

## **THE PREVENIENT ACTIVITY OF GOD IN THE CONVERSION NARRATIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEW ZEALAND**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Christian conversion is a process of change that can be examined from a variety of perspectives, including the social sciences with their focus on human agency, or theology with its emphasis on the nature and activity of God. However, theology runs the added risk of discussing a subject that is to some degree hidden from the human observer. Understanding the ways in which God might have been at work in the conversion of an individual is a challenging process, particularly insofar as the primary texts used to help establish this understanding are themselves inescapably “human.” Whether it be the words of Scripture or the testimony of a new believer, careful interpretation and analysis is required as various theologies are developed. The present essay engages with the conversion narratives of 32 young adults in Canterbury, New Zealand, in order to develop a perspective on the action of God in conversion. Notably, this data set reveals important insights about the action of God in and even prior to the individual’s own growth in attraction to God and the church. This in turn confirms some key theological insights advanced elsewhere, as well as providing food for the thought of current ministry practitioners.

### **GOD’S ACTION AND CHRISTIAN CONVERSION**

Much conversion research focuses on the various ways in which individuals are active participants in their own conversions.<sup>1</sup> Here, writers are reluctant to attribute too much of what goes on in conversion to outside agents such as God, worried that such an emphasis will downplay or conceal the ways in which converts are involved in the process. Yet sometimes, or so it seems at least, conversion is more a case of something happening *to* an individual, or at least something that begins with much less determination or intent from the convert. Filipino scholar Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr. defines a category of conversion narrative, “the swept,” by which he can classify this type of experience.<sup>2</sup> This kind of conversion involves “a largely involuntary experience in which the person undergoes an experience that leads to faith. ... The experience of the divine may not be actively and consciously sought, and the story may even depict the pre-conversion self as scoffing

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. James T. Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 no. 2 (1985): 163–179.

<sup>2</sup> Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity,” *Philippine Studies* 54 no. 4 (2006): 615–620.

at the practices of ... Christians. The story of the swept ... may be akin to the conversion story of Saul/Paul found in chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles.”<sup>3</sup> The stories that Aguilar provides to support this concept tend to involve significant events and coincidences that take the narrators by surprise, making his comparison with Paul’s experience in Acts apt. Other key factors of this kind of experience involve an initially negative (“scoffing”) or apathetic disposition to the Christian faith, and a subsequent moment of shock or surprise in the face of a new piece of information, such as a meaningful spiritual experience, miracle, or coincidence.

Theologically, such experiences, even prior to conversion being completed, should be of little surprise to Christians, affirming as we do the significance of the independence of God. As Walter Brueggemann notes, “Yahweh, the sovereign one who acts in his lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own purposes.”<sup>4</sup> The author of a small project investigating recent conversions to Christianity in Auckland drew the same conclusion from his data:

There seems to be an assumption that God only works in and through the church and so God’s work is enhanced when the church positions herself properly in a community and gets its gathered life together. However, ... a number of people from non-churched backgrounds came to faith in Christ, largely though the work of God’s Spirit.... We truly see that Christians don’t do the work of God, they participate in it. God is at work acting to save and, with considerable grace, involves people in these purposes.<sup>5</sup>

God’s work in the conversion process need not be contained or understood as always operating within human structures. Rather, a rightly held doctrine of the freedom of God’s action allows for the possibility of a broader range of conversion experiences, ones that are initiated and propelled by the action of the Spirit.

This action of God’s Spirit in conversion can be deeply personal and specific to individuals. New Zealand theologian Lynne Taylor, in her study of conversion in South Australia, notes that for her participants, “It seems that God started with their current reality and, aware of each personality, curated a conversion experience that allowed them to be, and become, who they were.”<sup>6</sup> Taylor notes ways in which her participants’ conversion experiences each fit with their personalities, as well as containing moments of well-timed interventions and events that helped the conversion process along.<sup>7</sup> Indian scholar Joshua Iyadurai notes that in many of the conversion narratives he analysed “a gentle conversation takes place between the divine and the convert that makes the encounter personal, not generic. Further, the encounter

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<sup>3</sup> Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence,” 595–96.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Finlay, “Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Master of Ministry Thesis, University of Otago, 2012), 59–61.

<sup>6</sup> Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 202.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 203.

sets up a loving and intimate relationship between the divine and the convert.”<sup>8</sup> God’s action in reaching out to human persons can be shaped in such a way that it fits with their circumstances and personality and can speak to each individual on a deeply personal level.

Theologians have developed the idea of God’s action in a person’s life prior to their conversion, and even prior to their awareness that God is at work in their reality, in various ways. Particularly in the work of John Wesley, the concept of God’s “prevenient” grace has been explored as one way of describing how God can be at work in human lives, preparing them for conversion.<sup>9</sup> This idea reinforces two concepts that are important for a theological discussion of conversion. The first is that God always makes the first move; it is God who prepares us to consider God, as it were.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the true beginning of an individual’s conversion involves neither their consent nor their awareness, but God’s action.<sup>11</sup> The second helpful concept here is the fact that at times, God appears to bring his grace to bear on the lives of individuals in particularly compelling or impacting ways. As Australian theologian Benjamin Myers notes, “God’s ‘peculiar grace’ specially singles out some individuals, but all the ‘rest’ of humanity [still] receive the divine ‘call’ to salvation.”<sup>12</sup> South African theologian David Field, in his discussion of prevenient grace in the work of John Wesley, suggests that “because the work of the Spirit is personal, free and unpredictable there is always the potential for dramatic and unexpected movements towards justice, mercy and truth.”<sup>13</sup> This is to affirm again the importance of God’s sovereignty and independence. Alongside this, we are reminded that God’s actions in the world are at times “dramatic and unexpected,” and that this is entirely in keeping with his grace.<sup>14</sup>

In the body of this essay, I will provide evidence to support the assertions made by the authors cited above, although I would extend Aguilar’s theory somewhat to include conversions that, while still surprising to those experiencing them, happen over a longer period and are less event-orientated. The data cited below comes from my doctoral research, investigating recent conversions to Christianity in Canterbury, New Zealand. I interviewed 32 young adults, each of whom had been raised in secular homes, about their conversions to Christianity during adolescence. Twenty-six of these individuals experienced, in some way, moments in their conversion journeys where they were met with an unexpected degree of congruity between one of their own emotional or practical needs and something that they encountered in the Christian world. Also, these experiences generally happened before those I interviewed would have identified as committed

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 242.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Purcell, “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically: Prevenience and Posterity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 no. 1–2 (2008): 78; Benjamin Myers, “Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 40 no. 1 (2006): 22.

<sup>10</sup> Purcell, “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically,” 73; Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 24.

<sup>11</sup> Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 22.

<sup>12</sup> Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 28.

<sup>13</sup> David N. Field, “The Unrealised Ethical Potential of the Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71 no.1 (2015): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Experiences in which individuals are confronted by a sudden revelation of God’s nature may in fact be even more common in secular societies, as Andrew Root argues: “Ministry in a secular age is ‘seeker sensitive,’ but the kind of seeker sensitive that perceives divine action. *It proclaims God, not us, as the seeker.*” *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 227, emphasis original.

Christians. I have termed this “the match,” insofar as it refers to a high level of synchronicity between personal need and present experience—essentially, these two things matched. These experiences generally occurred within the following set of conditions:

1. Participants’ initial reasons for engaging with Christianity were quite mundane, usually just in response to an invitation from a friend to attend an event
2. Therefore, participants were not expecting much from Christianity, and most were not on any kind of intentional spiritual search
3. Thus, when something personally meaningful occurred in this context, it was often either
  - a. a *surprise* to the participant, in that what was occurring to them was unexpected, or
  - b. a *contrast* with their current life experience, in that what was they observed happening was a pleasant difference to daily life
4. What occurred for each participant in this category was usually something deeply meaningful that clearly spoke to a closely held personal issue or concern

As can be seen in the above list, participants, for the most part, were simply not expecting much of the church.

## **FINDING COMMUNITY**

The reasons many participants first ended up engaging with Christianity were quite mundane. Often, this resulted from a friend or youth worker inviting them along to a Christian event and the young person deciding that they might as well go along and check things out. For example, one participant, Nathan, described his reasons for first attending youth group: “[I] kind of just went along for the fun of it really, just things to do with mates, didn’t really pay too much attention about God or any of that kind of thing.” Many participants, like Nathan, first attended a church with fairly low expectations. Thus, when they encountered something that was deeply meaningful to them, it came as a shock. One surprising experience for some participants was the discovery of community at church. The Christian community, whether a youth group or church congregation, provided several key moments of match for many participants. Their new experience of Christian community felt or functioned like a family, a place where they could build close relationships of mutual care and support. The youth group or church also provided *de facto* parental figures (in the form of a youth pastor or youth worker) to those who had lacked such care in their biological families. Others described a community of inclusivity, warmth, and sanctuary.

Helen<sup>15</sup> is one of six children in her blended family. Her father passed away due to suicide when she was young, and her mother remarried. She described feeling different to her siblings, noting that she felt like the “nerdy overachiever in a family of ... very thin, very makeup-clad beauty therapists.” Church

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<sup>15</sup> All names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms for privacy reasons.

provided a new sense of family for Helen. Early spiritual experiences developed into a deeply intimate relationship with God as Father. A key group of peers at church, both male and female, grew to care for and understand Helen. She notes that this combination of connection to God and these friends “has absolutely been key in solidifying my faith.” Yet Helen did not go to church looking for a family. She was almost there by accident, invited along by her friend following a funeral that had been held in the church auditorium that afternoon.

Six other participants told similar stories, describing the ways in which their relationships at church deepened and provided a new feeling of family. Key for many of these participants was the *contrast* they noticed between their biological families and their church family. Anna loved how youth group was a place with a strong family feel, within which people were welcoming, loving, and accepting of difference. She also began hearing about how God was a loving father, which she initially found difficult to understand. Anna notes that this was because “growing up, my father was quite abusive and not a very nice man to me, so, the idea of having a loving father was kind of weird.” God’s nature as a loving father was a key point of match for those who described family as a significant factor in their early experience of church. In addition, some participants found this need met in a more concrete form. For example, when asked why he thought his youth group was a place where he “felt at home,” Nathan said that “because I didn’t really have a father figure ... my youth pastor, he pretty much became my father figure.” Nathan’s own father had left when he was younger, and he grew to deeply admire his youth pastor and appreciate his care.

Some participants contrasted the sort of mutual care they observed occurring at church with their experiences of other social environments, generally at school, where there was less concern for the wellbeing of others. Kylie described how when she first attended an evening service at which her youth leader was to be baptised, she was impressed by the level of mutual support and love that she saw. This sense of mutual care and community was one of the things she admired most about church when she first began attending:

At school I think I was seeing people ... always like, friends one minute, then they were talking behind each other’s backs. [Yet at church] ... I saw people who were just genuine and actually just all cared about each other and if someone was going through something they might not even have known them, but they’d go and talk to them and either pray for them or help them. I think I saw that and was like, “I want to be like that.”

Similarly, Martin noted that he was surprised by how kindly people at his church spoke to one another and to him, in contrast to his school where he felt as though he was always “just waiting for someone to mock [me] about something.” For these participants, being included and not bullied at youth group and church was both a contrast and a surprise. In a more extreme example of this, Rewai noted that, early on in his faith journey, he often came to church stoned, expecting to be kicked out. Yet, this was not what occurred, which took him by surprise:

I was turning up stoned to church, and they weren’t like, “Bro, you can’t be here, go home.” They were like, “What are you stoned for man? Far out! All good man, come on.” And they were like all

good, cool. Where I thought I was going to be condemned by these guys, I thought they would look at me like.... But yeah, it was real authentic. Like no place that I had been before.

Rewai described this acceptance as “authentic,” seeing at church a genuine kindness which surprised him.

These excerpts from interviews demonstrate that the Christian community provided participants with an alternative picture of how a community could function, which was often a surprise to them, and which contrasted with their experiences at home and at school. Some who grew up in difficult family environments were delighted to discover a new level of family and of fatherhood at church. While the experience of fatherhood was in some cases associated with a youth leader or other caring adult, it was also directly attributed to God by some participants. While this introduction of an alternative father figure helped participants feel more “at home” at church, it also provided a sense of emotional stability. For other participants, the ways in which their experiences of a match had a positive emotional impact were even more apparent.

### **FINDING A NEW WAY OF FEELING**

Another group of participants described a significant change in how they felt about themselves, or others, or a personal situation. Often these experiences were deeply surprising, particularly for those individuals who may not have seriously entertained the thought of God’s existence or relevance prior to the events taking place. These experiences addressed many deep-seated emotional issues such as unforgiveness, emotional wounds, and a lack of self-worth.

Some of those I interviewed were able to view themselves in a more positive light after their encounters with God. For example, Carla described how an early message and spiritual experience at Easter Camp<sup>16</sup> changed her self-concept. She was blown away by the notion that God would want to have a relationship with her, and, intrigued by this idea, responded to a message where this was the main theme. Yet, it really sunk in the following night at camp, when she cried at length in response to a tangible sense of God’s Spirit.

Just the act of crying for that amount of time was quite healing because afterwards I remember just feeling ... emptied out. Like I’d just gotten out a lot of that hurt.... The fact that God loved me and wanted a relationship with me ... that was such a life-changing revelation that I’d had, and that in itself had healed a lot in me because I’d realised, “Actually, someone does love me.”

Carla was carrying a deep sense of feeling unloved, a consequence of a difficult childhood. The idea that she was loved by God was a deeply healing discovery.

Some of those I interviewed felt as though their need for personal affirmation was met by Jesus. Matiu described how, throughout his teenage years, he “struggled a lot with identity, who I was, [and] where I was going.” This in turn led to depression and drug use. Traumatic experiences as a child, some of which

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<sup>16</sup> This is an annual camp held at a large campground on the northern fringe of Christchurch. In recent years as many as 4,500 young people have spent Easter weekend at this event. See <[www.eastercamp.org.nz](http://www.eastercamp.org.nz)> (10 Apr, 2020).

he had suppressed, had impacted Matiu negatively, particularly those involving his father, who had been distant and abusive. However, amidst a particularly troubling flashback, Matiu heard God speak:

I started having real vivid memories and flashbacks of stuff that my father had actually done. And I remember at that moment feeling like a terrified kid, like feeling like I was helpless and hopeless and terrified.... It kind of took over my body. I cried emotionally, very emotionally for about five or ten minutes. And then I just felt an absolute calming presence, the Spirit of God, and him saying to me, "Matiu, I love you. Get baptised."<sup>17</sup>

For Matiu, these words motivated him to re-engage with his local church and eventually be baptised by the minister there. Over time his confidence improved, and he was able to distance himself from past trauma and make positive changes in his life. Matiu was eventually able to reframe his past which helped him attribute his changed circumstances and confidence to God's intervention in his life at a difficult moment.

Participants also described moments where their experiences of a match left them feeling as though difficult emotional issues had been resolved. In some cases, these were issues of depressive thoughts and self-blame that had reached heightened levels. For example, Wade described how his emotional state worsened during the last days of his grandfather's life. Wade had been particularly close with his grandfather and was feeling afraid of the impending loss, as well as blaming himself for not doing more to support his grandfather during this time. He was able to process some of these feelings through an experience at Easter Camp:

We were in this circle, and ... everyone's praying. And then one of the youth workers is just like, "You know, I just feel like something's broken in your family.... I just feel like that's taking a big toll on you, but, you know, you don't have to ... take it and blame yourself for this.... Don't put the blame on yourself, just look to God.... God's saying that ... you've got such a courageous heart, and you're such a powerful heart.... God's so proud of you." And I just bawled my eyes out, I was like, "What the heck ... like, how did you know this?"

Wade was clearly surprised by these words, which met him at a deeply emotional level. Other participants also had strong reactions to surprising spiritual experiences, to the point where they were able to forgive themselves and others for past hurts.

Caitlin's story illustrates the kind of emotional healing that involves forgiveness. On the third evening of Caitlin's first Easter Camp, she was deeply impacted by a message on forgiveness and felt that a major emotional issue she had been struggling with was laid bare. She felt a strong sense that God was calling her to forgive her father, who had left some years ago and had caused significant damage to Caitlin and her family. Caitlin acted on this immediately and left the meeting to call her father. She described this experience as feeling "uplifting ... like a big rock that I'd been holding onto and carrying around with me had just

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<sup>17</sup> This is an intriguing statement that Matiu attributes to God, in that the form it follows is one that can be seen elsewhere. Andrew Root provides three examples of moments where God spoke to individuals using a similar form, "a personal address ... followed by the naming of a decisive impingement of nothingness...leading to a promise of saving through participation in God's being through the act of ministry." Matiu's experience is particularly akin to that of Hagar (as discussed by Root) in that God redeems him from a place of desperation and isolation, and his opportunity to participate in God's being through ministry comes in the form of a command. See *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 248.

dropped or evaporated and smashed ... there was [still] little pieces, but there was not enough to weigh me down and stop me from moving forward and going on with life.” Caitlin did not say if she found this spiritual experience surprising. Yet in discussing her motives for attending Easter Camp that year, she notes that she was quite nervous about attending, and was not sure what to expect. It seems unlikely that she expected to find a resolution for her resentment towards her father.

In Caitlin’s experience, the call to forgive her father was not just about finding the power to forgive. It also forced her to consider the contrast between the person she was at the time and the person that she felt God wanted her to be. When the hurt and resentment she held towards her father was confronted, both by a message on forgiveness and with a sense that this was God’s will for her at that moment, Caitlin notes that this

wasn’t me wanting to become someone else, it was me wanting to be a better version of myself. So it was me realising that it’s not me becoming someone else, it’s me just letting go of things that were holding me back from being who I’m actually meant to be and who I am inside.

Other participants mentioned similar moments, where they felt as though they were being invited to pursue a more real, relevant, and authentic life by following Jesus. This was not necessarily something that participants had associated with the church and was often a contrast to their previously held beliefs about what a Christian life would look like.

### **FINDING REAL FAITH: AUTHENTICITY, MIRACLES, RELEVANCE, AND RELATABILITY**

Some participants were attracted to Christian faith when they discovered just how relatable, relevant, and authentic it was for them. Often this was a contrast to previously held assumptions about Christianity, a faith perceived to be boring and irrelevant. In some cases, these insights came quite a long time after participants’ initial engagements with the church. For some, these experiences provided evidence that the Christian faith was based on something substantive. I have termed this collection of experiences “finding real faith,” as they each gave participants a glimpse of how the Christian faith contained something real. I use this term not in a starkly literal sense (as an antonym to “unreal” or “untrue,” for example) but more to describe the way in which something can begin to feel more personally relevant.<sup>18</sup> The experiences outlined below indicate such moments, points in time where particular “facts” of the Christian faith were key factors in convincing individuals that following Jesus was valid and was something they could imagine themselves doing.

Six participants either alluded to or directly described how the concept of authenticity was an important discovery for them as they explored the Christian faith. In some cases, participants made it clear

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Root notes that “the very experiences that become transformative to my person are those that have cause that forces me to see reality differently — they are experiences of the real.” *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 201.



that their decision to take faith seriously only occurred once they gained some sort of vision or understanding as to how following Jesus might enable them to be a more authentic version of themselves. An example is, Jeremy, who despite being raised in a secular home, attended Christian schools throughout his education. He described how his realisation that he could live an authentic, Christian life only occurred in the more intense environments of Easter Camp, and later that same year on a church mission trip. He recalled how at the camp, he began having

really good honest chats with our leaders in that camp, and basically ever since then I've just been shameless in talking to people. Like, just basically told everyone everything, everything I'd ever done, really just opened up to my close group of friends and ... God really set me free of a lot of things.

Describing the mission trip later that year, Jeremy noted how the things he was required to do as a part of the team gave him a greater exposure to an authentic Christian life:

Openly discussing biblical stuff, and having the chance just to ... [see] what it looks like to actually live a Christian life I guess, to take steps out in faith. I think that's what this trip was for me, was a massive step up in faith.... I guess a large part of that was just living in Christian community for two weeks.... Having to talk to people [I didn't know] about Jesus ... was a really big thing as well.

For Jeremy, his Christian schooling was inadequate to provide him with the kind of vision of faith he needed, and in his early teens he did not profess to follow Jesus or live according to a Christian morality. Yet the intensity and duration of Easter Camp and the church mission trip gave Jeremy the space and time to see how participating in Christian community could enable him to be more honest and more faithful.

Four participants described moments in which evidence of the miraculous met their deeply felt needs, in ways which were often highly surprising. For example, Joel reflected on an experience in which his injured ankle was healed:

That was when I knew that it wasn't so much a hoax, it was like, "Hey, this guy [Jesus] actually heals. This guy can do what he promises." ... I felt amazed. I was in a lot of shock, not like bad shock, but like, kind of amazed and shocked at the same time.

Joel had been attending youth group for some time prior to this healing and had not expressed any strong sentiment either for or against the notion of God's existence. He notes that for the most part he was there to have fun with his friends, and he displayed a level of polite openness towards what was taught, which meant he slowly became familiar with the stories and concepts present in the Bible. However, his shock in the face of the healing indicates a level of surprise about the moment when Jesus tangibly entered his reality. Joel needed Jesus to be more than just a concept before he would embrace faith on a deeper level.

Seven participants described their surprise at discovering just how relevant the Christian faith could be. Often this was a contrast to their previously held stereotypes of Christianity, generally assumed to be something boring or unnecessary. Kylie described how this view was challenged when she started attending evening services at her church:

Growing up I always thought church was ... a really strict kind of place ... elderly people who were all just sitting there, facing the front, listening to someone who's really boring, and just kind of just

zoning out.... And then I remember going and actually being ... surprised at how ... everyone was actually really just enjoying the music, listening to the sermon.... [There was a] feeling of everyone just coming together and actually ... being normal, not what I expected. I think that's what I found probably the most powerful thing.... It completely changed my perspective of church.

For Kylie, witnessing people her own age, whom she admired, enjoying and participating in the church service was a key driver in convincing her that the Christian faith could be something relevant to her as a young person.

Some of those I interviewed were surprised and encouraged when they realised that the Christian faith addressed an issue that was pertinent to them. While there were some assumptions, like Kylie's, that Christianity was dull and boring, for most it was simply a lack of understanding that faith could be so wide-reaching. Sheree was surprised that the teaching topic at youth group the first week she attended was depression and that youth leaders were offering to pray for people who were struggling with the illness. Ryan was encouraged when he realised that his moral values and those taught at youth group were so similar. Wade believed that he was too angry to fit in at church or youth group and was encouraged when his youth leaders addressed the topic of anger in a message and provided a Christian understanding of the issue. These participants often contrasted their previous assumptions about the church with the new insights about Christianity that they had learned through their engagements with church and youth group. Similarly, some participants described how hearing another person's testimony helped them understand Christianity better.

Others described a match between their own situation and something they heard in a testimony at church or youth group. This allowed these participants to see the way faith might relate to their own lives and how Christian beliefs and practices could find tangible expression. For example, Astrid mentioned growing up in a family where faith was not spoken about, and when it was, it was always constructed as a negative thing. Having spent her early childhood in Scandinavia, Astrid did not recall observing many Christians in her context practising their faith publicly. Upon migrating to New Zealand, she began attending a youth group in Christchurch. Astrid recalled appreciating the stories of how her youth leaders were expressing their faith in practical ways:

Back then, the leaders used to tell their own stories, or how they've changed or what they've learned or what God has done in their life, and I think those stories were really cool. Not only of like the very cool miracles and things that have happened but like, the small things. I can't remember any specific stories, but they were, the specific examples that the leaders gave were really cool. I guess it gave a context to put things into.

The leaders at Astrid's youth group, most of whom were only a few years older than her, provided stories and a relatable face that gave Astrid the space to imagine what faith could be like.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THIS DISCOVERY

One recent piece of research regarding religion in New Zealand, the McCrindle report, documents current perspectives on the church and Christianity in New Zealand society.<sup>19</sup> This report provides a mixed account of the public perception of the church and the Christian religion in New Zealand, with both negative and positive characteristics mentioned by the study participants. Much of this variety in responses emerges in the report's assessment of how the Christian religion is perceived as a socio-political reality, with answers given that identified New Zealanders' perceptions of how the church has handled homosexuality, or how they felt about Christian friends and workmates.<sup>20</sup> When it came to local congregations and their impact, the study findings are less positive for churches:

Kiwis know ... less when it comes to their local church, with more than one in two (56%) suggesting they don't know their local church well at all. Therefore unsurprisingly, many Kiwis (51%) take a neutral stance regarding the impact of the church in their local area, suggesting it has neither a positive or negative influence in their community.<sup>21</sup>

Later, the authors point out that "younger Kiwis know the least about the church in New Zealand."<sup>22</sup> My data supports this claim. Not only do younger Kiwis appear to know very little about the church in New Zealand in general, but they also know very little about its message, its resources, and its spiritual practices. They might know that the local church runs a Wednesday night youth programme, but even this is not clearly associated with spiritual development, or indeed with any clear understanding of the mission of the local church to its community.

McCrindle Research goes on to note that "given the right circumstances and evidence, just over one in ten Kiwis (12%) would be very open ... to changing their religious views. A further two in five (42%) suggest they are somewhat or slightly open to exploring other religious views."<sup>23</sup> But crucial here is what follows this statement:

Kiwis are most likely to be attracted to exploring religion and spirituality further by seeing first hand people who live out a genuine faith. Three in five (59%) suggest this would either somewhat or strongly attract them to investigating religion and spirituality further. For many Kiwis, conversations with people (27%) have been the main catalyst for thinking about spiritual, religious or metaphysical things.<sup>24</sup>

This suggests that for many New Zealanders, a relational connection is a crucial component in furthering any spiritual change. It also indicates that much of what might cause change in individuals is to do with what

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<sup>19</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief in New Zealand," (May, 2018), <<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>> (2 May, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 6-8.

<sup>21</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 8.

<sup>22</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 48.

<sup>23</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 7.

<sup>24</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 7.

they observe in others. There is no sense here of active seekership or individuals on a spiritual search.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it is through seeing and hearing Christians in action that these participants suggest any real change is likely to occur.<sup>26</sup> Evidence in support of this assertion can be found in this article: in Kylie's experience, watching members of her church care for one another; in Astrid's experience, hearing her youth leaders describe how faith makes a difference in their own lives; and in Jeremy's experience, joining a team on a short-term mission trip and taking part in daily spiritual practices alongside Christian friends and mentors.

As noted above, the doctrine of prevenient grace reminds us of some important principles here, most notably the fact that it is God who always makes the first move in conversion, and that at times, in his grace, God appears to act in individual lives in particularly compelling or impacting ways.<sup>27</sup> My concept of the match, in which there is a high level of synchronicity between personal need and present experience, provides support for both these assertions. Of course, the doctrine of prevenient grace is much broader than this,<sup>28</sup> and there are certain perspectives regarding God's grace that the present project does not illuminate.<sup>29</sup> However, it would seem as though some Arminian perspectives on God's grace are also relevant here. This is particularly the case in the experiences of two participants, Maia and Wade, who for a time following their first experience of a match left the church and chose not to interact with God. Myers notes that "in the words of Arminius, all fallen human beings are 'excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace,' but their liberty of indifference means that 'in the very moment in which they actually assent [to grace], they possess the capability of not assenting'."<sup>30</sup> I would contend that this is a fair understanding of what occurred for Maia and Wade, in that they consciously rejected God's work in their lives for a period of time. In effect, it was not they that persevered in faith, but God, for he graciously drew them back through the situations and relationships that they found themselves in. As Field notes, describing Wesley's attempt to understand this dynamic of God's grace:

Whilst God in love and grace is persistent in seeking to draw people to Godself ... because God respects human freedom, persistent negative responses can result in the withdrawal of the influence of God's grace. God might in sovereign freedom and love continue to engage human beings who respond negatively; when they react positively God intensifies God's presence and power. Wesley's theology is here not entirely coherent in this respect – he attempts to bring together the affirmation of the reality of human liberty, God's persistent love, the reciprocal character of the relationship between grace and humanity and, at the same time, to hold up the possibility of God acting in

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<sup>25</sup> As contrasted, for example, to the research of Wade Clark Roof, where he associates this kind of "seeking" after faith with those in the baby boomer generation. See *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> This theme is explored at length in Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 167–85.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 20–36.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Field, "Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace," 1–8.

<sup>29</sup> Such as whether this grace is resistible or not: of course, I only interviewed those who eventually "gave in" to God's grace. But I am aware that such a question is a dividing line amongst some theologians. See Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 23.

<sup>30</sup> Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 28.

surprising, new and unprecedented ways to respond even to the most resistant sinner. In the end he is confronted with the mystery of God which cannot be reduced to neat theological schemes.<sup>31</sup>

How and why God chose to act in this regard toward Maia and Wade is something that cannot and should not be reduced to a neat theological scheme. Rather, it is best understood as a picture of grace that inspires gratitude and worship.

While there are many possible discussion points that my theory of the match could evoke amongst Christian ministers, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which my findings point specifically to the nature of the conversion journeys of research participants, which in turn provides some possible ministry implications. While the vast majority of those I interviewed were not on an active spiritual search, particular things were nonetheless “found” by these participants as they engaged with the Christian faith. Specifically, three common discoveries were made by those who recounted experiences of a match: they found community, spiritual and emotional health, and real faith. Thus, at the very least, these three common discoveries give some indication as to what the spiritual needs of contemporary secular young people in New Zealand society might be.

Joy in discovering community is particularly relevant for those young people who experience difficulties at home or school and feel a pressing need to find a space where they feel included and loved. Sometimes this might come in the form of a father/parental figure such as a youth leader or even God. Yet it can also be a response to how the group treats the individual, with inclusive, familial communities also meeting this need in participants. The young people in this project described the discovery of a new way of feeling as well as the discovery of community as gifts that came to them through the Christian faith, solutions to something that was missing. Both the discovery of a new way of feeling, and the discovery of community, involve the meeting of an inner need, including a sense of loneliness, isolation from family, lack of self-esteem, or a significant emotional wound. Social concerns such as the search for a group, for affirmation, and feelings of loneliness, are identified by scholars as being more acutely felt during adolescence.<sup>32</sup> Equally, psychological factors influence the individual’s relationship with God, including childhood experience of attachment. While the dynamics of how these experiences influence future spiritual interactions are contested,<sup>33</sup> it is possible that for some of my participants, their experiences of parental figures and family background “primed” them to be more receptive to the ministries they encountered at church and youth group.

The discovery of “real faith” (a term I am using to encompass a broad range of concepts)<sup>34</sup> indicates the value some participants placed on finding a belief system that worked, made sense, and felt personally

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<sup>31</sup> Field, “Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace,” 4.

<sup>32</sup> James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 219; James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 153–54; Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 95; Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 72–73.

<sup>33</sup> Victor Counted, “The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation: A Care-Giving Faith?” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 147–50.

<sup>34</sup> These are: authenticity, evidence of the miraculous, relevance, and relatability.

relevant. Here I find support for Lynne Taylor's assertion that authenticity plays a key role in the conversion process. Taylor argues that:

religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. ... [This] was experienced in four specific ways. First, there was a yearning towards God: towards an authentic spirituality. Secondly, there was a desire to be a better person: a more authentic version of themselves. A third type of longing was expressed when remedial help was required to achieve desired authenticity. This was expressed as a yearning away from dysfunction. Fourthly, there was sometimes a further element to the desire for relational authenticity as existing intellectual frameworks were unable to fully explain one's experiences.<sup>35</sup>

Although my data does not support Taylor in associating a "yearning away from dysfunction" with the search for authenticity, there is still much in the above quotation that is reflected in my research. These ideas also cohere with Andrew Root's assertion that "pulling us like a current underneath the steady lapping waves of Western history has been the movement toward authenticity."<sup>36</sup>

Root demonstrates at significant length, in his *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, the growth and implications of this movement toward authenticity, particularly as it pertains to the Christian faith.<sup>37</sup> Root notes, as he both critiques and affirms this movement, that "what must be affirmed is authenticity's attention to experience.... [A]uthenticity, actually, encourages us to follow our experience, to seek the real and true in and through the experiential."<sup>38</sup> The discoveries outlined above are inescapably "experiential" in nature. They were initiated and nurtured via encounter with God and his people. This does not mean that rationality or reason were set aside during the conversion journey,<sup>39</sup> but that, as Root asserts, the path to faith (and to perceiving faith as "real and true") came via personal experience. Root also describes how this search for experience has exposed a weakness in some expressions of church:

The church has not always created space for the depth of experience itself.... With an unwillingness to speak of divine action as a real experience, the church (especially in the mainline) has too often ignored or downgraded experience itself. Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity have fared much better in the age of authenticity because ... at their best they create space for experience — most powerfully, experiences of transcendence.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, my sample is too small to be able to provide unilateral support for Root's assertion here. Some of my participants who came from mainline churches also reported clear, and highly experiential, moments where a match occurred. However, it could simply be the case that these individuals came from mainline congregations that had allowed room for genuine talk of experience and its relevance to faith development. In any case, this research indicates that church leaders need to evaluate their practices in the

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<sup>35</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 278.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age; The Pastor in a Secular Age*.

<sup>38</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> This is discussed at length in Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 253–58.

<sup>40</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 8–9.

light of the growth of authenticity as a key theme in the Western worldview, with its accompanying commitment to experience as a genuine means of discerning value and truth.

A fresh understanding of the action of God in conversion provides insights for both theology and Christian ministry. In this article, my concept of the “match,” alongside existing ideas regarding the freedom of God and prevenient grace, reminds Christians of the importance of God’s action and independence. In turn, this relativizes any ideas believers may have about their own influence over the behaviour and choices of others. Yet this need not imply that there is nothing for us to do to support or better facilitate the activity of God in engaging with those outside the church. Clearly people today are attracted to authenticity. Equally, people in every society are helped by the presence of supportive and inclusive faith communities. In addition, this research demonstrates, implicitly at least, the importance of prayer, one thing that Christians are called to do to participate in God’s action in the world. This research demonstrates the significance of praying that those attending youth groups would find real community and deep personal relationships, and that they would encounter God in authentic experiences that connect with their real lives. And because prayer encompasses a much broader frame of reference than simple petition, even its petitionary mode is best served by careful attention to what God might be doing or saying.<sup>41</sup> If Christians truly want to join God in ministry to the world around them, they must attend to God’s action, and this, primarily, has its beginning in the regular practice of prayer.

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<sup>41</sup> Here Root notes that “prayer has been wrongly seen as a way to continue to focus on the immanent acts of counting dollars, possessions, and followers while insuring yourself against bad luck. This is not really prayer but wishful thinking cased in religious language.” Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 276.