongues, already familiar from Jewish culture to the recipients. By integrating glossolalia and doxological speech, Cartledge is able to find within this encounter a mediating role for the ecclesial practice of praise and worship.

Moving to later narratives of Spirit reception in Acts, which also feature strongly in P+c pneumatology, if in a supporting role, there is evidence of further mediating factors. In the narrative of reception of the Spirit by the Samaritans (Acts 8), laying on of hands and prayer play a mediating role, as it does without reference to prayer in Saul’s conversion/initiation (Acts 9). The Cornelius narrative and Peter’s subsequent report (Acts 10 & 11) add to the range and specificity of mediating factors. As well as angels and dreams and visions, operations of the internal world of the mind are involved, which Cartledge raised as a possibility in Acts 2. Subsequently, the Spirit is received as Peter’s preaching directly mediates the Spirit, without prayers or laying on of hands. In this episode, the reception of the Spirit is

\(^{704}\) Ibid., 93–96.

mediated by both internal and external speech.\textsuperscript{706} Cornelius and Paul were readied for the reception of the Spirit by events that had a mediating function. The angelic visitor and the sights and sounds of the Damascus road are legitimately excluded from Cartledge’s analysis of Spirit reception narratives. However, these developments could be considered more inclusively if both Paul and Cornelius were considered to have experienced a punctuated process, rather than Paul being the archetype of punctiliar conversion, and Cornelius’s extended experience generally neglected.\textsuperscript{707}

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) provides a context for apostolic reports on the reception of the Spirit by Gentiles. The Spirit’s inclusive work was evidenced not only by their reception of the Spirit, but also by signs and wonders being done among them. Within this narrative is an account of the council’s deliberations which, alongside the testimonies to which they listened and the Scriptures they considered, mediated the Spirit to the point where they could say that ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’, thus extending a mediating role to Scripture, testimony and reflective process or praxis.\textsuperscript{708} After briefly examining the experience of the Ephesian disciples (Acts 19), in which hands were laid on them for the reception of the Spirit, Cartledge summarises, in the context of baptism, the additional media evident in these stories of conversion-initiation. Hands are laid on individuals, preaching and signs and wonders occur and deliberations take place, all of which mediate the Spirit. These are added to evidence from the Day of Pentecost narrative, namely that creation mediates the Spirit in wind and fire, and that the filling of the Spirit is intensified through doxological speech.\textsuperscript{709}

Cartledge locates primary mediation (by the Trinity) and secondary mediation (by creation, church, and humanity) within a schema. In so doing, he draws attention to the P+c focus on ecclesial contexts for encounter, and highlights

\textsuperscript{706} Cartledge, \textit{Mediation}, 103–106.
\textsuperscript{708} Cartledge, \textit{Mediation}, 106–107.
\textsuperscript{709} Ibid., 108.
pneumatological limitations in the normative and espoused tradition. Cartledge has recognised that the tradition has focused on the creaturely mediation of the Spirit by the church to the church. In the P+c preference for Luke’s narrative, Cartledge also provides a sharp example of the significance of a starting point, an issue raised by Levison below. Equally significant is his movement from categorising glossolalia as ‘doxological speech’, to describing it as ‘in other words, praise and worship.’ It is not uncommon to hear Acts 2 described as a model for ‘Worship Evangelism’, recommending the virtues of sung worship as a locus for encounter leading to punctiliar conversion. In doing so it is elevated as particularly effective among P+c practices, creating a centrifugal tendency to creaturely mediation within his schema, drawing it into the church and away from the world.

All other encounters with the Spirit are to be measured against Acts 2. Cartledge identifies within the espoused theology of the tradition ‘a model for the spectacular, which … assumes that [Acts 2 represents] the ideal form of religious experience.’ A frame of reference based on Spirit reception narratives in Acts is poorly suited to interpret ‘the ordinary, what we might call the “low-level” interaction between the divine and human’ and in doing so points out important scope for development of P+c missional pneumatology. Cartledge has provided an extensive array of creaturely mediating mechanisms, even though he has limited himself to the Spirit reception narratives. Across the whole of the book of Acts, a few notable additions arise from Paul’s missional interactions. The reference to ‘extraordinary miracles through Paul’ (Acts 19:11) begs a category of more ordinary, perhaps low-level interventions. The Spirit is mediated through creation at Lystra (Acts 14:17), and culture at Athens (Acts 17:24–28). It could be argued that there is no explicit reference to the Spirit on the two latter occasions, but there would have

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710 Ibid., 96.
711 This is not to say that Cartledge is wrong in describing a major role for (sung) worship across the tradition (pp. 68–69). The point here is a limited one, that sung worship was not unquestionably a part of the Pentecost event. Sally Morgenthaler, Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers Into the Presence of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995), ‘And the conversion of 3000 souls began as the most stirring worship event in history: Pentecost’, 41.
712 Cartledge, Mediation, 68.
713 Ibid., 75.
been little point in engaging these vague theists with Trinitarian vocabulary.\textsuperscript{714} Instead there are echoes of that Spirit, ‘fill[ing] your hearts with joy’ (Acts 14:17), and ‘giving life and breath and everything else’ (Acts 17:25). The incorporation of these creational mechanisms into a framework for pneumatological mediation does not run counter to the thrust of Cartledge’s argument,\textsuperscript{715} even if it does represent a significant clarification in P+c pneumatology. The P+c tradition, from its inception, has placed a premium on the supernatural, and on invasion by the transcendent. Such intervention occurs from above to a lower level of existence, but this cannot be the whole story.

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\text{…[I]f God is said to sustain the whole of the created order, so that creation would cease to exist were he to withdraw his presence, then one can argue for an already existing interactive presence of the Spirit in order to sustain creation. Only an interactionist model does justice to this existing relationship between God and his creation.}\textsuperscript{716}
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### The Spirit’s wider role

The already present, interactive Spirit provides the link to the work of Levison who, in 2009, produced a major theological work, titled *Filled with the Spirit*.\textsuperscript{717} An academic study with that title, and which explicitly challenged P+c selection of biblical material in constructing normative theology, was almost certain to pique the interest of P+c scholars, and a dialogue ensued in both *Pneuma* (the Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Scholars), and the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*. Levison contributed essays to each, and it is in these shorter pieces that he responds to charismatic engagement with his thesis.\textsuperscript{718} Aware that he is in discussion with the normative as well as the academic voice, his response offers a developmental prescription which fed into his later work, *Inspired: the Holy Spirit*.

\textsuperscript{714} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{715} Ibid., 93, 111.
\textsuperscript{716} Ibid., p. 74.
\textsuperscript{717} Levison, *Filled*.
and the Mind of Faith. In this he presented ‘An Agenda for the Future of Pneumatology’, in which one of the more appreciative of his interlocutors, Frank Macchia, was co-opted as a conversation partner. Macchia has recently revisited key aspects of that broad discussion in a book chapter on creation pneumatology, an, as yet, underdeveloped area in P+C thinking. Levison’s original work has greatly appreciated in value as a result of the initial engagement with P+C scholars, particularly his response to that contribution and his subsequent development, in Insipred, of his biblical insights in a more theological direction. Recently, his writing on the Old Testament has been used to support work on the Spirit and mission, in passing by Yong, and in slightly more detail, with further critique, by Kim. In Filled with the Spirit, Levison surveys the literature of several eras to understand what it means to be filled by the Spirit and he endorses the following summary of his thesis which appears as part of the journal discussion.

Levison] seeks to articulate the distinct pneumatologies represented by the literature of these historical eras. Levison argues that the Israelite literature does not distinguish between the divine holy spirit and the spirit of life which inhabits all living things. This lack of distinction leads Levison consistently to write holy spirit without capitalisation and thereby, in his opinion, avoid mistaken identity. According to Levison, the earliest Christian literature is all but bereft of the broader notion of the spirit of life because it is preoccupied with the radically new community created by an endowment of the spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.\footnote{Robby Waddell, ‘The Holy Spirit of life, work, and Inspired Speech: Responding to John (Jack) R. Levison, \textit{Filled with the Spirit} JPT, 20:2 (2011), 207–212. This summary by Robby Waddell is endorsed by Levison.}

That his failure to capitalise ‘spirit’ caused a measure of protest is unsurprising, given that the convention, though not universally, would be to use the lower case for a spirit other than the divine,\footnote{See C.F.D. Moule, \textit{The Holy Spirit} (London: Continuum, 1978), 7.} but that is not a major issue for this thesis.

In his response to the dialogue, Levison lists a number of areas important for the future of ‘Pentecostal and charismatic pneumatologies’. Of seven items, several are particularly relevant in the current context, namely: ‘The Breadth of the Spirit’s Presence’; ‘A New Definition of Subsequence’; and ‘The Significance of a Starting Point’.\footnote{He also lists ‘The Search for Religious Experience’, though the kind of ecstatic and apocalyptic material he is referencing is too remote from the contemporary era to be relevant to the current research.} The last of these is discussed in the introduction to \textit{Filled with the Spirit}, and, for the others, the groundwork is laid in the first two hundred pages. His examination of the Old Testament (OT) is recognised by his interlocutors as making a particularly useful contribution to pneumatology.\footnote{Waddell, ‘Holy Spirit’, 212.} Levison, himself, had hoped that he would succeed in providing

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\text{\footnote{Robby Waddell, ‘The Holy Spirit of life, work, and Inspired Speech: Responding to John (Jack) R. Levison, \textit{Filled with the Spirit} JPT, 20:2 (2011), 207–212. This summary by Robby Waddell is endorsed by Levison.}} \\
\text{\footnote{See C.F.D. Moule, \textit{The Holy Spirit} (London: Continuum, 1978), 7.}} \\
\text{\footnote{He also lists ‘The Search for Religious Experience’, though the kind of ecstatic and apocalyptic material he is referencing is too remote from the contemporary era to be relevant to the current research.}} \\
\text{\footnote{Waddell, ‘Holy Spirit’, 212.}}
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a redefinition of inspiration in such a way that it will be no longer possible to define the presence of the holy spirit exclusively as a subsequent endowment, as supernatural revelation that arrives wholly in a charismatic endowment, as the onslaught of the inexplicable and the advent of the mysterious.728

While stopping some way short of implementing a new norm for pneumatology, he does describe a relationship between the initial endowment of God’s Spirit at birth and subsequent charismatic endowment that has engaged P+c consideration. His intention was that the Spirit from birth should be understood as a powerful presence, with its own supernatural effects, that paralleled the charismatic Spirit. He also aimed to reframe Israelite understandings of the Spirit without anachronism, in response to the P+c impulse to assume that anyone in the OT said to be filled with God’s Spirit, or to have the Spirit within, must have received a charismatic endowment. By proposing that, in the OT, the Spirit that people receive from birth is no less divine or holy than that which they receive through charismatic endowment, Levison identifies a strand that is missed when starting from the New Testament (NT).

Waddell agrees that ‘the Holy Spirit of Christian inspiration which forms the new creation in the theology of Paul is complemented by the ancient Israelite notion that without the life-giving spirit of God no living thing or person can be sustained.’729 Max Turner finds many of Levison’s readings convincing, though with caveats, pointing to places where the Spirit of God is more readily understood as a special gift of empowering.730 He finds it problematic that both ‘relatively quiescent activity of the Spirit’ and ‘more intense irruptions’ are placed in the same category, finding that Levison fails to adequately differentiate between the range of meanings

730 Max Turner, ‘Levison’s *Filled with the Spirit*: A Brief Appreciation and Response’, *JPT* 20:2 (2011), 193–200 [195]. The concern that Levison is trying to force all the OT evidence into a single mould, or relies on idiosyncratic interpretations, is also found away from the P+c discussion. See: CBQ 72, 2010, 831–832; Coombs, *Themelios*, 57–58.
of the term ‘s/Spirit’. On his part, Levison sees in Turner’s critique evidence of the
sharp wedge driven between the spirit of God and human breath that he has set out to
challenge – one viewed as divine, theological and charismatic, and the other as
human, anthropological, and merely creational. Nevertheless, Turner concludes
that Levison’s ‘is a stunning contribution’, in an unfamiliar area with which he hopes
that some will engage, though whatever sympathetic support Levison has received,
such conflation of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit remains an issue for
Thiselton and for others.

Among the roundtable respondents, Frank Macchia has particularly pursued an
engagement with the ideas raised by Levison, because

the extraordinary quality of the Spirit’s work in the new Testament is not necessarily problematic in itself, but, if overemphasised, can leave open the question of continuity with the Spirit of creation as the breath of Yahweh that gave life to creation and still sustains it and causes it to flourish.

This issue of continuity is critical in Macchia’s (and in Levison’s) thinking; rather than seeing the relationship between the Testaments only as promise-fulfilment, there exist two complementary pneumatologies. A tension exists between the Testaments that challenges a dualism between God’s Spirit and the natural realm and focuses on what the Spirit means for the ‘totality of life’.

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732 Levison, ‘Conversation’, 221.
736 Ibid., 118.
737 Ibid., 115.
738 Ibid., 122.
739 Ibid., 123.
As revivalists, we bathe in the glow of born-again Christianity and accent even more than other evangelicals the supernatural character of the Spirit’s presence as a gift given to those who embrace Christ by faith. This accent on the supernatural and eschatological nature of the filling of the Spirit is not problematic in itself, except that we tend to think we can only highlight this by neglecting the Spirit that inspires human wisdom and virtue ‘from below’, so to speak. We thus tend to see a life outside (or prior to) Christ as dark, lost, and devoid of the Holy Spirit. We tend to regard any celebration of the Spirit of life outside the sacred walls of the church as liberal and denigrating of Christ’s uniqueness.\footnote{740}

This critique of normative P+c theology, by Macchia, quoted in Levison’s subsequent work is replete with significance for understanding the narratives in this research and for a developed missional praxis.

Macchia provides a useful perspective from which to consider the heavy emphasis on intra-ecclesial mediation of the Spirit in Cartledge’s P+c schema, reinforcing Levison’s conviction that his conception of the spirit-breath – as the source of life for all and the reservoir of virtue cultivated by some\footnote{741} – has serious implications for how Christians acknowledge the Spirit in those who are not Christians. As Levison says, ‘The full biblical canon permits its readers – even prompts them – to confirm that people who are other than Christian can experience the spirit of God within them from birth as a source of wisdom, knowledge, skill, and holiness’. Consequently, he has ‘difficulty claiming that Christians are the sole possessors of the holy spirit’,\footnote{742} and that the spirit must be understood as more than what fills only Christians.\footnote{743} Drawing support from Macchia, Levison concludes that ‘[t]he church must develop a pneumatology that at one and the same time prizes the spirit in the church and values the presence of the spirit outside the realm of Christianity’ (original italics).\footnote{744} At the end of this text he returns to his personal focus in writing Inspired. ‘The dividing line, at least in part, is rooted in whether

\footnote{740}{Macchia, ‘Immortality’, 69–78. [71].}
\footnote{741}{Levison, Inspired, 194.}
\footnote{742}{Ibid., 65–66.}
\footnote{743}{Ibid., 201.}
\footnote{744}{Ibid., 200.}
Christians think this spirit appears in the spectacular or in a steady spirituality. The answer is ‘In both’; there is evidently something to be done within the tradition to celebrate the Spirit’s quiet power at work in lives of those not yet Christians so that it is possible to embrace, across the Testaments, themes of continuity as well as discontinuity.

This breadth of activity on the part of the Spirit of God leads Macchia to call for a redefinition of one of the most contentious charismatic distinctives. CPs and many other charismatics have argued for an encounter with the Spirit leading to an endowment that is subsequent to conversion. Many who have taken the position that, theologically, the Spirit is received at conversion, support the idea that, experientially, there are subsequent watershed experiences of filling with Spirit, sometimes differently labelled, sometimes initially linked to the reception of the gift of tongues or prophecy, and often appropriated in ministry time.

The subsequence issue raised by Levison is not between faith and post-faith experiences but rather between the human vitality granted at birth and any further endowment of the Spirit! Spirit filling in the Old Testament is not a subsequent endowment but rather the expansion of the spirit of life given to all humans from the time of Adam...

Macchia accepts the direction of Levison’s argument, and highlights the implications for charismatics.

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745 Ibid., 222.
One who is heavily invested in subsequence or the experience of the supernatural Spirit will read Old Testament pneumatology in this light...as a fleeting and inadequate foretaste of the supernatural spirit given through Christ’s death and resurrection, punctuated by momentary and noteworthy endowments, but generally experienced within a situation of relative spiritual dearth while awaiting the fullness of the Spirit that came through Christ.748

For Macchia, Levison’s thesis is useful in developing a more rounded charismatic pneumatology, with ‘creative potential for linking the Spirit of Christ explicit in the born-again experience with the Spirit of Christ hidden within any life that flourishes by the Spirit.’749 ‘We don’t need to denigrate the Spirit that inspires us from below in order to highlight the same spirit that comes to us from above or beyond.’750 Levison attempts to find support for Rahner’s inclusivism in Macchia’s position751 but the latter is clear that immortality does not evolve from within human life, but from the interruptive cross and the disjunction of the Easter event. However, there are elements of continuity, too. Jesus offered himself ‘by the eternal Spirit’ (Heb 9:14). There is between the creative Spirit and the Spirit of resurrection both discontinuity and continuity.752

P+c focus on the NT witness to the Spirit is not unreasonable, on the basis of the density of the evidence alone, and Levison was undoubtedly provocative in filtering OT and Jewish material through the ‘filled with the Spirit’ motif. But, if Warrington is justified in his conclusion that ‘[f]undamentally the message of the NT is that the Spirit is dedicated to the development of the life of the believer’,753 there is much about the Spirit’s wider role that must be supported from the OT or elsewhere. Firth and Wegner comment that ‘the Spirit of God is an important topic in the OT,

750 Ibid., 72.
751 Levison, Inspired, 198–199.
and yet there is little scholarly work on this issue.\textsuperscript{754} The lack of attention to the OT is demonstrated by the paucity of material in surveys of quite different length by Schweizer,\textsuperscript{755} Kärkkäinen\textsuperscript{756} and Thiselton.\textsuperscript{757} Where attention is given to OT texts, a tendency to read with hindsight is often evident. Montague, who traces the growth of the Spirit as a Biblical tradition, finds that the journey culminates in ‘the view from the mountain top’ of charismatic experience,\textsuperscript{758} as do some of Levison’s interlocutors and, of course, Cartledge’s P+c readers of Acts. Burke and Warrington give appropriate space to the OT evidence, but are concerned to harmonise the data, anticipating, as editors, a progressive presentation of the Holy Spirit that leads to a comprehensive NT portrayal.\textsuperscript{759} Moltmann has been at the forefront of the critique of those in the last generation for whom the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is restricted to the church and to faith.\textsuperscript{760} He may have the balance of the argument in his criticism of Congar’s relative neglect of the life-giving Spirit, in favour of the ecclesially located Spirit. However, the latter does at least include a short postscript to his second volume in which he affirms the active presence of the Spirit everywhere, with the Holy Spirit inspiring all true knowledge and secretly guiding God’s work in the world.\textsuperscript{761} Taylor has conceived the Spirit as the \textit{Go-between God},\textsuperscript{762} and McDonnell as the \textit{Universal Touch}.\textsuperscript{763}


\textsuperscript{757} Thiselton, \textit{Spirit}, 3–21.


\textsuperscript{760} Moltmann, \textit{Spirit of Life}, 8.

\textsuperscript{761} Yves Congar, \textit{Believe}, 218–224.


The work of the Spirit in conversion processes

Levison’s proposal that there is a ‘premium’ to be placed on any starting point for pneumatology has been amply borne out in Cartledge’s analysis of P+c pneumatological priorities and is reinforced in the responses of some of Levison’s less appreciative roundtable partners. By employing the lens of Acts 2, or in the OT searching for outbursts of charismatic activity, as did Roger Stronstad, an intense, but more restricted and punctuated trajectory emerges that is familiar in charismatic pneumatology.\(^{764}\) The weight of P+c espoused theology is evidenced in Janet Everts’ response to Levison. ‘[W]hich is really more important to his thinking – the spirit that is breathed into Adam … or the Holy Spirit given to those who believe in the crucified and resurrected Christ?’\(^{765}\)

The concern of the current chapter has been with considering ecclesial P+c theology in relation to the work of the Spirit prior to conversion. It is unsurprising that P+c academic systematic theologian, Pugh, and the practical theologian, Milton, come to conclusions that support the case made by Levison and Macchia in important respects.

[M]ost Pentecostals limit the work of the Spirit to the confines of the Church: empowering and sending it to witness, and preparing the way by convicting people of sin, but not substantially involved in the cosmos at large.\(^{766}\)

In Western Europe and the UK in particular, there needs to be more [Pentecostal] dialogue with secularism, atheism, post-Christianity and other denominations. The question is not only whether God is present and working in other religions, but in those of no religion at all.\(^{767}\)


\(^{766}\) Pugh, *Studyguide*, 42.

That there is a need for a full account of the work of the Spirit outside of the ecclesia and for conversion praxis is clear. Cartledge’s view of the primacy of Acts 2 in P+c revivalistic metanarratives and its consequences rings true. While there is little doubt that the quiet ways of the Spirit in the Christian life are accommodated within espoused theology, there is a bias towards crisis experience. This has been demonstrated even where ‘an Enlightenment rationalist apologetic and various influences from the Reformed and Evangelical-Charismatic tradition’ predominate as in the Alpha course. These influences owe much to the Pauline understanding of the ‘Soteriological Spirit’ that been extensively considered in the highly influential work of the P+c scholar, Gordon Fee. However, even here, in relation to the role of the Spirit prior to conversion, further reasons can be found for ambiguities at an operant level.

At the outset of his summary Fee asserts that Paul’s examination of the Spirit in conversion is less than clear cut. ‘Paul’s statements about the role of the Spirit in salvation are primarily experiential and altogether ad hoc; thus they do not yield easily to a precise scheme as to the ordo salutis.’ There are several components present with a certain logic. ‘But beyond that everything is speculative.’ However, Paul does see a crucial role for the Spirit within conversion, which starkly limits the scope of a continuous experience of the Spirit from birth to new birth. ‘In three texts Paul distinguishes believers from non-believers in terms of the former having the Spirit, while the latter do not.’

Paul employs a range of images to describe the Spirit’s multifaceted interaction in conversion. Among these Spirit metaphors and on this occasion resonating with Levison, Fee finds in ‘life giving’ some continuity—‘that God lives and give life to all that lives is absolutely foundational to [Old Testament] biblical

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768 Heard, Alpha, 53-54, 36-46.
769 Fee, Presence, 847-860.
770 Ibid., 847-848.
771 Ibid., 855.
772 Ibid., 855-860. Fee lists: adoption; washing; rebirth; life-giving; sanctification, anointing; seal; down payment; and first fruits.
faith,” and it is the Spirit of life who brings about regeneration. If Fee is correct, Everts’ invitation to choose is based on a false dichotomy. There is ample evidence of process and steady ethical progress subsequent to conversion in the images of ‘fruit of the Spirit’ and that of ‘walking in the Spirit’, though the less frequently used ‘first fruits’ and ‘new birth’, do lend themselves to further contextualisation as extended metaphors in understanding process. Fee offers no challenge to the possibility of the accompaniment of the Spirit in extended conversion processes leading to varied encounters prior to conversion. But neither is there much to support it. In the evidence he assembles in relation to the Spirit in conversion, and his conclusion that Paul’s comments are ad hoc, imprecise, and invite speculation, Fee does little to reduce the need for supplementary loci in developing conversion praxis.

**Missiological Implications**

The concern of this thesis is restricted to the work of the Spirit up to conversion, not beyond it. In seeking to extend the paradigmatic dimensions of Paul’s experience to complex and particular conversion processes in the contemporary era, it is Peace rather than Fee who draws attention to the limited references to Paul’s conversion in the epistles. Where his conversion is mentioned in the epistles, it is punctiliar and unexpected but references to its miraculous aspects (light, voice, blindness) are absent. Moreover, despite the priority given by Paul to hearing the gospel in proclamation and being sealed with the Spirit at conversion, he notes that the spoken witness of others did not mediate the revelation of Christ he

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773 Ibid., 858.


775 See Peace, *Conversion*, 105-110, 219, 236, 250. A model of conversion is developed from Mark’s gospel and the accounts of the conversion of Paul. It is used by Drane above, though it not explicit elsewhere within the fx review. It supports both a process approach to evangelism and a focus on discipleship, while identifying the Spirit as key agent in conversion.


received, an assertion that is consistent with his initial encounter on the road to Damascus.

Narratives in the current research point to a praxis of encounter with the Spirit in which proclamation, via the media of small group, evangelistic course, sermon, reading, or personal dialogue may be instrumental but does not often constitute the immediate context, at least prior or proximate to conversion. Sung worship is the more likely congregational context, though still affecting only a minority. Equally, in Milton’s research, the congregational setting, presumably following preaching, was not the dominant context for people making a conversion commitment. Even when healing is taken into account, one occurrence of healing – of a baby’s blindness – that would be considered among P+c Christians to be a miraculous sign – affected two participants, but not the father of the child. Quite understandably, people had been praying in many different contexts and her mother did not point to a single turning point event. In Ben’s case, prayer for healing occurred within the Alpha course and that proclamatory setting could be considered as a context for his contemporary spiritual experience, though by the attributional criteria employed in this study, not encounter.

That conviction of sin is a role of the Spirit in proclamation is emphasised by Fee. Though often with the benefit of hindsight, sin and forgiveness are prominent enough in Milton’s interviews or the discussions around them to find a place within her model of shalom. Sin and guilt are rarely referenced explicitly in the current research, a feature shared with Cartledge’s Pentecostal study in which he comments that ‘in this generation the concept of sin is discussed less openly and frequently’. In all, Fee’s analysis suggests that the Pauline data focused on the point of conversion and beyond. It seems likely that some, though not all, of the tensions between espoused theology and the current examples of emerging contemporary praxis may be accounted for by more extended process and other features of the

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778 Milton, Shalom, 166-167.
779 Ibid., 211-214.
780 Cartledge, Testimony, 78. The notable exception in the current research was Sarah who spoke of strong feelings of guilt around the possibility of Christ needing to suffer for her.
social context. Nevertheless (and the empirical data on this is thin), that sung worship is a context for encounter preferred to that of proclamation may be a cause for concern. Equally, the apparently low awareness of sin throughout conversion processes in the current study, and in Cartledge’s Pentecostal congregation, cannot be easily dismissed.

Because of his focus, not much is made by Cartledge of mediation of the Spirit to individuals that bypasses the church and its spearhead personnel, or is prior to Spirit reception or to conversion. Both extended process and individual mediation can be seen in the account of the God-fearing Cornelius, who initially experiences encounter through internal/imaginative mediation in a distinct vision of an angel within an extended process. The angel’s instruction is prefaced with affirmation of his life of virtue (Acts 10:1–6). Cornelius had no reported prior contact with the church or its agents; from this initial, though by no means mundane, encounter, a process is put in train that leads to reception of the Spirit four days later. In the case of Saul, an encounter specifically linked to Jesus on the road to Damascus – afterwards to become the archetypal conversion experience – was a precursor to contact with Ananias three days later and appropriation of the Holy Spirit. In both cases there was an experience that bore a proximate relationship to later encounters mediated by the church or its agents.

There are particular dangers for those with revivalist values in undervaluing the Spirit’s activity from below, and in the mundane. The inclusive belief that all people have within them (in some sense) the Spirit of God from birth does not automatically open the gate to universalism; a new beginning at the cross is required for a critical development of those natural propensities, however well nurtured, to constitute having the Spirit and to achieve immortality. Celebrating the Spirit of life and virtue outside sacred walls does not mark out those who do so as ‘liberal’ or denigrating of Christ’s uniqueness. A life before Christ is not total darkness without the Holy Spirit. ‘The Old Testament material [on the Spirit] is

781 Levison, Filled, 217.
important because it establishes the basic features of the Spirit’s work’. Attention to the complementary pneumatologies of the two testaments leads to the conclusion that people can and do experience the Spirit of God from birth onwards, though this certainly falls short of the converted person’s experience of knowing the presence of the indwelling Spirit. Moreover, it is possible to accept both the relatively quiescent and the dramatically irruptive as experience of encounter with the same Spirit of God, and in so doing also allow for the absence of experiential encounter, though that absence does present pastoral issues within a tradition for which encounter is central.

Instead of the entirely invasive connotations of ‘intervention’, Macchia prefers the terms ‘transformation’ or ‘conversion’, preserving the notions of both continuity and discontinuity. Alongside intervention, Cartledge identifies ‘interaction’ as a separate mode, which he has explored elsewhere. He suggests that the phenomena associated with the Toronto Blessing as a ‘supernaturally natural’ interaction (as opposed to an intervention of the Spirit) working through altered states of consciousness (ASC) rather than suspending natural processes. He considers Peter’s rooftop vision (Acts 10:9–16) as an example and points to John Goldingay, who identifies ways including interaction alongside intervention that we experience God’s actions. Moreover, while the notion of interaction does not require only mundane experience, its implicit challenge to a dualistic supernatural/natural divide does make way for a more ordinary kind of encounter. Acts is a catalogue of the invasive and hardly the place to find evidence for the ‘low-level’, but, like Levison, Cartledge is alert to the less spectacular.

The mediation of the Spirit might just as well be understood through the mundane and the ordinary as through the spectacular, providing that it fulfils certain criteria, such as pointing to Christ and embodying an aspect of the gospel message in some sense.\footnote{Cartledge, \textit{Mediation}, 112.}

Without seeking to completely map Cartledge’s thinking onto that developed by Levison and Macchia, there are significant points of intersection. Each, in different ways, offers a challenge to the dichotomy between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ which is characteristic of P+c theology. They offer extensive views of the presence of the Spirit that allows for ‘interaction’, as well as ‘intervention’ or ‘invasion’, in considering experience of the Spirit. They open the possibility of ‘intensification’ or extension of the Spirit’s work in conversion or subsequent encounters.\footnote{Ibid., 65.} Levison does this by considering an alternative OT pneumatology; Cartledge (though this is not his primary concern), by demonstrating the limitations of a frame of reference for pneumatology dominated by Spirit reception of an Acts 2 type.

pantheism or even deism’. The praxis of discerning spirits in the current cultural context, alongside other issues raised will be considered below.

793 Schweizer, ‘Challenge’ 16.
8: TOWARDS A PRAXIS OF ENCOUNTER AND CONVERSION

The cultural turn away from church attendance, engagement with which is foundational to the approach of fx, has been recognized elsewhere as it has gathered pace in the latter half of the twentieth century with each generation in European countries becoming less religious than the last. This trend has given force to the problematisation of the topic of encounter in conversion and the development of the central research question focused on those who have little church background and who have been converted within the last decade. Such societal change and its missiological significance is reflected in a statement from the Lausanne Theology Working Group following a consultation in 2010.

In some urban, affluent and individualistic societies we see secular cultures emerge, where adherence to traditional or structured religion seems to evaporate. This does not mean that the search for meaning-making ceases. But people in such societies are not likely to enter easily into institutional Christian settings as these do not fit well with their quest for individualized authenticity. In such settings traditional evangelical expectations about the act and process of conversion are challenged. Becoming followers of Jesus will normally not happen instantly, but implies a lengthy process of receiving and integrating Christian faith and spirituality in meaningful ways. This means that Christians must live missionally alongside such seekers in friendly, non-threatening ways in genuine service, dialogue and encounters.

The central indication of this research for contemporary mission is that, for the P+c converts who told their stories and the churches they joined, it is difficult not to conclude that espoused theology across the tradition may be out of step with practice in ways which may make more difficult, rather than easier, the path of discipleship in the current era, and reduce the possibility of achieving a genuine (i.e. theory rich) missional praxis. In the search for a more fully formed pneumatological perspective, Macchia, Levison and Cartledge have pointed to areas of development.

Moynagh, Context, 73.
Voas, ‘Fidelity’, 165-167.
for a P+c missional pneumatology, supplementing one that is primarily derived from Luke–Acts, and specifically centred on the Acts 2 Pentecost event. It remains to take a number of steps towards praxis consistent with the multidisciplinary method employed: to place those pneumatological insights in a missional context with the help of missiological thinkers; to return to narratives in the light of theological inputs; then, on the basis of that synthesis, to identify areas where existing missional practice might be improved or supplemented.

**Missional pneumatology**

To place the theological reflection thus far within a missional context, it is proposed to engage a TAT framework explicitly used by Amos Yong in a recent short essay relating to third millennium, post-colonial missional environment.\(^\text{797}\) This is undergirded and supplemented by his broader thinking in a slightly earlier collection of material,\(^\text{798}\) in which he develops a ‘pneumatological imagination’ that informs his TAT approach. Concern with the third millennium global context is common to both the short essay and the longer book, and for part of the latter he shifts from the language of post-colonialism to the discourse of ‘post-Constantinianism and post-Christendom’ in the United States and incidentally the United Kingdom.\(^\text{799}\) Over the past (close to) two decades, Yong has been concerned with reconsidering Christian theology, and specifically pneumatology, from a missiological perspective;\(^\text{800}\) his missionally attentive approach to pneumatology, from a P+c perspective, provides a bridge from theology to praxis.

While Yong chooses to start from Acts 2, his uniquely inclusivist perspectives\(^\text{801}\) go beyond those of normative P+c pneumatologies in his treatment of


\(^{798}\) Yong, *Missiological*.

\(^{799}\) Ibid., Kindle location 4187.

\(^{800}\) Ibid., Kindle location 139.

\(^{801}\) Yong is at pains to retrieve ‘inclusivism’ from ‘contemporary charismatics’ to locate it within a predominantly ‘exclusivist’ CP tendency. (Ibid., Kindle location 2615.)
the Pentecost narrative within the *missio Spiritus*\(^{802}\) in at least two respects. Firstly, the affirmation of diversity as a result of the Spirit being poured on all flesh provides a ‘grounding’ for religious pluralism.\(^{803}\) Secondly, Spirit empowerment is for witness to the temporal ends of the earth, as well as its geographical range, requiring fresh thinking that responds to change within cultures over time if the gospel is to be faithfully communicated.\(^{804}\) The first element has been extensively examined by Yong. His constructive work on the latter has been more recent and less thorough but, unusually among P+c scholars, points towards a pneumatological (as opposed to simply pragmatic) basis for P+c contextual engagement in the minority world that as discussed in the context of fresh expressions, has been largely absent.\(^{805}\) Milton’s call for an answer to the question of ‘whether God is present and working in other religions, but in those of no religion at all’,\(^{806}\) anticipates Yong’s turn to the issue posed by post-Christendom even if his point of reference is, almost exclusively the USA rather than the UK and Europe.

**Starting with the Spirit**

Against this backdrop, Yong’s pneumatological imagination and a TAT approach allows him ‘to think creatively … particularly with the Nicene confession about the Spirit, in ways appropriate to the third-millennium global context and beyond.’ Within the third article of the Nicene Creed he considers the Spirit from four perspectives: ‘the Lord, the Giver of Life’; ‘Who proceeds from the Father’;

\(^{802}\) Ibid., Kindle location 370.

\(^{803}\) Ibid., Kindle location 1438.

\(^{804}\) This desire ‘to proclaim afresh the faith in each generation, led by the Holy Spirit’ is central not only to Pentecostals but to the Anglican ministry, and motivates the Fresh Expressions contextual church movement. Available: https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/declaration-asent (accessed 1 June 2018).


\(^{806}\) Milton, *Shalom*, 93.
‘Who with the Father and Son is Worshipped and Glorified’; ‘Who Spoke by the Prophets’.\textsuperscript{807}

In reflecting on ‘the Lord, the Giver of Life’, Yong explicitly finds common ground with Levison in his understanding of the breadth of the Spirit’s presence.\textsuperscript{808} Implicitly, there is recognition of the need for ‘a new kind of subsequence’, as championed by Macchia, and for continuity as well as discontinuity to be recognised. The Spirit’s work should not be treated as mainly worthy of comment when characterised by supernatural intervention, and ignored when less interruptive, experienced as interaction from alongside. The Spirit illuminates and encompasses the whole of life, rather than starting with the new birth, outside of which there is relative dearth and darkness. That illumination sometimes involves subtle interactions, including those only recognised in retrospect.

Turning to the clause ‘Who Proceeds from the Father’,\textsuperscript{809} Yong describes economies of the Spirit and the Son that, though related, are distinct and make it possible for him to envisage a

\begin{quote}
...pneumatological praxis [that] may have the capacity to reconcile all people ... to the Father according to the image of the Son even if the Trinitarian identity of God is not clearly perceived by those in other faiths not fully or formally initiated into the Christian church.\textsuperscript{810}
\end{quote}

Levison, too, cannot limit the Spirit only to Christians. By transposing ‘spirit’ for ‘grace’, he incorporates Rahner’s proposition that ‘grace permeates the creation from the start, not just from the incarnation’, and with it, the likelihood of the anonymous Christian. While Rahner’s terminology is widely considered as problematic,\textsuperscript{811} his description of ‘justified pagans’, who have ‘a real, albeit enexplicated [sic] or, if we

\textsuperscript{807} Yong, ‘I believe’, 24 - 33. Though the greater number of references are to the longer work, primacy is given to the short essay because of explicit employment of a TAT framework.
\textsuperscript{808} Ibid., 27 fn. 48.
\textsuperscript{809} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{810} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{811} For a Catholic and charismatic view see: Gabriel Flynn, \textit{Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 41- 43.
like to put it so, rudimentary faith’, could well describe some participants in the current study over a large part of their conversion journey. Yong rejects the term ‘anonymous Christian’ in deference to ecclesial sensitivities, but otherwise is not far from Rahner when he claims that ‘people may be encountered by the spirit of God apart from the church and hence may yet be drawn into the eschatological people of God’. However, that said, he is slightly further back in his ecclesial inclusivism than Congar, who ‘includes members who appear to be outside [the church]. They belong, invisibly and incompletely, but they really belong’. Within the space opened up by Levison, Yong offers further tangible points of departure for addressing the complex realities of the lives of the participants in this research, who have previously only minimally entertained the possibility of God.

Rather more briefly, Yong addresses the third main clause, ‘Who with the Spirit and the Son Together is Worshipped and Glorified,’ challenging what he sees as a tendency to treat pneumatology as an appendix to the person and work of the Son. ‘Spirit Christology must proceed methodologically as if both hands of the Father were equally definitive’. For Yong, ‘Christian pneumatology … charts new trajectories for Trinitarian theology … by inviting reassessment of Christology … among other traditional and newly emerging theological loci.’ Levison acknowledges a variety of valid pneumatological starting points including the outpouring of the Spirit (on all flesh), but he has chosen to work from the Spirit as a presence in individuals by virtue of God’s (creative) inbreathing, and the universal need for virtue and learning. These allow for the Spirit to work ‘Outside Sacred Walls’ and, as Cartledge has recognised, for ‘a diversity of religious experience from the mundane to the spectacular, with all the variety in between’. Macchia has constrained the scope of Levison’s OT perspective and in so doing, issued a warning

813 Yong, *Missiological*, Kindle location 5656 fn. 497.
814 Cited in Flynn, *Congar*, 42.
815 Yong, ‘I believe’, 32.
818 Cartledge, *Mediation*, 75.
to that of Yong’s inclusivism. ‘The reality of the cross shows that one cannot move in an uninterrupted way…to the gift of immortal embodiment…[P]reservation of the discontinuity helps to protect us from unbridled utopian enthusiasm.’

In an ‘interim conclusion’, Yong makes only a brief reference to the phrase, ‘Who Spoke by the Prophets’, using the opportunity to consider the post-apostolic role of prophecy and the ongoing role of the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit. Yong employs TAT to ‘retrieve and elaborate on the third article of the Creed both by being anchored in in the revelation of Christ and by being open to wherever and however the wind of God blows.’

A wider view of encounter

The method of starting with the Spirit in an environment where the Christian religion is increasingly on the margins has also been welcomed by the evangelical Robert K. Johnston, specifically engaging Yong’s inclusivist pneumatological thinking in his work on prevenient encounters, prior and proximate to conversion. Johnston points to significant implications for missional and ecclesial praxis of recognising a more extensive view of encounter and identifies four benefits of his perspective for evangelical praxis, each of which merit extension to the specifics of the P+c environment. Firstly, his wider view roots encounters (and here he appears to focus specifically on those mediated by creation) in the Spirit’s current activity, not merely as traces of God’s past revelation. Within the charismatic context it will result in experiences, mediated through creation, culture, and conscience being eligible for recognition as genuine encounter, rather than relegated to a class of generic religious experience because they lack specific Christological content.

Secondly, his perspective will challenge the unduly limited view of God’s activity outside sacred spaces. Thirdly, increased recognition of God’s wider revelatory presence will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Spirit of God. For charismatic practice this may well contribute to softening the artificial separation between natural and supernatural, and with it affirming an interactive work of the

822 He talks of ‘inner being’ as an alternative category to conscience. Ibid., 9.
Spirit. Finally, Johnston highlights the increased importance of discernment if the sphere of operation of the Spirit is to be widened. This is clearly an issue not only for the theology of religions but is a necessary part of the problematisation of this thesis, which recognises the limitations in the contemporary era of Christological essentialisation of encounter and the dangers for ecclesial practice and for individual lives of an unsupported and unchallenged attribution of encounter.

**Discernment**

Discerning the spirits has been part of the problematic of this research and the absence of any direct theological or pastoral critique of narrative data has been mitigated by the active role of congregations in the selection of participants. Most, though not all, of their encounters would have been subject to what Archer has described as a 21st century hermeneutical process of validation of narratives of encounter as, at least, ‘appropriate’ Christian experience. Yong claims that his discernment is missiologically focused, and Johnston is concerned with encounters prior and proximate to conversion, within the contemporary world of ‘“postmodernity” where spirituality is considered a public virtue’. He is not surprised at the disconnect between church and world, nor that culture is largely ‘post-Christian’, given that ‘Christians have too often been pouring cold water on that spark [of awareness of God’s presence]’. He does consider complementary discernment criteria that may have a less extended gestation period than Yong’s longitudinal discernment process. However, in his proposal for listening to Scripture and to the tradition while reserving long-term judgement, from Johnston’s point of view, Yong has most to offer praxis. Johnston considers that determining the validity of others’ religious experiences is an exercise in practical theology at an operant level, rather than an intuitive impulse or a criteria based process.

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823 Ibid., 207–209.
824 Johnston, Presence, xvi.
825 Ibid., xvii.
827 Ibid., p. 213.
Spiritual discernment has been an acknowledged issue for Yong. He is unable to make sense of the assertion that discernment of spirits is a purely intuitive exercise and is sceptical of supernaturalist claims. He sees greater potential in a spiritual discernment that is a dynamic process attuned to observing phenomena over time, employing a range of physical, cognitive, and affective sensibilities. Yong compares the distinct gulf between the Holy Spirit and other spirits in (normative) Pentecostal theology, with the much more blurred lines of practice in third millennium contexts ‘where “principalities and powers” are never unambiguously good or bad’ so that manifestations require discerning on a case-by-case basis. In this, he may well see a more distinct gulf between classical and contemporary perspectives than is the case. For instance, Warrington, in articulating the normative/espoused tradition, talks about the possibility of a ‘framework with an appreciation of the role of the Spirit [that] can provide a more appropriate context [than one which is rationalistic] for discerning and analysing supernatural phenomena’. 828

Understandably, Yong’s position has become a focus for criticism as well as appreciation. Ott is critical of the ambiguities that, lacking a Christological anchor, characterise his discernment process,829 and Thiselton considers that he has been too readily seduced by postmodernism.830 These challenges are not without weight. In effect, Yong has bracketed soteriological and Christological concerns for more than a decade and, for practice as well as normative theology, resolution of these issues is perhaps overdue. Yong is well aware of his commentators who have reservations,831 but considers that the preoccupation with a Christological apparatus for discernment reflects anxieties about how to understand the fundamental reality of Christian faith (that starts with the Spirit) in the multiple contexts of Christian mission.832

831 Yong, *Missiological*, Kindle location 5658.
832 Yong, Amos ‘Christological Constants in Shifting Contexts: Jesus Christ, Prophetic Dialogue and the Missio Spiritus in a Pluralistic World’, in Stephen B.
It may be that the call for stronger Christological focus in discernment is justified, and that Yong missed an opportunity in developing his contemporary discernment with too little reference to the equally pluralistic first century. Dunn finds that a Spirit-led mission to pre-Christendom society was marked by novel and ambiguous experiences. In those circumstances (as in the contemporary setting where non-churched converts lack Christian vocabulary) claims to experience of the Spirit needed ‘checking and evaluating’. Dunn identifies a Pauline (first century) theological framework that overlaps with Yong’s (21st century) longitudinal perspective, but also included the sophisticated criterion of the ‘sense of sonship’, and ‘confession of Jesus as Lord’. Somewhere along the conversion–initiation process, both were component in discerning spirits in a context no less plural than the contemporary world.

Dunn is not seeking to marginalise such experiences, which ‘may be the key to Christianity’s growth in the wider world and essential for its revitalization in the West’, even if they ‘need to be discerned and evaluated as to their source and the community’s benefit’. For Dunn, ‘expecting the unexpected’ and discernment ‘go hand in hand’. Dunn and Warrington are focused on encounters that are experienced in an interventionist mode. Those that are mediated in the ordinary and experienced in an interactive mode may merit light touch criteria such as ‘pointing to Christ and embodying some aspect of the gospel’, as suggested by Cartledge, particularly if the issue is more in helping converts to recognise sparks and echoes than rejecting counterfeit or demonic phenomena.

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Ibid., Kindle locations 423-424

Ibid.

Ibid., Kindle locations 422, 425.

Cartledge, *Mediation*, 112
New forms of faith and life

In seeking to valorise more mundane encounters, Johnston reinforces the case for the current study. His research focus has been on popular culture, even if – perhaps because of his North American location – few of the stories he tells are of people with as little prior contact with the Christian faith as many of the participants in the current research. Johnston lends his weight, to the main force of Yong’s proposal for a deeply pneumatological missiology even though, given his limited attention thus far to the Western post-Christendom context, Yong’s constructive proposal for praxis in this area offers, by his own admission, no more than hints.

Yong’s imagination is formed within the P+c tradition; not only by his pentecostal background but also because of choosing as a starting point of Acts 2 where the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, and that the Spirit is for all times. But he moves beyond conventional revivalistic expectations in several ways, engaging Stanley Hauerwas as a ‘colony missiologist’ to propose that the church will engage from the margins while living as resident aliens; sometimes in survival mode rather than experiencing growth and expansion. In his (limited) search for enhanced praxis, Yong explicitly draws on the missiological thinking of Stuart Murray who has been a formative contributor to the fx discussion in the UK. As a result, he looks for a prescription that is ‘less a set of missional programmes or initiatives than a flexible and dynamic way of being church and a discerning mode of operation that pays attention to the contextual factors that inevitably shape the church’s concrete engagement with the world’. That mode of operation, as yet undiscovered by Yong, is also absent from Hauerwas, according to Moynagh. ‘How can Christians counter the powers in faithfulness to the story of Jesus when they have no structured means for doing so?’

The argument for thoroughgoing contextualisation for the minority world has been more characteristic of fx than the P+c tradition. In the introduction to MsC

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839 Yong, Missiological, Kindle location 4256.
840 Ibid., 4368.
841 Moynagh, Context, 58 fn. 7, 197 fn. 2.
842 Yong, Missiological, Kindle locations 4309–4400.
843 Moynagh, Life, 192-193, Context, 135-137, 379.
Cray summarised the case for contextual church. ‘Our missionary context requires a new inculturation of the gospel within our society. The theology and practice of inculturation or contextualization is well established in the world Church, but has received little attention for mission in the West…Church has to be planted, not cloned’. The societal changes that Yong has begun to explore have, in part, been described by Moynagh as an ecclesial turn. In response to the movement of the church to the edges of society, ‘[m]ission-shaped church is a hypothesis that God will use new contextual churches to help the church to become more relevant and available as it takes shape within all the settings of life.’ Yong lists a variety of ‘emergent-type’ examples from monastic communities to café church. Rather than homogeneous, the required forms of church are diverse with an operational mode that is anti-institutional.

This missiological imagination aligns closely with Cray’s vision for fx when he, like Yong, talks of the two hands of God. Both the Son as a foundation and model of missional praxis, and the Spirit who leads mission and energises a local and prophetic foretaste of the future are indispensable. Deeply involved in both fresh expressions and the Pentecostal and charismatic tradition, Cray advances the argument.

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844 CofE, MsC, xii, Moynagh, Context, 151-167; See also Lausanne, Haslev.
845 Yong, Missiological, Kindle locations 2205–6, 2636, 4348.
846 Ibid., Kindle locations 4367, 4351-4357.
848 Ibid., 6-8.
849 Ibid., 4-6.
Missional imagination is possible because of the presence of the Spirit … The dreams, visions and prophecies … poured out at Pentecost are the gifts which equip missional leaders to plant churches which are provisional foretastes of the future. These gifts take form with greater diversity than some Charismatic circles allow, but they give substance to the promise of missional imagination … If empowerment for witness beyond one’s comfort zone is of the essence of the Pentecostal gift, then missional imagination is the key to discernment.\textsuperscript{850}

That is not to say that Cray is satisfied with the fx offering.

\textquote{[W]e find it much easier to plant something culturally appropriate than something prophetic… If we are to plant such churches we must pay close attention to context, we must accept that we will probably not know the end at the beginning, and above all we will have to be two handed.}\textsuperscript{851}

Among his vague hints and adopted proposals, Yong also does make a further constructive contribution, reflecting on the possibility not only of contextualised churches but of contextual conversion.

Once the seductiveness of the colonial (and Christendom) world view has been exposed, we can see the difference between genuine conversion to Christ that invites converts to explore how to live as Christians in their own context, as opposed to proselytism that requires them to give up their inherited cultural identities for another one.\textsuperscript{852}

Recognition that conversion may take different shapes connects closely with the problematisation of Dadswell’s research above and reinforces the need for narrative reporting of conversions. Reconceptualisation of mission requires a more complex understanding of conversion.

\textsuperscript{850} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{851} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{852} Yong, Missiological, Kindle locations 4319-4321.
Instead of missions understood only in terms of proclamation there is a reconception of mission as embodying the gospel in lifestyle and works of service ... spiritual practices, and relationships ... The result is an emphasis on process rather than on documenting convert ‘decisions’.\textsuperscript{853}

Yong’s concern with process as in tension with commitment decisions should not be glossed over. Much of British evangelicalism, as well as global Pentecostalism embraces a rhetoric of success that is prone to make claims of gains which are not tested in the longer term or subject to appropriate provisos.\textsuperscript{854} It has contributed to the focus within fx on the language of discipleship, ‘not to count converts but to create disciples.’\textsuperscript{855} This is in contrast to assertions of ‘decisions for Christ’ or overly certain declarations of ‘salvations’, where premature attempts are made to identify what is, as described by Packer above, a hidden process leading to a moment of regeneration. That is not to say that measured celebration of faith commitments, or rigorous evaluation is inappropriate, but to emphasise the need to apply longer term as well as shorter term measures to missional activities, and also to admit to failed expectations. Yong’s missiological imagination, shaped by a theology of the third article, has led him to a vision that he considers to be appropriate and understandable to our age, and that suggests further points of development for praxis. His work on the response to the ecclesial turn is at too early a stage to be mapped on to the more developed thinking within fx but his direction of travel is significant, as his imagination looks towards ‘new forms of faith and life’\textsuperscript{856} and to a practice of prophetic dialogue.\textsuperscript{857}

Prophetic dialogue

The ‘new forms of Christian faith and life’ that Yong looks for include missional practice that is dialogical rather than aggressive,\textsuperscript{858} and which he sees characterised by the ‘emergent-type’ church.\textsuperscript{859} In this he is following Walter

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\textsuperscript{853} Ibid., Kindle locations 4358-4361.
\textsuperscript{854} Warner, \textit{Evangelicalism}, 85-86, 134-137.
\textsuperscript{855} Hollinghurst, \textit{Evangelism}, 108.
\textsuperscript{856} Yong, 4408
\textsuperscript{857} Yong, ‘Christological’, 19.
\textsuperscript{858} Anderson, \textit{Introduction}, 214.
\textsuperscript{859} Ibid., Kindle locations 2205–6, 2636, 4348.
Hollenweger, who after a century of Pentecostal mission advocates an evangelistic model based on the interactions between Peter and Cornelius. In that model some mutual learning takes place, though it need not totally displace evangelism which is assertive or assured. For further elucidation Yong points to Stephen Bevans and Richard Schroeder, who have proposed a development of missional communication suited to the third millennium. They characterise mission as dialogue with a bold humility that includes prophetic deeds and words. As well as speaking against (without words as a contrast community, and with words in advocacy) the prophetic role is fulfilled in speaking forth (without words as witness and with words as proclamation). Yong has raised the P+c understanding of contemporary prophecy in his discussion of the third article. Dialogue with a prophetic element has a specific resonance within the tradition but he does not develop or comment on this in his contribution to the ecumenical discussion. His concern is that in a pluralistic environment, actions may be more important than words.

It is left to Kirsteen Kim in her review of Luke–Acts, to suggest a variety of prophetic and transformative roles as component in prophetic dialogue, rather than overemphasising words or deeds. She identifies Levison with a tendency among commentators to restrict the prophetic power of the Spirit to social justice. Nevertheless, she considers that ‘mission as “prophetic dialogue” well describes a theology of Christian mission for today’, though she finds it less satisfactory as a description of the unique mission of Jesus Christ. Even when Bevans and Schroeder consider the role of trail guide as an image of prophetic dialogue there is no hint of distinctively charismatic possibilities, though they describe it as a role that

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862 Bevans, Constants, 348–395.

863 These two latter terms are seen as substantially equivalent to Bosch’s use of the word evangelism. Bevans, Constants, 252–253.


requires ‘gifts of discernment and prophecy … a ministry of clearly showing the way’. 866 When they turn to the Thessalonian epistles, they find support both for caring dialogue and for prophetic proclamation, but do not choose a charismatic reading of the text. Such a reading can be provided by Fee, who considers that 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 contains the earliest NT record of the charismatic nature of the first Christian communities, with its instruction to ‘not treat prophecies with contempt’. 867

There is a case to be made that much of Yong’s missiological contribution can already be found among those working in the context of Europe and in the sphere of fx: Paas, Murray, Cray, and most of all Moynagh. Nevertheless, Yong speaks with a distinct P+c accent (though often does less than necessary to offer resolution to the tensions he exposes), and in doing so makes a substantive contribution to a minority world missiology for the post-Christendom era. He is more explicit about encounter than these others, and engages with existing P+c perspectives by highlighting the issue of discerning spirits, essential to any wider praxis of encounter particularly that which occurs outside sacred walls.

867 Fee, _Presence_, 55–62. Fee takes prophecies here to simply refer to spontaneous utterances.
Connecting the voices

Competing theological voices (T4V) have been detected throughout this thesis: in a formal proposal from the academy; in the normative and espoused contributions from within the P+c tradition, sometimes connected to a wider evangelicalism and to fx; and in operant theology, less distinct but implied by the missional and ecclesial practices evident in the stories of research participants. In a search for a developed praxis, Yong’s missional pneumatology has illuminated the previous theological reflection from the perspective of the still developing cultural turn. Yong’s analysis of the third article of the Creed has affirmed a reconsideration of the role of the Spirit throughout space and time. By considering alternative starting points for understanding the Spirit, and reading anew the Pentecost narrative, a fuller understanding has emerged of continuity as well as discontinuity between creation and new creation. Johnston has explored encounters through creation, culture, and conscience. These, even when mediated in the ordinary and outside sacred walls, do not need to be considered as second-class incidents when they initially exhibit a pneumatological rather than Christological locus. In the changed contemporary environment, revised missional practices are required, including those connected with new forms of church life. Given the degree of reorientation involved, the ambiguities of experience, and the blurred lines of practice it is unsurprising that a modified, more flexible theological framework for spiritual discernment is required; though it may not be possible to jettison Christological or soteriological criteria.

In this process, a substantial body of theory has been assembled to connect with the empirical data from cases. This will be pursued both as a dialectic interaction between formal theology and operant theology, as evidenced in practices; also as an engagement between the texts of Scripture and the tradition, and the texts of lives, following Anderson’s ‘Christopraxis’. Its adoption sharpens the empirical contribution in a ‘return to cases’, with due regard to the gestalt of the stories as told, thematic analysis, and detailed consideration of small parts of narratives; all in the

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light of theoretical inputs and broad observation of P+c and fx praxis. It resonates, too, with the notion of theology from ‘above’ and ‘below’, that valorises the interactive mode as well as the invasive. It is expected that the operant voice can be deduced from the text of lives, with some certainty where practices are made explicit in PINs, and more tentatively, where implicit in events or narrative sequences.

**The wider work of the Spirit in lives**

If the presence of the Spirit is identified in the outer reaches of extended conversion processes, some complexities in narratives make more sense. Catherine had always considered herself to be a Christian, but one who had only intermittently and partially pursued virtue. Soteriological discourse might well have seen this as self-righteousness; she recognised herself that thinking she would ‘get to heaven’ by doing good deeds was inaccurate. However, several years on from her conversion, in trying to put together a timeline, she still described herself as a Christian in that part of her life, albeit a ‘baby Christian’. Nevertheless, she needed to be ‘converted’ – to become ‘fully-fledged’. In reflecting on the inconsistencies of her life as lived, in her own analysis she resorted to pathway vocabulary – ‘still growing and learning’ – though there was little sense of quest prior to conversion in her story.869 Michael attempted to explain to his parents that by deciding to be baptised as a believer he was not rejecting his paedobaptist history. In doing so, he stressed continuity;870 even through issues with alcohol and relationship breakdown, he just wanted to be the ‘best version of me’.

Significant insight was provided in a PIN in which Anthony recounted that during a difficult time at work he was asked by his manager what accounted for his improved emotional resilience. His response was that there seemed to be ‘a grace’ on him. This was years rather than months before the end of his conversion process, but he insisted that it was an accurate account of the vocabulary he used. Overlap between grace and the Spirit is evident in Levison’s thinking, and has been mentioned elsewhere by Yong and Macchia. Grace, specifically prevenient grace,

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870 which was limited to baptism as a child and involvement in the Boys’ Brigade in childhood
can be considered as a pneumatological operation\textsuperscript{871} and, in Dunn’s view, ‘Grace …
is a term almost synonymous with “Spirit” in Paul’s letters.’\textsuperscript{872} Anthony had ‘grace’
on him some years before his extended pathway to conversion was complete. His
story may have fitted less well with espoused theology if he had said that ‘the Spirit
was on him’ at that stage.

While soteriological inclusivity resulted in criticism of Congar, and continues
to do so of Yong, it does help to make sense of the puzzlement evinced by some of
those who took part in this research. They had, over extended periods, recognised
faith within themselves even if it was ‘rudimentary’ and ‘unexplicated’. Jasmine,
alongside her experiences of rejection, addiction, and imprisonment, found aspects
of continuity with her belief in ‘Jehovah’ as a child, which were in evidence as she
struggled, in her new P+c context, to understand a Trinitarian God. In most cases,
when directly asked, the ‘Trinitarian identity of God [was] not clearly perceived’. If
a degree of distinction between the economies of Son and Spirit\textsuperscript{873} is accepted as
appropriate in an increasingly post-Christian culture, these narrators could be
understood to have received the touch of ‘the second hand of the Father’,\textsuperscript{874} over
extended conversion pathways.

**Starting with the Spirit in lives**

Support for the proposal of starting from the discourse of the Spirit in
missional dialogue is found particularly in the preference of participants to speak of
‘God’ rather than Jesus (Christ) or the (Holy) Spirit. God as ‘Father’ was never
mentioned. If Dabney is justified in naming the Spirit as the ‘possibility of God’,
then there is a hidden discourse of the Spirit across the narratives. Had Anthony
acquired the skills to name the emergent and even ambiguous influence he was
experiencing, they may have helped him to find an alternative narrative device to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[871] Joseph W. Cunningham, *John Wesley’s Pneumatology: Perceptible Inspiration*
  (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 27, 53–54.
\item[872] James D. G. Dunn, ‘Towards’, [337].
\item[873] Or at least a phasing in the discourse of each.
\item[874] Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*
  (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 161; Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-
\end{footnotes}
that of ‘pretending’ he was a Christian. He had aspired to goodness throughout his adult life; over several years he had engaged with the Bible and spiritual reading, initially to encourage his wife and subsequently for himself. It is possible to see his extended journey as a pneumatologically empowered, long-term and increasing experience of the Spirit. Understanding his behaviour negatively, as pretence, could be viewed as accommodating to the narrative of darkness and worthlessness prior to conversion in common soteriological discourse.

Discussion of the cultural turn – away from Christian belief and church practice – is beyond the scope of this research; though the turn itself is acknowledged by conversation partners and in a focus on third millennium converts with little or no church background. In the research, where belief was found in the possibility of God, it was most often not strongly connected to the Christian story. Trinitarian terms were rarely used by narrators; and in only a handful of cases was there more than vague Christological awareness in stories of encounter prior or proximate to conversion. Where Christ or the Spirit was mentioned, titles were used haphazardly. Most often narrators simply talked of God. However, given that they were frequently speaking from a position of several years’ growth in faith, it would be unwise to leap to the conclusion that their language is indicative of a vague theism unanchored in Christian theology, unless that failing is to be attributed to the contemporary P+c churches from which they came. A likely suggestion is that earlier experiences may have been pre-conceptual, and subsequently mentors and pastors – at least in the ten churches from where these narratives originate – are not overly concerned with Trinitarian categories, and that God may be accepted as appropriate discourse in operant theology as well as by converts to speak of continuing, if imprecise, experience of the Spirit.

Steve, the trainee evangelist said, ‘Well, for us Pentecostals it’s all the Spirit’, when he was invited to clarify his dramatic encounter in Trinitarian terms.

This resonates with the conclusions of Cartledge from his exploration of classical Pentecostal ordinary theology, that consideration should be given to adopting an explicitly Trinitarian grammar within oral worship liturgy, and separately co-opts Yong. Cartledge, Testimony, 143–148, 180.
The Spirit in lives from birth to new birth

A few research participants were able to identify experiences of the possibility of God from their early years. Susan had known a supportive invisible presence forty years before she recognised ‘God and Jesus’. Gemma had felt the closeness of God in the rosary taught to her by the family maid, and Sarah had seen the kindness of Jesus in the eyes of her mother’s boyfriend. Even the atheist, Steve, with no church background, suggested a possible awareness of God in his childhood interest in astronomy. Others pointed to more recent hints and nudges that, in retrospect, they considered may have been a prevenient work of the Spirit.

Conversely, there are some who told of no such incidents. Richard, who blamed God for his grandfather’s painful death from asbestosis, experienced no encounter until an eventful Easter weekend, proximate to his conversion. Charlotte had only a single experience of the reality of God, and Karen was to all intents and purposes tabula rasa in terms of encounter until well into her small group career. Missional practice supported extended journeys with the Spirit in a number of ways. On the fringes of the same congregation, both Andy and Anthony offered practical skills in serving the church community over several years. In another church, at an early stage in their conversion processes, each of Lauren and Karen were invited to help plan small group worship.

In the context of a dominant ecclesial narrative of discontinuity, which finds strong P+c support, there is a need to account for aspects of pneumatological continuity, such as found by Kim in Luke–Acts. This continuity is evidenced in the Spirit’s agency throughout life histories, and interactive mode of operation that has been described by Macchia as the Spirit working from below, and is intertwined with enhanced understandings of conversion, both as a process and in its multidimensional nature. In several cases it was possible to see experience of pneumatological continuity contributing to complexity in narratives. People in Andy’s church told him that they knew he was a Christian before he did. Gemma recounted three PINs, spanning several years, each of which may have been the point

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877 However, he did not recount any PINs in support; this claim may have been an active reconstruction.

878 Kim, ‘Jesus’, 45.
at which she ‘said “Yes” to God’. Anthony ‘pretended’ to be a Christian, but gradually found he wasn’t pretending any more. Some narratives evidenced implicit multidimensional understandings of conversion, where relationships or beliefs were out of step with behaviour or emotional experience. For Alistair, conversion built towards a straightforward decision which simply required behavioural activation of pre-existing beliefs.

The obvious discontinuities of inherited soteriological discourse were generally absent. Only Nic offered a date for conversion, references to sin were completely absent from the interviews, and only Lauren and Sarah mentioned the issue of guilt. Daniel, when attempting to construct a timeline, said, ‘I can’t even remember when I became a Christian’ and, like others, used his baptism and the age of his child as chronological markers. Even among Alpha graduates, a prayer of repentance and commitment was not always mentioned, though its use is a central part of the programme. The hermeneutical inference is not that these commitment prayers did not have a place in ecclesial praxis, but that their failure to emerge in PINs suggests that within the gestalt of narratives they are not of primary significance.

Operational modes of the Spirit in lives

The work of the Spirit outside of the congregation has been a major thread in the theological discussion. The world in all its diversity – both created and cultural – alongside conscience and intuition will provide contexts for encounter. An interactive mode of the Spirit, recognised as authentic, will allow for experience of God in the less dramatic. The dominant narrative of punctiliar conversion, and relatively dramatic Christological encounter at that point, implies a single operational mode of the Spirit that is interventionist – an invasion by the transcendent – with an emphasis on the Spirit from ‘above’, rather than from ‘alongside’ or ‘below’. This undergirds a discourse of the supernatural that provides a sheen to some activities, which it does not give to those that are experienced in a more interactive mode. If the Spirit is operative in parallel modes of intervention and

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879 See: Cartledge, Testimony, 78.
interaction – the latter in some way incorporating both cause and effect, and human decision making – the premium placed on suspension of natural processes can be reduced. Some converts experienced ‘low level’ but nevertheless significant experiences in the ‘mundane’, including those who needed help to recognise the activity of the Spirit. Andy retrospectively found in his accidents at work, ‘God incidences’. Michelle described ‘going cold’ when significant connexions were made in spiritual conversation, a feeling similar to that she experienced when listening to a particularly good singer in a TV competition. Daniel took time to connect his experience of acceptance and family warmth with God’s presence.

**Life as context for encounter**

Yong suggests that different vehicles for experiencing the Spirit may lead to a variety of pneumatological reflections, and it seems likely that encounters within nature or through the visual arts, or where pre-critical emotions are involved, might lead to interpretations of encounter that are different to those framed by the words of worship songs. The narrow focus of this research provides little scope for reflecting on such a possibility, but it may suggest a starting point for interpreting Anne’s frustration at the Alpha awayday. Having previously encountered God in the open air and in reflecting on artwork, she failed to experience encounter in the confines of the small group, whereas her husband found the event transformative. It seems possible that this may be a situation where, having become attuned to visual and numinous experiences of the Spirit in a particular context, a more word-based mediation was difficult for her to access.

The hegemonic claim of sung worship and its underpinning will tend to restrict the scope for an operant theology that valorises a varied mediation of the Spirit. Nevertheless, Warrington does acknowledge alternative contexts outside the church. The emergence of what has become known as creative worship was illustrated in the narratives by artwork being produced during one service, and the dramatic enactment of hammering nails into timber at the Good Friday event attended by Richard. However, this latter impactful experience did not merit
Christopher experiencing ‘echoes of Pentecost’ through a Radio 4 programme was the closest event to encounter through culture. Anthony, when talking of the influence of a particular song in his teens, was careful to point out that its significance was emotional but not religious.

Prophetic dialogue in lives

Hospitable dialogue contributed to the prominence of the dimension of ‘belonging’ across the narratives. Those conversations, at all stages of journeys, included moments of specific as well as more general insight. Across the cases, PINs of ‘prophetic words’ were more frequent than those of prayers for healing. Two of the narratives, those of Amy and Christopher, featured conversations in which they received advice that helped them ascribe their experience to encounter, though neither described the experience as ‘prophetic’. Amy asked why she cried when she heard contemporary worship music and was introduced to an understanding of the dual modes of the Spirit. Christopher enquired about his failure to experience encounter and subsequently experienced a ‘sudden dawning’. Amy only recognised the night time comfort she received as originating from the Holy Spirit when that possibility was suggested by people from the church. Lauren had attributed her tears in church services and small group meetings entirely to her own emotionality until a woman reached out to her during a worship service and suggested that they might be a response to the Spirit.

Anne, who had several previous outdoor encounters, found her own way to a church where it was common for art to be worked on during services. In conversation with the artist following the service, she was invited to comment on the

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880 A further example, involving reflection on a picture was part of a PIN from Becky in the pilot study. It was the moment that ‘I noticed [that] I had God in my life’.

881 These two conversations were with professional ministers, which was an infrequent occurrence in PINs in this study. This contrasts with Finney’s ecumenical research in which he found that ministers were cited, without direct questioning, as the main influence in conversion in 17% of cases, and in 43% as an important supporting factor. Non-professional church members were the main partners in dialogue across this research. (Finney, Finding Faith, 51–59.)

882 This is sometimes described as prophetic art, and its motivation is often to provide for the mediation of the Spirit.
meaning for her of the partially completed work and, the following week, she was given the finished painting. It provided salient insight on her conversion process to the extent that she included showing the picture as part of her initial narrative. During his conversion process, her husband, Alistair, experienced a more conventional ‘prophetic word’ in an evening service, which formed part of his initial narrative. Matthew’s one significant experience of encounter, well into or possibly beyond the conversion process, involved an impression received in prayer. This stimulated dialogue and research, leading him to conclude that he had experienced encounter while praying for the successful outcome of their pregnancy.

The dominance of the relational dimension is evidence of hospitable practices, but it is possible that these are pragmatic and intuitive strategies that fall short of the requirement for reflection, and for theory-ladenness, to be considered praxis. On the other hand, it is possible that a pneumatological missional theology, substantially in advance of that espoused by the tradition, is informing praxis. The lack of prominence of soteriological and Christological categories, evidenced by the absence of talk of sin and repentance and failure to identify encounters as being with Jesus Christ, is difficult to align with the normative voice evidenced in statements of faith. Alpha is designed to implement a broad evangelical and charismatic normative theology, and there were frequent references to group dialogue. Nevertheless, however helpful the course has been in facilitating the conversion process, there are few details of its content included in narratives, beyond that things subsequently ‘made sense’. There was even less reference to the propositional content of weekly ‘talks’ in local churches, though a number of appreciative references were made to them. As well as reflecting a movement from proclamation as sermon to the assertive, and (minimally) dialogic, form of the evangelistic course, other factors may affect the low occurrence of preaching as a context for encounter. It could arise from participants becoming involved in unfamiliar ‘institutional Christian settings’ late in (or subsequent to) the conversion process. It may also be affected by an

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883 The opportunity to ask questions and engage in dialogue was frequently mentioned.

emphasis on sung worship as a specific locus for encounter, a context which was cited more often, though still infrequently, by participants.

**Discerning the spirits in lives**

Problematic aspects of discerning the spirits outside of Christological and soteriological normativity have been evident throughout this discussion, but they have not generally emerged in the narratives. Ben, who had yet to experience encounter to his satisfaction, was the only participant to advance criteria for its evaluation. Others, who had experienced initially ambiguous phenomena, described the process of ascription in terms of gradual realisation, sometimes with help from dialogue partners. There is no evidence of the sharp dualism critiqued by Yong though, even if unlikely, that may be because little discernment being exercised or that the details of these stories of encounter are not part of pastoral conversation or public testimony.

On at least three occasions, experiences that were, pre-critically, assumed to be of dead relatives were subsequently reinterpreted as encounters with the Spirit. Julie was helped by a conversation with a hospital chaplain; Anne’s perceptions changed as she looked at and read the inscription on a statue of Jesus. Deborah decided that the feelings she experienced as a child were similar to those she experienced on Alpha and decided that both were prompted by the Holy Spirit. Some participants gave the same level of attribution to spiritual experiences that would probably be classified as of ‘occult’ origin by normative P+c theologies, as to those that occurred in Christian worship services. One participant told of a friend who was able to provide her with helpful and reassuring messages from dead relatives, prior

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886 This is one of several issues which could have been illuminated by direct conversation with church leaders had follow up enquiries not have threatened the anonymity of participants.
to her conversion; another consulted a medium when grieving over a family member’s death.887

By and large, long-term assessment of the fruit of encounter seems to have met the need in these cases, with one significant exception. Olivia’s story could have been designed as a case study in the potential problems of bracketing the Christological agenda in favour of a pneumatologically-led trajectory. Over at least two years she had continued to ascribe her occasional intense experiences, during sung worship and corporate prayer in a large church, to the same ‘higher power’ she had experienced in childhood. For her, the exclusive truth claims of the Bible were highly problematic, and her inability to accept them had stalled the conversion process. She was increasingly sceptical of the advice of her pastor who told her not to worry about the problem, and to maintain her involvement as a children’s worker and attendance at church. Olivia’s crisis was Christological rather than pneumatological. She insisted in the interview that, at that time, she was unlikely to find common ground between a biblical soteriology which for her was unambiguously exclusivist and her earlier experiences that connected her to her life story and to her parents, who had both died while she was in her early twenties, leaving her to care for a younger brother.

The call to develop a missional pneumatology that draws on insights from the majority world is particularly apposite at this point. In the diffuse spiritual milieu of Western post-Christendom, the issue of ambiguous presence and connection with the deceased, particularly among young people, has been a topic of interest for researchers,888 and has led to a highlighting of beliefs and emotions around relationships with dead relatives and family members. The dualistic framework that allowed binary ‘discerning of spirits’ has a poor fit with a theology from below that

887 Neither of these occurrences were proximate to the conversion process and such occult experiments did not continue. In the last case the narrator explained that, because of embarrassment, church leaders had not been told about this episode.

starts with the Spirit, and a praxis which accepts extended journeys to faith. Nevertheless, a holistic concern with the well-being of converts and the churches in which they find faith will no doubt drive the search for a discernment praxis that, where necessary, does not delay discernment until the eschaton.

Transparency in stories of lives

The return to cases illuminated from theological and missiological perspectives has allowed for a subtle and empathetic interpretation of highly particular narratives. By comparison between those narratives in the light of developing theological categories it has been possible to find commonalities which may be seen in the particularities of other stories. The transparent adoption of BNIM as a well-tried research method allows for the possibility of the addition of other cases to those in this initial research. Even without that formal approach, it will be possible for other reflective practitioners, working within a compatible epistemological framework, to find resonances in extended stories of all the events and experiences that were important for those who with little or no church background have recently become Christians.
A journey worth making.

Empirical analysis of the role of encounter in conversion has proved a worthy topic for research, particularly when considered in the light of ambiguities within Pentecostal and charismatic thinking, and with that wider developments in mission practice. The consequent exploration of praxis from the perspective of a shared missiological imagination has had the capacity to link each phase of the research. That creative insight has been demonstrated throughout in the interaction between P+c praxis and that of fx. Andy Lord, insightfully, proposed a contribution to P+c understanding of contextualisation from Cray and from Warren who have emerged as influential within the development of fx. The literature review provided background to propose to the P+c community in a published article the benefit of a conversation between P+c and fx praxis. P+c perspectives would benefit from recognising conversion as extended pathways as well as watershed event. Equally, fx praxis of ‘belonging believing, and behaving’ needed to accommodate the likelihood as well as the possibility of experiential encounter. That less than adequate praxis suggested the methodological use of Saroglou’s four dimensional model, to explore the significance of encounter as bonding with the transcendent. Complex (and sometimes uncertain) processes, portrayed in the fx literature, including longer journeys alongside punctiliar and punctuated experiences, were identified in stories of lives. Equally, to an extent not mapped in fx description of pathways, experiential encounters prior and proximate to conversion were widespread in this empirical research and not uncommon in Milton’s congregational study. These small number of cases of encounter prior and proximate to conversion present a significant challenge to a restricted view within fx of multidimensionality, together with complex conversion processes key finding of this research. The theological study indicated the need for a wider role for the Spirit in P+c missiology, a concern for which is foundational to MsC and to fx contextual practice, but in which the theological foundation for the praxis of discerning ‘what God is doing’, has yet to be fully explored. With the greatest of respect to the distinctively P+c input to praxis by Yong, there is a case to be made that he is in several areas a step behind fx thinking.
Throughout this work the revivalistic aspirations, sometimes disappointed, of P+c movements have been noted, Hollinghurst, from within the fx movement, has drawn the attention of Pentecostals and charismatics to the failed revival expectations of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{889}

What if God was enabling a great spiritual awakening, not in the church but outside it? … If people are as they say having more spiritual experiences, … [i]f God is at work in the world, might these experiences be of God. People that have been raised in a culture that has forgotten the Christian language of faith will speak of their encounters in a different language.\textsuperscript{890}

The data he uses are only part of the picture and they may indicate a passing phase, a distraction from the onward march of secularism, but they do fit with the narratives here. Pentecostals and charismatics are revivalists standing on tiptoe waiting for God to act but on this occasion, they may be looking in the wrong direction.

Rich resources in the stories of lives have been identified and a substantial degree of rigour has been brought to bear on the data they have yielded. This has been evidenced in reviewing a clearly identifiable body of contemporary literature that has demonstrated a development trajectory over the period of review. It has been seen in writing two articles, which have engaged with both a wide body of literature and have addressed current practitioner concerns. The first of these has been accepted for peer reviewed publication to address to a key audience for the research. It has also proved possible to identify a multidisciplinary model of religiosity and conversion, that has empirical support, and has provided a mechanism to integrate the P+c priority of encounter within the broad missiological discussion of belonging, believing and behaving.

It has been possible to employ a transparent methodology, accepted within the wider academy that is compatible with an ontology and epistemology appropriate

\textsuperscript{889} To these could be added those of subsequent decades.

\textsuperscript{890} Hollinghurst, \textit{Evangelism}, 59.
to the theological as well as empirical process. Ethical integrity has been maintained that has respected the needs of participants and gone beyond that to acknowledge the value of their agency and experience. It is expected that the report of findings, balanced between thick description and inclusion of a range of cases will be seen as credible; that the stories of lives they represent will have resonance for practitioners, both engaging their empathy and inviting transferability within particularity. Drawing from academic contributors who understand and address the pneumatology and missiology of the tradition, this research has the potential to make a significant contribution to praxis, both affirming P+c priorities, and inviting innovation within a broad theological framework.

Milton has pointed out that ‘case studies are generally recognised to hold broader importance when they challenge commonly held assumptions’.891 From the outset the intention has been to problematise the understanding of encounter in conversion both within P+c praxis and that of the contextual church planting movement as represented by fx. These case studies of conversion have demonstrated that some churches exhibit a praxis in which recalling the date and time of conversion is not a priority, and that affirms particularity and variety in conversion pathways, including those which are more extended alongside those which show punctiliar features. It has also demonstrated that in these few churches at least, some have experienced encounter and attributed it as awareness of God prior to, as well as co-terminus with, or subsequent to, conversion. Such challenge that arises to received wisdom, arises from a methodology which, allows converts to reflect on their past experiences in historical context, distinguishing these from subsequent reconstruction.

**Limitations of the empirical research**

Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations to this research. It is hoped that the issues raised are relevant across the P+c tradition, with its common concern to meet God in encounter, and shared evangelical understanding of conversion. or reasons of practicality, only leaders from a few NC and CP congregations were involved. The increasingly important diaspora churches, renewalists within other

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denominations, and a variety of neo-Pentecostal groups were all excluded. Only three of more than a dozen small NC denominations were involved.

The selection of candidates was purposeful and directed by a theoretical interest in adults who had found faith within the last few years and had little or no church background. Unprotected selectivity contributed to bias at a number of levels. The churches that contributed participants may not have been typical of their denominations. Given the small numbers of non-churched people joining churches, these congregations may have been unusually successful. Gatekeepers who were willing to put effort into responding to requests for help with this research may have had more time on their hands than others or may have had a more reflective attitude to research and to praxis. Candidates who were willing to take part were relatively confident and willing to meet a stranger and tell their story. They may have been more articulate and better organised than others.

As an individual researcher, I selected and interpreted data. There was no opportunity for multiple coding or alternative interpretation. I started with a view, based on practice and desk research, that many conversions were likely to demonstrate extended process, that the incidence of encounter prior to conversion was likely to be underestimated, and that many encounters did not conform to dominant narratives within the tradition. Throughout, a cognitive empathetic approach was employed which privileged the narrators’ viewpoints, accepting the verisimilitude of their accounts, though I did not assume that they were able to retrieve with complete precision their experiences or recall accurately contemporaneous internal conversations. The SQUIN left the narrator free to pursue their own course, but my listening was not completely passive. I was interested in the stories told and, during their IN, they would have seen my pen move when I made notes on things I wished to pursue at the second stage. I am certain that at times, I smiled. I know I on occasion felt moved by their stories.

While the results of this empirical study are open to challenge and development from similar studies of encounter, the size of the sample, and methodological rigour applied could be compared favourably with other research, on the foundations of which major theories of conversion have been erected. Even with
relatively small numbers, there was evidence of saturation in variety and context of encounter, though there were important outlying cases that suggest the value of concentrated investigation among the most recent converts and those likely to deconvert. The method employed to generate the narratives has been transparent throughout and could be extended and reproduced among other denominational populations. Aspects of consistency between narratives, accepting their particularity, has been such that it has been possible to make some indicative, though by no means conclusive, generalisations. It has been possible to match and pair many of the PINs, suggesting that at a denominational level, between these CP and NC members, there are few relevant differences.

I had the privilege of listening to the diverse narratives of more adult converts from non-churched backgrounds than I or most pastors of P+c churches would hear in our own churches over the years in which they occurred. For the greater part, these stories were credible and persuasive. INs showed both coherence and incoherence, even though they were shaped for my interest. PINs added extra details and sometimes illuminated internal conversations that were proceeding at the time of the events. The two TQs provided a useful backstop to check that nothing important had been missed.

**Directions for further research**

I have noted above that there would be considerable value in listening to the narratives of those at early stages of their conversion process, and to those for whom the process has stalled. The possibility of extending the research to other P+c streams and beyond is appealing, with a view to developing an instrument that would allow for quantitative investigation of encounters, prior to conversion, in due course.

I was warned that the number of narratives I was aiming to gather would provide a richness that I could not fully explore. I hope I have done justice to the stories told, but there is certainly more to be discovered within the existing data. Elsewhere, analysis of the gender differences in stories of conversion, and the
metaphors employed in those stories has been researched and, in the stories collected, there is a small but detailed database that might be mined for those insights. I was not warned of the richness of theological insights I would discover in my research, or the potential for action research that would emerge. Already, in real life, it has been possible to test some of the ideas that have begun to form. I hope that, in disseminating the work, additional possibilities for enhancing practice will be discussed.

The lack of success in discovering truly contextual fresh expressions of church (rather than evangelism) in the P+c tradition has been the major disappointment along the way. The effort needed to draw together participants for this research suggests that contemporary conversions of non-churched adults are still quite rare. There may be a need for contextually shaped churches which remain true to Pentecostal and charismatic values but are attentive to the ways in which a variety of groups of people are encountering God and finding faith in the contemporary era.

**Proposals for practice**

At the start of the exploration of praxis I suggested that espoused theology might be out of step with practice in ways which could make the path of discipleship more difficult for those with little or no church background. There is evidence from the research that congregational practices and operant theology informing praxis is in advance of that theology and is operating with more flexible models of conversion and encounter and a more nuanced discernment, than that of espoused theology.893 While the greater implication for mission of the research is in the discussion of praxis above, in order to focus attention on both theological and empirical data, I have made proposals for practice, suggested by four theological themes and numerous insights on practice that have emerged across the process. The test for inclusion has been that in each I could imagine the missional practitioners I work with considering the possibility of acting on them. For that reason, I have restricted

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893 The PINs recounted of ambiguous encounters were surprising, and the implied praxis across the denominations involved merits further consideration.
the recommendations to eight, two in each area. Most of the proposals are directed towards the existing congregation that will include those who are early on in their discipleship process. For other members, these developments provide opportunities to develop new attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will provide the basis for dialogue and reflection. They are in some cases accompanied by footnotes. These are to suggest resources and examplars, not to advance the argument.

Starting with the Spirit

1. A case has been made that within the tradition (and more widely among evangelicals) the Holy Spirit is presented as being of relevance only to Christians. If the Spirit is extensively active in the world and in lives, including those of not-yet-Christians, there is a case for an evangelistic exposition of the Spirit—a pneumatological apologetics. The naming of the Spirit as ‘the possibility of God’ provides a way of illuminating experiences prior to conversion, some of them uncertain or ambiguous, and might take as its starting point the prophetic dialogues of Acts 14:15–17 and 18:24-31. Additional raw material for such a project may be already available in the writings of Boyd,894 or in sources for learning to pray cited by Luhrmann.895

2. The missiological and pneumatological reflection above has been at points dependent on bracketing or limiting soteriological and Christological issues. If the Spirit leads us to Jesus, who reveals the Father, then the place of confession of Jesus as Lord, and sense of relationship with the Father will need to be recognised on conversion pathways. The lack of appropriate categories has been noted at several points, including the absence of Trinitarian grammar. The language that converts need to understand their journeys and encounters should be developed, and modelled in worship, including prayer in a way that aids reflective process.


895 Luhrmann, Talks, 157–178.
The Spirit from birth to new birth

1. It has become a commonplace of practice that mission should proceed on the basis of recognising what God is doing, and joining in. If the Spirit is active in the world and in lives, and it is acknowledged that existence prior to Christ is not one of total darkness, there is opportunity to celebrate aspects of continuity between creation and new creation. It is not uncommon for P+c rhetoric to celebrate bad news in society with apocalyptic anticipation. Less obvious is a consistent and ungrudging celebration of wisdom and virtue wherever they are found. If these, alongside creativity and artistic skill, are works of the Spirit there is little option but to do so, and to affirm all those who show the fruits of such inspiration.

2. Missional praxis in the participant churches has evidently made room for converts who see their narratives as improvement of the self rather than its total reconstruction. This was evident in the stories of those who talked of wanting to become ‘the best version of me’ or a ‘fully-fledged’ Christian, as well as those who recognised personal change in retrospect. For extended periods as part of their journeys, including in churches from different parts of the tradition, some participants took part in small groups attended by both Christians and non-Christians, in a discipleship course originally designed for converts. The development of such ‘crossover’ courses seems ripe for consideration, particularly if conversion pathways are seen as part of, rather than a precursor to, discipleship and if conversion itself is to be contextualised. This will involve contextualising the language of coming to faith for never churched groups, perhaps by capturing the vocabulary used by those converts to tell their own stories.

Operational modes of the Spirit

1. If hymnody is taken to be indicative of P+c discourse, an interactive mode of the work of God is already recognised to some degree. To fully embrace encounter in the mundane will require some adjustment to the style and time given to testimony. The cumulative weight of a series of coincidences in a life story is unlikely to achieve impact in a three-minute contribution. Moreover, there is a need for preachers to take a broader approach to
ministry time. For some, and on some occasions, the appropriate response to the exposition of Scripture may be that of prayer for an experience of invasive resolution of some issue. On other occasions the better invitation may be to quiet reflection or to mutual debriefing by the congregation, reflecting on action points and everyday strategies for forward progress.

2. A more holistic P+c pneumatological praxis, which balances the interaction and intervention modes should be reflected in preaching. This can be specifically connected to the work of the Spirit in healing and can be seen in the work of P+c authors, though how their extended stories would fare as short testimonies is open to question. Paul Mainwaring, previously a colleague of Bill Johnson, makes the case from experience that healing through medical treatment is not second best to that achieved through prayer alone. The founder of the 24–7 prayer movement, Pete Greig, in a book about supernatural interventions, includes an appendix that explains that miracles are rare. As with each of these proposals for development, to advocate embracing an interactive as well as interventionist mode is not to undermine the good of what already exists within the P+c tradition. There are supernatural healings and signs and wonders, too; they are just not the whole picture.

Wide ranging contexts for encounter

1. The absence of experiential encounter mediated by preaching during conversion processes has been noted and several possible reasons have been suggested for this. This study has not been at all concerned with the context of encounter in the post-conversion period, when it can be assumed that people would have been more frequently exposed to preaching. For some,

896 Pugh, Bold Faith, 118–120.
897 Paul Mainwaring, Kisses from a Good God (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2012).
898 Available at: https://www.24-7prayer.com/ (accessed 27 September 2018).
other means of proclamation, in courses, groups, or individual conversation provided contexts for encounter. For those who did attend church services during conversion processes, encounter may have been displaced to singing or to ministry time. It is possible that changes in learning styles may have resulted in barriers to the kind of extended monologue exemplified in inherited preaching styles. It is beyond the scope of these suggestions to engage with the literature around preaching and its contextualisation in the contemporary church. It is worthy of note, given the current focus on missional praxis, that the Alpha Film Series shifted to a documentary televisual format from previous pulpit centred presentations.\(^{900}\) Though participants in the current study seemed well adjusted to their P+c congregational context, Paas has suggested that those converted in small groups prefer to remain where they have started out.\(^{901}\) Worship on Alpha is considered to help make the step from course to church.\(^{902}\) It may well be that the Alpha course in future years may need to ‘train’ participants to recognise encounter in the context of preaching, in a similar way to the training in prayer observed by Luhrmann.

2. Within the tradition, teaching on individual spiritual practices will broaden awareness of ways of mediating encounter, and the notion of sacred pathways will extend it further. Celebration of encounter in varied contexts, identifying the affinity of context with different situations and with different personalities, will be part of the development of a wider understanding of the Spirit. The idea that diverse contexts provide for different content suggests that actively cultivating awareness of God in different circumstances could be encouraged. Encouraging congregations to expect encounter with God in words of scripture, in worship, in nature, or in interaction with others should


\(^{901}\) Paas, Planting, 262, 262 fn. 44.

\(^{902}\) Heard, Alpha, 116, 140.
probably not be governed by preference alone.\textsuperscript{903} Heightened awareness of the varied ways in which encounter occurs would increase sensitivity to the experiences that Johnston describes as ‘sparks’.\textsuperscript{904}

3. The worship event has been the quintessential locus for encounter within the tradition. Several research participants experienced encounter prior to conversion through singing, one through prayer ministry and others through creative worship practices. While sung worship was not a preferred context for encounter for those on conversion, there is no single alternative that has emerged. By introducing a variety of congregational practices that engage different senses and supplement sung worship it may prove possible to widen the range of ways in which the Spirit is mediated within the church. The ‘alternative worship’ branch of contextual church would claim to provide a range of contexts for encounter\textsuperscript{905} as would ‘Forest Church’,\textsuperscript{906} though these would be more associated with the sacramental than the evangelical and charismatic traditions.

\textsuperscript{903} Deeper exploration of corporate as well as personal spiritual disciplines, and of so-called ‘sacred pathways’, may be merited.
\textsuperscript{904} Johnston, \textit{Presence}, xvi.
\textsuperscript{906} Bruce Stanley, \textit{Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals} (Llangurig: Mystic Christ, 2013), Kindle locations 368, 595.
APPENDIX A: LIST OF NEW CHURCH DENOMINATIONS
(with numbers of UK congregations)\textsuperscript{907}

Abundant Life Ministries (3)
Ground Level Network (121)
Ichthus Christian Fellowship (79)
International Network of Churches (25)
KC 21(4)
Kingdom Faith Church (5)
Lifelink International Network (25)
Ministries Without Borders (18)
Multiply Network (54)
New Frontiers International (310)
Pioneer Partnership (80)
Plumbline Ministries (11)
Salt and Light Ministries (81)
Together Ministries (17)
Vineyard Churches UK (118)
Woodlandschurch.net (5)

\textsuperscript{907} Estimated in 2014. Brierley, \textit{Statistics} 2, Section 7.3.
APPENDIX B: REPORT ON PILOT STUDY

The purpose of the initial research was threefold: to test the effectiveness of data collection using the BNIM protocol, and to adapt its analytical framework; to establish the feasibility of the broad research design, particularly recruitment of participants; to explore the effectiveness of biographic-narrative method in identifying narratives that would address the theoretical concerns of the research. The review of the pilot study is structured by describing the procedure for data collection and analysis, followed by a consideration of issues arising, and concluding with a brief consideration of implications for the main research.

Data generation: sampling

Sampling was purposive (to identify a sparse population among church attenders) and theoretical (to increase the likelihood of addressing the concerns of the research) given that, at the pilot stage, selecting participants on the basis of ease of access would not give a true indication of the likely difficulties of reaching participants for the main research. The plan was to acquire the names and phone numbers of six participants from a single, evangelistically active church within the renewalist branch of the tradition, with three guidelines for inclusion: age (eighteen years or over), recent experience of becoming a Christian (not more than three years, though this was later relaxed), and having little or no church background. In the event, the names of six candidates were supplied and interviews were concluded with four of these, three of which were included in the pilot study. To these were added four people connected with my own New Church congregation; one was part of a group connected with Alpha, the other three were involved in the Sunday congregation and play a part in the life of the church.

A couple aged about 25 initially agreed to take part but cancelled at short notice and did not respond to subsequent invitations to set up a meeting. On checking with the minister, it was found that they had not been attending church services. One interviewee was rejected from the study because early in the interview he began to show heightened levels of anxiety. Having determined that he was on medication for mental health problems, it was deemed unsafe to proceed and the conversation was quickly drawn to a close.
Of the seven people who were included, five – Jamie (20), Sam (21), Emily (25), Becky (34) and Peter (53) – had no significant attendance at church in childhood. Both Alison (40) and Deborah (47) had memories of attending Sunday school, though their parents had minimal involvement. Alison had attended until the age of nine, until they moved house; Deborah had been confirmed, though after that she had no contact with church for thirty years. Jamie was in an anomalous position in that, while he was not involved with church until his mid-teens, he recalls strong influence, particularly from his ‘very Christian’ grandmother. She prayed with him and brought him ‘words’ and talked about faith, as did his mother, though while she identified herself as a Christian in belief, until his conversion she was completely non-observant.

Interviews

Sub-session 1: main narrative (IN)

The single question inviting narrative (SQUIN) followed a form common to many BNIM interviews.

‘Tell me in detail how you became a Christian, all the events and experiences that are important for you, starting wherever you like and taking all the time you need. I will do my best not to interrupt’.

This first stage of storytelling, the initial narrative, lasted until the narrator wound down, slowly and with several false finishes in some cases, apologetically in the case of some of the more terse respondents. Several wanted to understand what might be helpful to me. The duration of this first section varied between approximately two and fifteen minutes. The two longest narratives were provided by friends, Sam and Jamie, each including substantial sections of argumentation throughout the interview. Both Deborah’s and Emily’s narratives included description as well as narrative, and reflected on their experiences as they went along. Sam gave what felt like a blow-by-blow account of what clearly had been frustrating discussions with

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909 Numbers refer to ages.
910 Interview quotations are italicised throughout.
911 The brevity of these INs was a matter of concern.
Christian friends about heaven and hell. Emily looked back on her motivations as a child and as an adolescent. Each of the seven participants made some kind of evaluation of their story – its usefulness to the researcher, its brevity or their inability to recall sequences or details. Both Jamie and Emily had been influenced by the charismatic youth event, ‘Soul Survivor’.

**Sub-session 2: narrative questioning (PIN)**

The goal of the second sub-session was to feed back topics to the participant in the order raised and in their own words. ‘You told me about …’. ‘Can you think of a particular time when that happened …’. ‘Can you tell me more about …’. Questions involving ‘why’ and ‘how’ were avoided, and those starting ‘what’ or ‘when’ were quickly prohibited, too. There was no break between the sub-sessions to review initial output; the impact of this change in protocol was reviewed with each transcript, to consider whether there were episodes or statements that might have been investigated further. I did not find it difficult to recall a single story with the aid of brief notes. Listening to Sam’s story, it was evident that its focus was on belief and values, rather than experience, and only small parts of the story merited further exploration. Jamie’s narrative was experientially rich and included three PINs of spiritual experience, though one was missed. Given that his was the second interview to take place, failure to explore an episode of encounter provided an opportunity to learn to note not only transitions to new topics or themes in the story, but to ensure that episodes that could be mined for experiential content were clearly marked.

**Sub-session 3: theoretical questioning (TQ)**

Sub-session 3 followed immediately with just two prescribed questions, asked together. ‘Have you ever had a spiritual experience?’ ‘Have you ever been aware of God?’ There were no problems in understanding the terms used and they provided a prompt to further PINs. In most cases, new or supplementary stories of emotional experience or encounter did emerge at this third stage. The exception was Jamie who had explored the experiential dimension quite fully in the main narrative. To round off this session, demographic information was collected.

The most challenging interview was with Alison, whose adult experience of church spanned less than two years. On the afternoon of her interview, she had come
from a long morning session at college, where she was taking a course in
counselling, and had only an hour available before collecting her children from
school. She was the least open of the respondents and gave the impression of fearing
that the wrong response would show her in a bad light. Only for Deborah did the
speed of delivery of the main narrative fall below the conventionally recognised
speaking speed of 100–150 words per minute. This was due to several moments of
tearfulness, which caught her by surprise, when returning to childhood experiences
of hearing stories from the gospels.

**Audio recording**

Initially the recording was restarted between the sub-sessions. However, it
was soon realised that important stories were being lost in this way so the recording
was kept running throughout the interview. In the final two interviews, the lapel
microphone was not used.\(^{912}\) While this would present difficulties in a noisy
environment, the evidence points to a benefit in not having participants ‘wired up’.
Becky is a normally outgoing person, already known to the researcher, who admitted
to being uncomfortable with the microphone. It was decided to re-run the interview.
At the second meeting, she was told again that she would be recorded. Without a
wired connection, she chatted quite happily with the recorder in full view. The
reason for the second meeting with Becky was for her to review her transcript. She
found seeing her story in hard copy affirming – ‘*quite funny*’ – when reading back a
print version which tried to do justice to her distinct and lively regional style. On
being asked whether there was anything that had been left out, she added a
significant story of encounter in the context of prayer ministry that had occurred
perhaps a month or two into her church career, earlier than any of the experiences
she had recounted in her interview. She also commented that she had ‘*only said two
seconds*’ about her baptism, though at the second attempt she had little to add.

**Transcription**

Transcripts were produced of the story-as-told, together with answers to the
questions in sub-session 3. In the transcripts, no account was taken of hesitations or
other paralinguistic features. Fragments were left in place, including false starts and

\[^{912}\] These were with Emily, and a second session with Becky.
repetitions in the interviewer’s questions. These were assumed to be part of the process of thinking out loud and implicit in ‘an anxious incomplete interaction’\textsuperscript{913} rather than of defended behaviour which, if it existed, was only a central concern of this research when it related to encounter. Only minor adjustments to style were made. For instance, ‘yeah’ became ‘yes’. Most colloquial expressions, for instance ‘kind of’ and ‘I was, like’, were left in place as useful markers. The former was judged to herald a tentative statement, and the latter to signal a move to direct speech; each helped to preserve narrative vitality. All names of people and places were replaced with pseudonyms or removed at this stage.

**Analysis**

Two issues affecting the interpretive process were evident. Firstly, in three cases participants did not introduce themes of encounter, or the broader theme of emotional experience in their initial narratives, though they did respond to questions in the third sub-session. The stage at which stories of experience and encounter emerge will require hermeneutic treatment in the main study, particularly to determine how far these episodes are unresolved, as in the case of Alison (see below) and possibly Deborah, who explained that she had failed to respond to a request from an Alpha leader for testimony because she was unsure of the status of her impressions. The response in these two situations was quite different to stories from Sam, the non-convert, who argued that a putative encounter with God lacked authenticity and was the result of manipulation through music.

Secondly, Jamie showed significant evidence of consciously formulating his main narrative to show what it meant to be a true Christian. He was a relatively new Christian of less than three year’s standing but one who had some background in belief, acquired from his grandparents, and had accelerated through the ranks to become a youth leader himself. Others did not show a similar constructive pattern; though Becky, in PINs, described moments of encounter as ‘epiphanies’ and ‘lightbulb moments’. Had she not been part of the congregation I serve, I would have

\textsuperscript{913} Wengraf, *Interviewing*, 235.
interpreted this as ‘local discourse’, but I had no recollection of these terms being used in the church context.

Once the overall shape of the narrative and narrative themes were identified, sections of text relating to experience were identified for detailed analysis. The excerpts presented below are chosen, in part, because they are brief but complete. Each episode points to experience of God occurring in the realm of the ordinary, outside but sometimes adjacent, to the worship context.

The following exchanges with Peter occurred as part of sub-session 3, in response to direct questioning.  

INTERVIEWER: Is there any time that you would say you had been aware of God; of the spiritual realm?

PETER: When I’m serving at church. That’s when I usually get that sort of feeling; or occasionally when I am reading through the Bible. But it’s, like, intermittent. It’s not constant.

INTERVIEWER: And how would you describe it?  

PETER: Sort of a joyful headiness.

INTERVIEWER: ‘Joyful headiness’. I think I understand joyful. What about headiness?

PETER: Can’t really describe it. Like I’m floating, I think.

INTERVIEWER: So, give me an example, recently, when that happened to you.

PETER: Can’t think now. Probably the last time was when... we go to a wildfowl sanctuary a lot – I get quite joyful and

914 Verbatim quotations from participants are italicised throughout.

915 BNIM in its pure form would not accept an invitation to describe. However, my view on listening to the response was that it was a justified improvisation, particularly as Peter was particularly economical in his responses.
that when I’m watching the creatures, the birds – sometimes I go off into a mind of my own and forget that [my wife] is there.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. That’s an example of joyful headiness when you’re aware of God. When is the very first time you can think of that happening?

PETER: Probably was around the time I was finishing off the Alpha course and when I was helping out at the next one. Even though I was cleaning, washing dishes, it was a joyful experience – a feeling of well-being because I was helping other people.

These experiences did not form part of Peter’s very brief IN, only emerging in response to TQ. He immediately identified two contexts in which he was aware of God; while volunteering and when reading the Bible. He then added a third context, that of being attentive to the natural world.916 Each of these led to a similar emotional experience which, to him, is evidence of God’s presence. In future interviews, it will be important to be alert to such varied contexts, to explore commonalities and to ask for stories about how narrators feel and what they think about at the time. At an early review of the audio recording, it was evident that an opportunity had been missed to ask for stories of his interaction with Scripture that could have been compared to the other episodes described.

Becky’s account of encounter was front and centre in the initial narration, where she told of an occasion when pictures clipped from magazines were placed on the chairs before a Sunday morning service as part of a reflective exercise. Invited to say more, she added to and clarified her story. The full interaction is included here, with both the IN and subsequent return to PINs.

BECKY: I think the moment that I noticed that I had God in my life was one night I was in bed. We had had cards in church on the seats and we’d gone in, and they were just pictures of random things, like rivers, mountains. And I had… mine was a mountain and I couldn’t get it out of my

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916 Peter was asked why he felt that these feelings were an experience of God’s presence. His reply was, ‘Well, they never happened before’.
head. It wasn’t until that night it popped into my head, trying to get to sleep, that ‘Of course. Because he’s up there.’ And five minutes later I fell asleep.

[Silence for some seconds]

INTERVIEWER: Is that it?

BECKY: Yes. I think that was the defining moment I think I became a Christian.

This was the end of Becky’s very short IN. We then turned to PINs.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me more about what happened with the card. Tell me a bit. Tell me some more about it.

BECKY: I don’t know. It was just that one day we had the cards out on the chairs. You had to pick up the card when you sat down and interpret it in your own words, about what it meant. And just I looked at my … and it was just like, ‘I don’t know. It’s just a mountain;’ and it wasn’t ‘til probably that night I went home and couldn’t sleep. I tried for about an hour and a half and I was still wide awake and it just dawned. It sort of just popped into my head. ‘Of course.’ As if a light bulb had gone off or on.

Once the recorder was turned off, she told of a number of subsequent episodes, which shared similar features, and referred to these light bulb moments as ‘epiphanies’. Some of these related to struggling to cope with her daughter who has been recently diagnosed with ADHD, and moments of confidence that God was with her. Others related to answered prayer; when she was made homeless as a result of a relationship break-up, and an exceptional sense of peace – she described herself as ‘the world’s worst worrier’ – when she needed a medical investigation. However, these post-dated her conversion.

**Contribution to the central research task**

All seven completed interviews explored spiritual experience or encounter with God, within participants own understanding of the terms. Sam rejected the likelihood that his experiences were real. Alison offered insights into a continuing internal conversation, in which she differentiated the prompting of conscience from
the presence of God. After an interval of several months, Deborah had come to the conclusion that her experience during an Alpha Holy Spirit Day was authentic, and the interview provided her first airing of this story. Emily had experienced God in awareness of poor life choices while a student, as well as other encounters. Peter had experiences of ‘joyful headiness’ close to the point when he decided become a Christian. Becky anchored the point at which she knew she was a Christian to an experience of the presence of God.

Both Jamie and Emily told of experiences of awareness of God at the Soul Survivor youth event that with the broader P+c narrative of encounter in worship. As well as similarities between the two who had been influenced by Soul Survivor, common narrative themes were evident between the two with school-age children, and the two women who experienced ‘presence’. Each member of these pairs was involved in different congregations. Four of the participants referred to sin, or at least to falling short of the mark. Emily talked of sin; Jamie spoke in terms of challenges to his relationship with God; Alison raised the issue of conscience; Becky spoke of ‘making mistakes’ in a way that emphasised their importance for her status as a Christian. That these participants raised the issue is of interest in the light of the Cartledge’s Pentecostal study, where only one participant reflected on sin. In the initial narratives, only one of those taking part referred to Jesus, and only one to the Holy Spirit; the rest preferring to speak of God.

917 Cartledge, Testimony, 78, 80.
APPENDIX C: ETHICAL APPROVAL

University of Manchester Committee on the Ethics of Research on Human Beings. Excerpts from application form for approval of a research project, approved 5 June 2015.

Research objective
The focus for the field research stage is to determine within the charismatic tradition, the place and contexts of encounter in the conversion process of previously unchurched people.

Scientific justification
There is a possible mismatch between the theology and praxis of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in that the dimension of encounter in conversion is emphasised but not experienced by a substantial proportion of converts. The context for such encounters has been typically the congregational worship event. Currently, there is a strong emphasis on fresh expressions of church in which key elements of the worship event likely to facilitate encounter may be rejected. If charismatic churches are to engage successfully with this strategy, missiological and theological reflection will be required from a deeper understanding of encounter in the conversion process. Results of a study of conversion using similar methodology were published at the end of 2014. Ines Jindra, A New model of Religious Conversion, (Netherlands: Brill, 2014)

Scientific quality assessment
The proposed method is based on Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method described by Tom Wengraf in Qualitative Research Interviewing, (London: Sage, 2001) and his Shorter Guide (to BNIM).

Inclusion criteria
I am selecting those with previously little or no record of church attendance whose involvement has commenced within the last five years and who attend a church within the broad charismatic tradition.
Data Collection Method

The research employs a Narrative Inquiry methodology, and will invite converts to tell the stories of their conversion process. The sharing of faith stories is common within the charismatic tradition and participants will normally have been invited to tell their story in the past, though rarely with the freedom and in the detail of a narrative interview.

Each participant will receive one face to face interview for up to two hours. If further time is needed, a second face to face appointment will be arranged. MAIN NARRATION: the participant will be invited to tell their story without interruption. NARRATIVE QUESTIONING: ‘Questions pointed at narrative’/ ‘story only questions’ will be used to uncover critical events involving encounter. THEORETICAL QUESTIONING: At a third stage, direct questions of particular interest will be raised. The stories will be recorded.

Analysis

Transcripts will be made of those sections of narrative relevant to the central research question. The methodology does not require quantitative analysis. At this point it is proposed to follow, to a large extent, the BNIM protocols. From all stages of the interview a chronology will be developed per interviewee. From a transcript of the main narrative, themes will be identified and the participants’ gestalt will emerge. Where appropriate the chronology and life story will be compared using narrative methods. Micro-analysis of small sections of text will be used aiming to analyse the relationships between past experiences and their presentation and to check emerging hypotheses.

Risks

Interviews will take place in one of three venues, based on the participant’s choice: a local coffee shop or pub, a church office where others are present or the participant’s home. Details of venues and return times will be left with the researcher’s wife and a mobile phone carried.
There is a slight possibility that being invited to review their conversion process may lead participants to reassess their conversion experience or question their personal fit with the church they attend. The researcher will be careful not to imply criticism of the participant’s church. The problem is unlikely to emerge unless the participant is already unsettled and questioning their experience. However participants facing such issues may contribute valuable insights to the research.

It is possible but unlikely, that retelling of difficult times in the participant’s life may cause small and temporary distress. If this occurs, at the end of the interview the participant will be asked if they have adequate support and if wished, contact details of counsellors will be offered. Criminal disclosures are very unlikely, given that the participant will be retelling a story told often before but should any disclosure occur, contact would be made with the safeguarding officer of the church concerned. If the church has no safeguarding procedure or church leaders are a cause for concern initial advice will be taken from the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service.

The risks are negligible and should issues arise can be responded to by the researcher who is an experienced pastor who has received safeguarding training. Any adverse event will be reported to the Committee.

**Benefit to participants**

The opportunity to tell their story in unusual detail to a new audience and to reflect on their experience.

**Privacy**

Names of churches will be coded. Participants will be identified by code and pseudonym. The key will be kept on a USB drive separately from transcripts and not stored on-line, in the researcher’s study in a private home in a locked file. The data from the study will be stored for up to ten years for further analysis. Personal details, including audio recordings, will be destroyed once the research has been concluded.
Research on becoming a Christian in the 21st Century

Participant Information Sheet

I need your help in my research, which will collect people’s stories of coming to faith so that we can find out more about how people become Christians in our society.

Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

The research will be conducted by me, Dave Halls, a doctoral student at Cliff College and the University of Manchester.

What is the aim of the research?

By listening carefully to stories of faith and understanding them deeply, I hope to find out common features and differences in the way people’s relationship with God comes about.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been asked to help because we understand that you have been on a faith journey in the past few years and before that had little or no involvement with church.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

I will ask you to tell me in detail about how you became a Christian, including the ups and downs. I will ask you questions about events on the way that are important to you and to check that you have left nothing out. I am not looking for a three-minute testimony! We will record the conversation so I can listen to everything again and make a written copy of what you say.
What happens to the data collected?

By the time I have talked to around forty people, there will be hundreds of pages of testimony. These will not be included in my report but will be available to scholars who wish to look at them. The report will contain summaries of the stories I have been told that will include important and interesting things that you have said.

How is confidentiality maintained?

All names will be changed and your church only identified by a code. Your details will be kept separately from your story on a password-protected drive that only I will have access to. The audio record of our conversation will also be kept separately and destroyed once the research is complete.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

What is the duration of the research?

Our conversation should last for about one hour, though if you have more to tell I will be happy to listen and we can arrange to meet again.

Where will the research be conducted?

We can meet wherever you wish, at a coffee shop or pub, or at your home.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

When the research is completed in 2019, I hope that there will be enough interest in the results for me to publish the results and to talk about it in conferences and at churches.

Contact for further information or if something goes wrong?

You can contact me, Dave Halls, on 01249 817 792 or 07714 990 770. My email is mail@davehalls.org.

If you wish to make a formal complaint about the conduct of my research you should contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.
Research on becoming a Christian in the 21st Century

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below.

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that our conversations will be audio recorded.

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes.

5. I agree that any data collected may be passed to other researchers.

I agree to take part in the above project.

_________________________  _____________  __________________
Name of participant              Date              Signature

_________________________  _____________  __________________
Name of person taking consent    Date              Signature
### APPENDIX D: LIST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>BRANCH OF TRADITION</th>
<th>STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION</th>
<th>ESTIMATED TIME SINCE CONVERSION (YEARS)</th>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>5</td>
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