

SPIRITUALITY, GENDER AND IDENTITY

Women, Identity Development and Spirituality within the Anglican Church of Canada: A  
Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

Identity development has been an active area of research in the field of psychology for many years. This Master's thesis will present results from a study investigating the interplay of gender and spirituality in the identity development of women within the context of the religious institution of the Anglican Church of Canada. Previous scholarship has indicated the potentially harmful impacts of traditionally patriarchal religious institutions on women's identity and spiritual development, indicating the need for further exploration. The sample for this study included twelve participants who self-identified as women, practicing Christians and members of the Anglican Church of Canada. Interpretive phenomenological analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experiences and meaning making of the participants with regards to their identity development within their religious contexts. Specifically, the relationship between identity development, gender and spirituality were explored, in order to better understand the influence of these phenomena on each other and to map a process of identity development that may be particular to women. While each woman's story was unique, emergent themes generated a tentative model that captured characteristics of the participants' experiences that were recurrent across interviews. Analysis revealed a framing theme of *intergenerational journey*, and the superordinate themes of *disruption in integration*, *differentiation*, and *authenticity in integration*, as well as several subordinate themes. This study points to the importance of considering gender identity and spirituality as interactive factors in identity development, and the value of hearing women's voices as essential to gaining access to, and a deeper understanding of, women's experiences.

*Keywords:* gender, spirituality, identity development, women

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**Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review**

Identity development has been an active area of research in the field of psychology for many years. Questions of what it means to be a self, the sources of identity, the role of other people and the environment, and changes in identity across the lifespan have captured the imaginations and professional dedication of not only countless scholars in many fields of inquiry, but also the attention and concern of almost every individual at various times throughout life. Indeed, the question “Who am I?” and our ability to ask this question and questions regarding meaning and subjective experience, are considered by many to be central to what it means to be human (McLean & Syed, 2015). Many attempts, from multiple disciplines, have sought to provide answers to questions relating to identity, including what precisely personal identity is, the processes, and the factors in its development. Erikson (1968), a seminal figure in identity development theories, notes how at times the term identity seems entirely self-evident, and at other times seems to evade any concrete conceptualization, or to be used so loosely that it becomes devoid of meaning. Fifty years later, though neuroscience has made astounding progress in mapping the brain, the concepts of self, consciousness and identity remain highly contested (Smythies & French, 2018). While identity conditions and the meaning of personhood continue to be explored, we continue to live our lives as experiencing, subjective selves with a sense of both personal and social identities (McLean & Syed, 2015). In the twenty-first century, with its expanding levels of connectivity, transient lifestyles, dissemination of ideas, and increasing access to every corner of the world, the human need for identification and

categorization may look different than in previous generations, but is no less present (Hammack, 2015). Hammack describes identity's current role as:

... the tool we have to think about conflict and continuity within an individual person at a time of rapid social change of challenges to local cultural views of self. Identity is thus concerned with sameness and difference at the level of social categorization, group affiliation and intergroup relations, as well as at the level of individual consciousness and subjectivity (2015, p. 2).

This study will focus on the interplay of two potentially influential and interacting factors in identity development that have often been neglected in past research in this field: gender identity, specifically individuals who identify as women; and spirituality as it is practiced, at least in part, through the religious institution of the Anglican Church of Canada.

### **Need for the Study**

The relevance and potential value of an exploration of these factors, in order to contribute to existing knowledge in this area has been made evident both within theology and the social sciences (Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1995; Schwarz, 2017). Ample research has drawn a clear link between identity and spirituality, which raises questions about the possible impacts of gender identity on one's understanding and experiences of their spirituality, and therefore on their overall identity development (Martin, 2003; Pargament, 2007; Saussy, 1991). Growing awareness of the powerful impact of gender identity on experiences of the world indicate women may face a unique set of challenges specific to their gender identity, when they are living out their spirituality through engagement with religion, and in the case of this study, specifically Christianity (Schwarz, 2017). Previous research has highlighted the potentially harmful implications of traditionally male-centered Christian theologies and church power structures on women's sense of self and their spirituality (Daly, 1985; Johnson, 2008; Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1994). The identification of such issues calls for further research to better grasp women's

experiences now. Are the challenges identified by previous scholars still present? How are the women who volunteered currently experiencing their gender identities and spirituality over time, as they engage with an organized religion? What insights might the women in this study have to offer, that may be helpful to those involved in developmental psychology, psychotherapy, theology and spiritual communities?

### **The Study in Context**

Of course, as one examines these topics, one must bear in mind that experiences of being a woman and experiences of religion, in this case the Anglican Church of Canada, are far from monolithic. Gender identity intersects with class, race, socioeconomic status, ability, religion, gender expression, and sexuality, among other factors, to form the unique set of sociocultural contexts in which identity develops (Wong, 2017). While it seems to be crucial to effective clinical practice to apply a lens of intersectionality, the general population of women as a meaningful categorization for research in and of itself has also been documented (Schwarz 2017; Wong, 2017). Therefore, this study aims to offer insight into the significance of gender identity as a key factor in identity development, while acknowledging that other components of identity are at play in mutually shaping each other.

Further, Christianity contains a vast diversity and variation of beliefs, practices and interpretations which are expressed differently between various denominations and also within denominations (Stuckey, 2010). It is beyond the scope of this study to address how the variations between denominations may impact women differently. In order to maintain some level of common basis of experience through uniform liturgy and creedal statements, this study will focus on the Anglican Church of Canada. However, each parish will vary in leadership style, atmosphere, demographics, theological leanings and myriad other factors. Finally, Christianity is

only one form of a vast array of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, the examination of which would most certainly have implications for the field of psychotherapy and would be a worthy area of future research. The study design and methodology therefore do not aim to offer findings that can be generalized, but rather to provide a deeper understanding of the subject at hand (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009).

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this research are two-fold: 1) to explore women's experiences of identity development, specifically by examining the meaning women found in their experiences relating to their gender identity, religious affiliations and spirituality across time, and 2) to provide insight and greater understanding of the phenomena for women, spiritual leaders and mental health clinicians working with women who are engaged in spirituality within a religious institution, in order to better grasp the potentially unique factors and development process some women may be experiencing.

### **Identity**

Theories of identity have a long history and have been approached from many different perspectives both within the field of psychology and many other disciplines (Hammack, 2015). The meaning of terms such as self, identity, consciousness, experience and identity development, vary depending on the perspective of the scholar (Smythies & French, 2018). However, at least working definitions of these terms are essential for understanding the topic of investigation. The follow ideas are offered with the caveat that they are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive and have been selected for their compatibility with a phenomenological approach. Beginning with two key terms, previous scholars have found it helpful to delineate the concepts of *self* and *identity*. Hammack (2015) describes *self* as one's interior world: one's perceptions and awareness as an individual psychological process. This differentiation is in keeping with

Erikson's idea of ego identity, as personal continuity and sameness through the integration of one's basic and private beliefs about one's self over time (McLean & Syed, 2015). In contrast, *identity* links one's interior self to the exterior world of language, categorization and relationships as a relational tool used to present one's self and to engage with the world (Hammack, 2015). As defined, identity and self are aspects of the same process, though not synonymous. For the purposes of this study, identity will be the primary focus, as the link that generates meaning between individual cognitive processes and the external, social world (Hammack, 2015). As Schwiezer (2004) notes, one's identity is unavoidably relational as it changes in the context of different relationships, and is constantly influenced by the many transitions that occur throughout the lifespan. It is in this realm of the experience of being a self, engaged with the world that phenomenologists believe meaning is found, and this is specifically the concern of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which will be explained in more detail in the next chapter (Smith et al., 2009). However, having identified IPA as an appropriate method of analysis for the topic of interest, it would be helpful to provide an explanation of terms and ideas that are especially pertinent to this approach.

### **Identity and Phenomenology**

A phenomenological approach to research is concerned with understanding human lived experience, and IPA is specifically concerned with how people make sense of significant experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is exploratory in that it, "tries to give a direct description of a particular human experience as it is, without taking into account its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the research may be able to provide," (Grindstaff, Wrisberg & Ross, 2010). Phenomena in question could be any particular event, object, emotion, process or relationship (Patton, 2002). This approach is undertaken with the social constructionist assumption that one only knows what they are experiencing through

description and interpretation of sensory perception that is mediated by an individual's unique lens, rather than as direct access to some objective reality (Patton, 2002). Experience is defined by Dainton (2008) as, "any item or state with a phenomenal character, and something has a character of this type if there is something that it is like to have it" (p.29). This definition of experience is linked to consciousness in that one must be *aware* in order for the experience to be conscious and for there to be something that *it is like* to be having the experience (Dainton, 2008). Translating philosophical ideas into everyday language, one sees that this form of experiencing is not a philosophical abstraction but rather one undertaken daily, each time one is aware of, pays attention to, and reflects upon her perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). The experiences of others cannot be accessed directly, so a phenomenological approach to research aims to get as close as possible, operating from the assumption that humans are in a continual process of meaning-making, that the experience is perceived by the individual through a constant process of interpretation and that the researcher's interpretation of the participants' meaning making results in a double hermeneutic that is intrinsic to IPA (Smith et al., 2009). A phenomenological approach prioritizes subjective experience as a way to describe, explore and interpret the ways in which participants make sense of their worlds (Smith et al., 2009). As Dainton (2008) states, a phenomenological self is an experience-based approach to the self, and this offers one approach for exploring identity development. By utilizing this method in the examination of processes of identity development, the researcher aimed at accessing lived experiences in order to allow for emergent themes and for the experiences to speak for themselves, inviting exploration into new ways of understanding.

### **Identity Development**

Tracing the history of identity development in the social sciences often begins with William James, who wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century about identity as a "sense of selfsameness and

continuity in self perception” (as cited in Hammack, 2015, p.10). James was highly influential to the work of Erikson (1968), whose concept of the identity crisis and psycho-social stages of identity development have laid the groundwork for the development of many subsequent theories, and is still widely referenced and utilized within the field of psychology. Another key figure in identity development approaches was George Herbert Mead, who emphasized the role of social interactions in identity development, and posited that identity was socially constructed (Hammack, 2015). James’s focus on continuity of mind in contrast to Mead’s emphasis on social interactions has led to what could be described as a false divide in approaches to identity development that can be traced through the history of the field (McLean & Syed, 2015). Today, a wide variety of approaches to identity development are being used, with varying levels of integration between individual psychology and social context. There are two approaches to identity development that are especially worth noting in relation to the present study, although there are many others which could likely also be effective dialogue partners with the data gathered.

**Narrative identity.** A narrative identity development approach, commonly attributed to Dan McAdams (2011), situates identity as an autobiographical construction; an evolving life story that integrates past and imagined future to create purpose, a narrative arc and continuity over time (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This approach sees humans as story telling creatures, and their identities as formed out of the construction and sharing of these stories (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Unlike stage theories of identity development, narrative identity theory does not follow a set of predetermined stages that must be moved through sequentially, rather it is a fluid process of continual reconstruction of past events and projections into the future, marked by increasing levels of causal and thematic coherence as individuals mature (Hammack, 2015;

Murdock, 2013). Developing an identity through narrative is an interactional process, as one learns to tell her story within the parameters of certain groups and cultures, as well as continually reshaping, editing and processing past experiences through the influence of others (McAdams & McLean, 2013). A narrative approach is based in social constructionist philosophy, as one's view of herself, others and the world is constructed through interactions with others, the influence of social contexts and individual and collective interpretation and meaning making used to create life stories (Murdock, 2013).

**Interactional identity.** An interactional approach to identity development, as outlined by Korobov (2015) encompasses several theories including narrative theory; incorporating elements from more internally focused and more externally focused theories, and is also grounded in social constructionism. Social constructionism emphasizes: the role of language, the social nature of knowledge and the crucial role of relationships in experience and understanding (Hammack, 2015). In other words, humans do not have direct access to an objective, singular reality, but rather they construct knowledge about reality through their particular contexts and in relationship with others (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of this study, and in keeping with a phenomenological methodology, this means that the phenomena can only be understood within its context and cannot be generalized to other settings, or beyond the individuals interviewed (Patton, 2002).

Korobov's (2015) discussion of interactional identity development draws on the lineage of both James' focus on individual cognition and Mead's focus on social interactions in an effort to adequately acknowledge the interaction of internal and external influences, in a field that has generally prioritized one at the expense of the other (2015). This approach assumes that development happens incrementally in the course of interactions in different contexts, as

identities are tested, revised, and integrated (Korobov, 2015). He describes the defining features of this approach by noting that, “identities are not character types that are the result of reconciling stepwise developmental tasks, but rather reflect the burgeoning social and cultural capacity (or dexterity) to be rhetorically responsive and answerable in the midst of social interactions” (Korobov, 2015, p.4). Hammack highlights the link between an interactional approach and a narrative approach, stating that narrative theory bridges individual and social cognition, the influence of language and sociocultural contexts (2015). The current study’s focus on the development of identity in context, allows for the potential examination of internal and external factors in development, using the mechanism of narrative as a frame for meaning making.

### **The Spiritual Dimension**

Turning to the spiritual dimension of this research, it is essential to define some key terms to avoid conflation of concepts that are connected but also distinct. Western understandings of spirituality and religion have changed over time with shifts in cultural practices, increasing individualism, and a growing aversion to traditional authority structures (Pargament, 2007). The constructs of religion and spirituality are incredibly hard to define, as they are dynamic, continually-shifting and context dependent phenomena. The terms spirituality and religion are increasingly considered, in current Western thought, as separate spheres of belief, with many people defining themselves as spiritual but not religious (Gall, Malette, & Guiriguis-Younger, 2011). This relatively recent polarization often endorsed by those in mental health professions does not necessarily reflect clients’ lived-experiences, acknowledge the impact of context and personal history, and this stance sometimes romanticizes spirituality in a form divorced from religion (Pargament, 2007).

While previous research has often assessed religion and spirituality with a simplistic approach of inquiring about denominational affiliation or religiosity, today's pluralistic and increasingly secular society requires a more nuanced understanding of these terms (Doolittle, 2016). The popular idea that religion is a set of traditions and doctrines that emphasize the communal and relational aspects of belief often associated with institutions, whereas spirituality is associated with meaning, connection to the transcendent, and an inward, individual search, may well be setting up a false dichotomy (Doolittle, 2016). As King (2008) points out, though secular society often desires to see spirituality and religion as two separate spheres, a historical perspective reveals spirituality as, "mutually embedded...but not exclusively contained by [religion]" (p. 2). Such a sharp distinction presents an impoverished view of both phenomena, hindering both social and personal growth by severing one from the other (King, 2008). Discussions of spirituality often refer to whatever an individual perceives as sacred. At certain points in the history of Western thought, what was sacred was often contrasted to what was profane, or associated with ordinary experience, materiality and the biological world (Magee, 1995). Over time, this false dichotomy has been challenged, and today beliefs about what is considered sacred can range from ideas about transcendent beings, mystical experiences and the afterlife, to the natural world, the human body, relationships, ethical standards, and lifestyle choices, amidst countless other things (Pargament, 2007). Spirituality, as it relates to the sacred, can be described as what one holds as ultimate, beyond one's self, associated with divinity, or of great value, and has been described as "a central element of one's deepest self," (Gall et al., 2011, p. 165). Pargament (2007) notes the common denominator of religion and spirituality is a quest for the sacred, with religion often being the collective, externalized form, and spirituality the more internalized, individual aspect of this quest. Since the parameters of this study are

confined to women practicing their spirituality through Christianity, it is reasonable, within this study, to take the view that spirituality and religion are deeply connected and that religion serves as a framework through which one encounters what one considers sacred, and as a way to access one's spirituality (Gall et al., 2011; Pargament, 2007). Participants will be given the opportunity to delineate any differences between their understandings of these terms during the data collection interviews, however distinctions often made in the literature will be offered below.

**Spirituality.** References to spirituality continue to be made in increasingly diverse aspects of contemporary society, so that it has, in some cases, been rendered close to meaningless in its' myriad contexts (King, 2008). Different value judgments have been placed on the concept of spirituality, ranging from describing spirituality as free-thinking, open-minded, something desirable and longed for, to less positive attributes such as being ego-centric, lacking structure and discipline, and leading to relativism and something to be resisted or rejected (Doolittle, 2016). The spiritual is often used to reference a power greater than ourselves, something beyond, often linked to the transcendent, whether that be God, the Divine or some other higher power (King, 2008). It is often linked to ideas about the mind, consciousness, reflection, discernment and a deepening self-awareness (King, 2008). King (2008) offers a perspective that highlights aspects of spirituality that may be important to this study: she highlights the connections between spirituality and imagination, creativity and relationships with ourselves, others and the transcendent, and how these aspects of spirituality can play out within all human experiences. Further, King (2008) acknowledges the potential for spirituality to be both a source of joy and celebration, as well as suffering and struggle. It is a lived experience, both rooted in history, culture and religion and also unique to the individual.

Within the social sciences, the term spiritual has often been equated with the words balance, satisfaction, positivity and peace, and within social science research can sometimes lead to the reduction of spirituality to emotional wellness (Doolittle, 2016). Linking the term spiritual back to its Latin origin of *spiritus*, also translated as breathing or respiring, indicates a connection between spirituality and the invisible forces that provide life (Doolittle, 2016). Here the emphasis is on the sacred dimension, so that spirituality is not simply a constellation of traits of emotional health, but a source of these traits that is seen by the individual as sacred; something beyond one's individual self, which cannot be reduced to psychological processes (Pargament, 2007).

**Religion.** Religion, especially within Christian contexts, has often been associated with belief in God, along with associated institutional structures and dogma (Doolittle, 2016). In Christianity, religiosity is often measured by church attendance, following rules and moral codes (Doolittle, 2016). At various times throughout Western history, it has been described as old-fashioned and traditional, and has often put in opposition to reason. Religion stems from the latin word *religare* which means "to bind," binding us to God, each other and the earth (Doolittle, 2016). In this sense, religion is the external, formal and structured expression of what a community holds to be true regarding the sacred (Doolittle, 2016). Fowler describes religion as a, "cumulative tradition composed from the myriad beliefs and practices that have expressed and formed the faith of persons in the past and present" (1996, p.56). He notes that religion can form and bring faith and spirituality into one's conscious awareness, showing the inextricable link between religion and faith for people who hold a religious world view (Fowler, 1996).

Faith and belief are terms that are often used when referencing religion, particularly religious traditions based on a belief in God. Faith, however, does not always need to refer to

religious content, or affiliation with a belief system, though in many cases it does (Fowler, 1981). Rather, it is the way in which we find coherent meaning in the many dimensions that together constitute our lives (Fowler, 1981). It is a question of one's ultimate concerns, and shapes the trajectory and energy of our lives (Fowler, 1981). Beliefs are the concepts and propositions that come out of attempts to express and translate experiences of the sacred (Fowler, 1981). Belief can be a way that faith is expressed, but faith is about trust in the transcendent or sacred, not a faith in certain ideas themselves (Fowler, 1981). Faith in this more inclusive sense, as well as the more traditional concept of religious faith are both relevant to the present study as the researcher explores ways of understanding and making meaning used by participants who hold a religious worldview.

**Christianity and the Anglican Church of Canada.** Under the umbrella of religion, Christianity can take many different forms, and have many meanings. Any attempt to encapsulate all of Christianity into a concise definition will inevitably fall short. According to Stuckey (2010), Christianity can be roughly broken down into the Orthodox Church, Asian Orthodox Churches, Roman Catholicism and various denominations of Protestantism. The Anglican Church is sometimes called the "middle way," or "reformed Catholicism," as it retains elements of both Catholicism as well as various influences of Protestantism (The Anglican Church of Canada [TACC], 2018). Anglicanism's roots are in the Church of England. Anglicanism didn't emerge as a term used to describe a specific form of Christianity until the 19th century (Sykes, Booty & Knight, 1999). Its development began in the 16th century when the Church of England separated from the Roman Catholic Church. It was influenced by processes of reformation and counterreformation, the movements of which resulted in many of the denominational divisions we see today (Sykes, Booty & Knight, 1999). As part of these

influences, the Church of England chose to simplify many of the rituals and make services accessible in English, while still maintaining some traditional elements, including the creeds and governance by bishops (TACC, 2018). Anglicanism's definitive resource has been, since the beginning, the successive editions of the Book of Common Prayer and later the Book of Alternative Services, which have formed the outline and essence of both theology and practice, leading to a liturgy and lectionary that are relatively uniform across Canadian parishes and worldwide (Sykes et al., 1999). Anglican churches both in Canada and internationally see the Eucharist as a central component of Sunday worship services, as well as the importance of symbols such as the baptismal font, communion altar and cross (TACC, 2018).

The Anglican Church of Canada established independence from the Church of England in 1893, but remains in full communion with the Church of England as well as 44 other churches that are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion (TACC, 2018). The Anglican Church of Canada operates with four levels of governance, including the national office or General Synod, bishops who oversee the diocese covering different geographic regions, with each diocese containing several parishes. Through the process of two meetings by the national office of the Anglican Church of Canada in 1973 and 1975, legislation was passed that enabled the ordination of the first women into the priesthood, which occurred in 1976. The first woman elected as a bishop occurred in 1993 after approval was given for the election of women bishops in 1986 (TACC, 2018). Presently, the Anglican Church of Canada has over 500,000 members in 1,700 parishes and represents a diverse community, reflecting the multi-culturalism of Canadian society (TACC, 2018).

**Spirituality in psychotherapy.** While Canada has been witnessing a decline in religious affiliation in many areas, over half of the Canadian population still identifies with a Christian

religious institution, including both Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations (Dilmaghani, 2017). This indicates that to provide the best client care possible, it is crucial for psychotherapists to have a thorough and nuanced understanding of how spirituality and religion can shape people's worldview, identity, and the approach clients take to psychotherapy (Griffiths, 2010). Since considerable research has shown religious beliefs and spirituality may be part of the core of one's identity and an essential dimension of a person, addressing these beliefs can have profound effects (Gall, Malette, & Guiriguis-Younger, 2011; Martinez de Pisón, 2009). The potentially positive implications of integrating spiritual concerns into counselling are clear if psychotherapists are able to provide a safe space for exploration and offer possibilities to consider, in an appropriate and sensitive way (Pargament, 2007). As it pertains to the current study, this may require the psychotherapist to be aware of how a woman's experiences and understanding of Christian faith have shaped her relationship with God and herself, knowing that questions of who a woman is with others, with God and with herself may be deeply intertwined (Martin, 2003). Pargament (2007) notes that spirituality can be both a source of wellbeing and also a problem, and that therapists must have an awareness of when a helpful resource becomes detrimental to client health. If psychotherapy can be a place to consider avenues that enable the growth of a healthy spirituality, this could have a transformative impact on both the individual and her community. Regarding the positive potential of addressing spirituality, King (2008) states:

A wide understanding and exploration of spirituality is of considerable interest today, not only to people of religious faith but also to those working in psychotherapy... Contemporary understandings of spirituality capture the dynamic, transformative quality of spirituality as lived experience, an experience linked to our bodies, to nature, to our relationships with others and society. (p. 4).

Further exploration of this topic, including the relevancy and implications for the field of counselling requires an examination of women's understandings and experiences of God and the relationship of those ideas to women's sense of self. As Pargament (2007) states, clients bring their spiritual beliefs, values and worldviews into the counselling room with them, and spirituality often enters the therapy process, whether the therapist or client is aware of this or not. An approach to research that acknowledges humans as integrated psychological, social, physical and spiritual beings must take seriously the implications of the shape and understanding of that spirituality on the other dimensions of a person (Pargament, 2007).

**Spirituality and identity development.** The idea of spirituality as a key component of overall identity development, and the exploration of different processes surrounding spiritual development has a long history. It has been well documented across disciplines that religion is an instrument of identity development, both individually and culturally (Gall et al., 2011; Martinez de Pisón, 2013). For people who actively practice a form of Christian religious faith, the development of self is clearly related to their understanding of God (Martin, 2003). As D'Costa (2000) states, "the way we envisage the trinity is also a question about how we see ourselves, which in turn is already a question about how we view God," (p. Xi). In a study of young women's identity development in relation to Christian education, Martin (2003) noted that young women are particularly vulnerable when it comes to healthy identity development and the language that Christians use to name God. According to Berger (2013) there are approximately one billion Christian women worldwide, therefore the identification of gender as a potential risk factor in healthy identity development warrants serious consideration. The concept of identity will vary between researchers depending on one's theoretical framework, however, recent research has shown that a personal experience of God or a higher being is "integral to one's

identity”(Gall et al., 2011, p. 158). In an article by Martin (2003), identity is linked to self-esteem and the development of one’s voice. Similarly, in Saussy’s explorations of women’s spirituality, she draws a direct connection between images of God and the development of self-esteem, including the true and false self (1991). She outlines the connection by stating, “religious faith does not contribute to self esteem unless it grows out of and along with faith in one’s abilities, in one’s intrinsic worth, in one’s capacity for intimacy: out of and along with faith in oneself (Saussy, 1991, p. 14). Her research has shown that self-concept, God, and one’s ability to value oneself are all interrelated (Saussy, 1991).

Many approaches to understanding spiritual development have been generated, perhaps the most popular being Fowler’s Faith Development Theory (1995). Fowler’s Stages of Faith model, influenced by the theories of Piaget and Erikson, maps a development process that begins at birth with *primal faith* and continues through six successive stages to *universalizing faith* which some individuals reach later in adulthood (Fowler, 1995). He is careful to note that not everyone moves through all the stages, and that regression to previous stages occurs, however movement forward is sequential and has been observed to follow the pattern he outlines (Fowler, 1995). Fowler’s approach to faith as a complex construct that is intimately linked to personal identity, relationships and meaning making is one of several spiritual development theories currently in use that clearly ties spiritual development to psychological approaches to identity development, seeing it as one facet, though an integral one, of a multi-faceted process (Fowler, 1995).

### **Women and Gender**

The meaning of terms and concepts relating to gender research, like many ideas within the human sciences, have shifted over time and important distinctions need to be made for words

that have often been used interchangeably. Both gender and sex tend to be addressed within a binary system of male/ female (Fulton, 2017). Sex is a biological designation, of which approximately 98% of the population falls within the defined characteristics of either male or female (Fulton 2017). Murdock (2013) describes gender as the construct that is the social representation or meaning of sex designation. How one identifies oneself in terms of the culturally defined characteristics of gender is one's gender identity, in other words, one's acceptance of one's self in relation to their biological markers (Fulton, 2017; Pierceson, 2016). The terms sexuality and sexual orientation are used in reference to one's gender attractions (Pierceson, 2016). The man/ woman binary that has historically dominated Western culture is increasingly being challenged, as gender identity becomes a more accepted part of self-determination and self-expression and as gender identity and expression is seen to be increasingly independent of biology (Murdock, 2013; Pierceson, 2016). Shifting expectations about one fitting into a binary conceptualization of gender are leading to more nuanced discussions on the topic. For example, a transgender person, is someone whose gender identity is not fully consistent with their biological sex and the expectations of a culture that are associated with those sexual characteristics (Pierceson, 2016). In contrast, a cisgendered person's identity and expression of that identity fits within cultural expectations of their biological sex (Pierceson, 2016).

Gender roles are the societal expectations of behavior and appearance that are attached to being male or female; how one is expected to perform her gender within a given culture (Helgeson, 2017). The gender roles of men and women contain features that are generally described as either masculine or feminine and these are communicated through family, peers, education, media, religion and culture (Fulton, 2017). Masculinity and femininity are made up of

a constellation of traits, behaviors, expectations and stereotypes that a society associates with being male or female (Helgeson, 2017). For example, in North America the traits of assertion, independence, competitiveness, aggression and stoicism are considered masculine (Murdock, 2013). In contrast, commonly accepted feminine traits include sensitivity, passivity, emotionality, helping behaviours and preoccupation with appearance (Helgeson, 2017; Murdock, 2013). These individual traits also translate into social expectations with men seen as career-oriented and women seen as relationship and family-oriented (Murdock, 2013). Needless to say, many of the terms and ideas relating to gender, are at least to some extent, based in and influenced by culture, ethnic background and other intersecting factors, so that each society will understand gender in a unique way; however, the connection between gender and power is widely recognized across cultures, connecting the experiences of women as a whole (Helgeson, 2017).

### **Conceptualizing Gender and Gender Identity Development**

Within psychology research, efforts to differentiate between the psychological and biological embodiment of male and female have traditionally been made by noting sex as a biological marker (male and female primary and secondary sex characteristics), and gender as socially constructed categories (culturally defined characteristics of men and women) (Shields, 2002). Understandings of gender have continued to evolve, and recent discourse more and more sees gender, not as a fixed set of traits, but rather as a performative phenomenon continually in process (Fulton, 2017). Though gender differences are widely acknowledged, various conceptualizations of the origins of gender differences continue to be argued today (Murdock, 2013; Schwarz, 2017). Are gender and sexuality socially constructed or biologically based? Some scholars and experts in the field have taken an essentialist stance that sees gender as fixed, and largely biologically determined, based on neuroscience, hormones, chromosomes and

anatomy (Fulton, 2017). Proponents of this view argue that this fixedness is culturally important and central to a critique of male-dominated societies (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). To see gender through the lens of men versus women with inherent gender differences enables a clear examination of the social and political power differentials that have historically existed between men and women. This approach argues that the experiences of oppression that are often a result of being a woman in a society operating within this binary, requires a serious examination that acknowledges the impacts of gender difference (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). It has been stated that to shift understandings of gender to include transgender individuals or to eradicate gender identifiers in public policy will interfere with the ability to recognize and address discrimination against women (Pierceson, 2016). Further, this stance, often taken by more radical or socialist feminists seeks to celebrate gender differences and avoid the internalization of patriarchal values as the norm to be worked towards by women (Murdock, 2013).

Others have taken a sociocultural view and have incorporated social constructionism principles into their analyses, agreeing with transgender and intersex theorists that gender is, to a great degree, socially constructed (Fulton, 2017; Pierceson, 2016). However, many who take this stance still maintain that male power is a phenomenon of significant force that must be acknowledged and critiqued (Pierceson, 2016). For example, McClintock Fulkerson and Briggs (2013), cite globalization as a force that constructs identities as Western consumers, and also allows the deconstruction of essentialist theories of identity by exposing us to a diversity of cultural, social and religious contexts that conceptualize gender in different ways. In this way identity is not essentialized through fixed identity markers, rather it becomes a relational process of engagement that emphasizes context and intersecting factors (McClintock Fulkerson &

Briggs, 2013). Feminists that take this view see gender as a construction of culture, and psychological differences as largely the result of socialization (Murdock, 2013). Those working within the social sciences generally accept that socialization plays a significant role in gender differences and understandings of gender identity, and point to shifting societal expectations and shifting gender roles as indicators of the potential for change (Fulton, 2017).

**Gender in the study's context.** This study focuses on a Canadian context, which is comprised of a richly diverse and multi-cultural population. The focus on women in this study does not attempt to capture a universal experience or understanding. Further, while this study seeks in part, to explore the development of one's gender identity as a woman, it should also be noted that such experiences can be deeply connected to one's sexuality and expectations of the ways that gender roles are performed in different sexual relationships as well as the challenging of gender norms by both heterosexual women and those who identify with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community (Pierceson, 2016). This may be further complicated by the presence of religious beliefs and institutions in the participants' lives since many religious institutions have a complicated history in their application of doctrine and practices with regards to women and sexuality (Daly, 1985). Needless to say, intersections between gender identity and other elements of one's identity, both personally and in one's social contexts, means that any statements about womanhood cannot be universally applied, as investigations into women's gender identity cannot fully capture the meaning of womanhood as it is influenced by many factors for each individual. As Berger (2013) states, the category of 'women' is not a stable or stand alone identifier, but rather a category that is in continual and shifting dialogue with other identity markers, that are unique to time and culture. The study design's open-ended interview questions and criterion of self-identification in the recruitment

process are intended to open up discussion of any meaningful intersections of gender identity with other identity factors, allowing the sense making of participants' identities to emerge from the data.

An inductive approach to analysis prioritizes subjective experience in the development, meaning, and role of gender identity for the women being interviewed. Therefore, the current study's phenomenological approach does not require a predetermined conceptualization of gender identity. However, the research question and methodology, and specifically the chosen population from which the sample was drawn, indicate certain assumptions and questions regarding gender identity brought to the study by the researcher. Firstly, examining gender and identity development as it pertains to a specific social context suggests social constructionist principles and assumptions about the significant impact of social interactions in identity development. Secondly, by identifying the population of interest as the general category of women, the researcher is suggesting that there is something important about womanhood as a discrete category and as an identity marker that is engaged with social contexts, rather than entirely shaped by them. Gilligan captures the need for a balance in conceptualizing gender when she states:

I find the question of whether gender differences are biologically determined or socially constructed to be deeply disturbing. This way of posing the question implies that people, men and women alike, are either genetically determined or a product of socialization- that there is no voice- and without voice, there is not possibility for resistance, for creativity, or for change whose wellsprings are psychological (Gilligan, 2003, p.xix).

Therefore, a study that accesses women's experiences of their gender identity will provide the space for participants to give voice to their understanding of gender identity, allowing meaning to emerge from the data rather than pre-imposing a conceptualization of gender.

### **Gender in Psychotherapy**

Gender has important implications for one's relationships and health, and psychotherapy has a history of inadequately addressing individual and systemic level power differentials related to gender (Helgeson, 2017; Murdock, 2013). Whatever conceptualization of gender identity development that a clinician adopts, acknowledging the potentially crucial role of gender identity in mental health has been thoroughly documented (Schwarz, 2017). Approaches to psychotherapy that address the particular impacts of culture on women date back to Freud, Adler and Horney, sometimes in problematic ways that reinforce oppressive ideas (Murdock, 2013). Most traditional counselling theories were developed by men and based on studies of boys and men, often leading to the pathologizing of women in ways that reflected the androcentric lens of the theorist's approach (Schwarz, 2017). Exploring identity, empowerment and awareness of the effect of internalized sociocultural messages can be especially valuable to women, given women's increased vulnerability to discrimination, violence, oppression and poverty (Schwarz, 2017). There are many approaches to counselling that are sensitive to the role of gender and counteract psychotherapy's tendency to focus on the individual at the expense of adequately addressing societal factors and gender related messages (Schwarz, 2017). Emotion focused therapy, narrative therapies, strength based interventions, and the application of feminist philosophy in therapy are just a few examples of avenues for psychotherapy that are sensitive to the role of gender in experience (Murdock, 2013; Schwarz, 2017).

### **Feminist Theology**

**Historical background.** While this study takes an inductive approach to data analysis rather than the application of pre-existing theories or philosophies, the historical context which makes the importance of this area of research evident will help to situate the topic in terms of relevance, and understanding the feminist theological underpinnings that informed the chosen

methodology. Firstly, to consider very briefly the development of feminist theology: within the dominant cultural narrative of Western modernity, the First Wave of feminism was defined by the women's suffrage movement beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). By the 1960s, Second Wave feminism was a growing force that was challenging the patriarchal narrative, re-examining gender roles, and drawing attention to male-domination and power differentials. This was occurring not just in the public realm but in the private realm as well, including women's reproductive rights and domestic violence (Pierceson, 2016). However, the emergence of Third and Fourth Wave feminism has highlighted how the Western narrative cannot claim to be representative of some global story of feminist struggle, in the light of increasing acknowledgment of alternative histories and those rendered invisible by the traditionally white, Western, Christian, middle-class discourse (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013).

Feminist theology developed in the context of Second Wave feminism in North America, seeking change through social movements and mostly fueled by white women activists (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). The oppression and subordination experienced by many women resulting from the patriarchal system that has dominated historical and contemporary doctrine and practice in much of Western Christianity has received growing attention and is now widely acknowledged (Johnson, 2008). The work of scholars, especially feminist theologians over the past several decades, has offered a rich body of discourse on the topic and laid the ground work for this study (Christ, 2003; Daly, 1985; Johnson, 2008; King, 1994).

In the second half of the twentieth century, as women began to experience a greater disparity between their lives as women in a shifting culture and their lives in church institutions,

critique, reform and challenges by women began to reshape liturgy in North America (Berger, 2013). Subsequently, other movements have emerged that focus on a greater diversity of perspectives within feminist theology, including the Womanist and mujerista theologies by women of color (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). The Second Wave feminist theology, beginning in the mid-1980s drew attention to the heteronormative bias that was often operating and the impacts of globalization, especially challenges to the exclusively Western perspective that had previously often failed to acknowledge the intersection of class, sexuality, racial, ethnic, economic, cultural, religious and political factors. Historically, feminist theology has been accused of developing discourses that ignore the majority of women around the world living in poverty, struggling to overcome oppression and violence, and who bear a huge proportion of the burden of social injustices (Aquino, 2013). Today, feminist theology, rather than monolithic, encompasses a huge range of diverse views, ideas and perspectives from a diversity of women, with a shared desire to have theology grounded in women's life experiences, and a return to an embodied spirituality (Althaus-Reid, 2013).

**The current state.** Feminist theology is now built on the belief that context is central to meaningful theology, acknowledging that gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, globalization, and other factors all intersect to inform and shape ideas and experiences (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). In addition, individuals occupy multiple cultures and realities, accentuated by technology and virtual global communities, and these multiple aspects of our selves all contribute to forming our identities (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). By taking this viewpoint, one acknowledges that gender is not necessarily the basic building block of identity for all women; the complex interaction of identity informers means that gender cannot be examined in a vacuum, but must be seen as one of multiple identities, that is at least to some

extent, socially constructed (Berger 2013; McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). Feminist theology works to reconstruct ways of developing knowledge by breaking free of strict scientific criteria built on rationalizing science and instead acknowledging the whole human being, and emphasizing the power and credibility of experience (Dumais, 2004). Dumais notes that, “as the Christian tradition does not attach meaning to the experiences of women, women are obliged to probe the meaning of what happens to them in the course of their lives and to manifest that meaning” (Dumais, 2004, pg. 86). Women’s experiences have become a way forward for the field of feminist theology, both by integrating these experiences into Christian tradition and as a touchstone to guide us away from areas where patriarchy has manipulated the essence of Christian faith (Dumais, 2004). Berger (2013) notes how acknowledging and sometimes even prioritizing women’s experiences and approaches to worship are underway on both global and local levels, with more formalized feminist ritualizing movements taking shape and growing over the last half century. Woman-focused liturgy and various religious rituals and forms of worship are currently operating with varying levels of ecclesial support; it seems that increasingly, Christian churches of different denominations are enabling, at varying degrees, for women to claim ritual spaces for themselves (Berger, 2013). However, in the midst of continued shifts in language, leadership structures, gender roles and Biblical interpretations advocated for by feminists, there is still resistance and open opposition to many of these changes (Berger, 2013). In other words, though the state of feminist theology has experienced considerable transformation, especially in the last century, it remains a continued area of concern and consideration.

**Self-image and God-image.** Feminist theologians argue that current and historical church structures, such as widely accepted Biblical interpretations, and the use of particular

language in liturgy are implicit in perpetuating patriarchal ideologies in as far as the church continues to speak of God in one particular way at the expense of all others (Johnson, 1994). The relationship between the language humans use to describe God and the way we experience God is complex, and influenced by multiple cultural and historical factors (D'Costa, 2000).

According to the well-known theologian Martin Buber, “[God] is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated...Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground,” (as cited in Martinez de Pisón, 2013). God’s various names and descriptions have been manipulated for human purposes, perhaps more than any other set of words throughout history. In an effort to possess God, to define God in finite human terms, humanity has often reduced God to a one-dimensional character (Martinez de Pisón, 2013). The model of God as Father and other male symbols are sometimes the only understandings of God offered and this univocal correspondence between God and man can be interpreted as a description of God (McFague, 1987). Examinations of gender and God can often bring up discussions of female sexuality and the complicated relationship many societies and women have to the female body (McFague, 1987; Nagoski, 2015). It has been argued that women are not able to have their full sexual identity affirmed through identification with God since God is associated exclusively with biological maleness (Martin, 2003). Women and women’s bodies have often been the scapegoat throughout history, associated more with nature than with the spirit, unclean and always changing, and thus needing to be controlled (Christ, 2003). Others have claimed women are not in the image of God in terms of the physical body or in their role in society, or described women as defective males who must submit to their male-counterparts (Johnson, 2008). Traditional Christian theology has often made women’s bodies a source of shame, something to be covered, monitored and regulated, further

perpetuating silence by women on these topics (Christ, 2003). In light of this gendered division of God image and self image, examining women's experiences in a specifically Christian context is warranted, and accessing women's perspectives is essential. Indeed, Berger (2013) notes how many of the women within Christian church institutions who are engaged with these issues are challenging the previously clearly demarcated lines between church and feminist spirituality as they work to balance the tension between tradition and innovation (Berger, 2013). She describes this as a refusal to be pushed out of church institutions, while also refusing to necessarily conform to longstanding expectations of gender roles and acceptance of the liturgical status quo. Her observations point to the potential insight and "on the ground" experience that women may have to offer as they navigate these complex issues while remaining engaged with Christian organized religion.

### **Women and Research**

Studies done for and about women from women's perspectives tend to defy traditional scientific approaches which claim truth in the absence of the "other," who are often voiceless and excluded from the academic research process (Dumais, 2004). Gormly and Brodzinsky (1993) highlight how research findings from studies conducted almost exclusively on and by white men have often been applied to women and people from various ethnic, cultural and socio-economic circumstances, without due consideration of differences in development and the influence of intersecting factors. In light of a history that has prioritized men's voices and experiences, the importance of opening up a space to hear women's voices has been urged by many scholars. This means research often looks like a collaborate relationship between researcher and subject, in a process that shifts the power from expert and reality studied, to an exploration of equals (Dumais, 2004). Carol Gilligan (2003) describes her own research as a relational context where conversations are protected by confidentiality, and where the researcher has upended the usual

power dynamic and is coming to learn from women. She notes how this approach revealed that women often have a strong sense of what they think, believe and want, that they do not feel safe to express in their daily lives (Gilligan, 2003).

Over the course of the last several decades feminist scholars have highlighted the potential challenges and limitations of traditional approaches to social science research as it relates to the exploration and analysis of gender and gender identity (Harding, 2008). Research tends to reflect the concerns and questions of the dominant social group, which has historically led to an inadequate, underrepresentation of women's lives and experiences (Campbell & Schram 1995; Harding, 2008; Weinberg, 2002). More recent investigations have highlighted the multiple strands of feminist research, with attention to diversity of experiences, intersectionality, emerging methods and the many forms of feminism that inform these methods (DeVault, 2018). Though perhaps obvious, it is important to note that there can be no monolithic "woman's experience," representative of all women, fortunately the idiographic nature of IPA espouses the valuing of individual experience (Smith et al., 2009; Wong, 2017). Campbell and Schram (1995) identify how many traditional epistemologies that inform methodology do not acknowledge women as "knowers" and tend to silence women's voices and experiences. Harding (1987) notes that the valuable and distinctive elements of feminist research are unlikely to be the result of a particular method but are rather features that can be present across a variety of different methods of data collection and analysis, and this continues to hold true today (DeVault, 2018).

These features include: women's experiences, social science research for women, and a relocation of the researcher in relation to the subject matter (Harding, 1987). Feminist qualitative researchers have identified the importance of women's experiences, and perhaps more importantly, how these experiences emerged, as an avenue to the examination of historical, and

social systems from a perspective that has long been neglected, and to an honouring of women's experiences as valid and legitimate sources, while remaining critical of experience as the sole source of knowledge (Olesen, 2018). By focusing research on areas that concern women in a way that allows women to generate their own data, the purpose of research shifts to providing explanations and increased knowledge *for* women (Harding, 1987). Finally, there is a shift from the power differential that more traditional research methods often create between the researcher and the participants, to a relationship of co-researchers. This acknowledges both parties' subjectivity, humanity, avoidance of "othering" and exploration of a topic in a way that addresses the complexity of representing women's experiences (Olesen, 2018). The current research has attempted to integrate these principles in the study design, selection of the research method and approach to analysis.

### **Summary**

Many theories of identity development are currently being applied as researchers, psychotherapists, spiritual leaders and individuals seek greater understanding of the processes and meaning involved in the development of one's identity. Spirituality and gender have been identified as critical factors in the conceptualization and development of identity (Pargament, 2007; Schwarz, 2017). However, an understanding of how these factors might be interacting in the process of identity development, when mediated at least in part, through the lens of a Christian religious institution, has yet to be thoroughly investigated. By bringing a long history of feminist concerns, traditionally patriarchal Christian doctrine, developmental psychology and the potential for psychotherapeutic applications together, the need for a deeper understanding of what it is like to develop one's identity as a woman practicing her spirituality within a Christian religious framework is evident.

The issues of patriarchal Christianity, male-centered language, and imagery for God have already been explored extensively and the negative impacts on women's spirituality have been well documented (Daly, 1985; Johnson, 2008; King, 2008). As previous research has identified, women who believe in, and are committed to the core tenets of Christianity, are faced with the challenge of managing gender related tensions that can come from the almost exclusively male representations of God created by a patriarchal institution (Winter, et al., 1994). While developments in interpretation of scripture and doctrine continue to be made, and awareness of the impacts of certain institutional Church structures on women increases, there is still much work to be done (Martin, 2003). Authors such as Daly (1985), Christ (2003), and Johnson (2008) point out, Christian communities, past and present, frequently affirm men as superior to women, in both explicit and implicit ways.

The growing number of studies taking a feminist theological perspective has challenged patriarchal norms on multiple levels. The field of feminist theology has introduced alternative theologies that offer an empowering voice and place to women and transform traditional understandings of women's relationship to God (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs, 2013). However, the trickle-down effects from academic discourse to everyday practices of spirituality by women affiliated with a Christian religious institution are unclear and scholarly examinations of this area are lacking. Martin (2003) notes that academic explorations of gender bias in religion, undertaken near the end of the twentieth century, have not yet made a substantial impact on praxis. In Berger's (2013) tracing of the history of feminist ritual practices within the Christian tradition she comes to the conclusion that as long as gender continues to be a central identity marker, Christian women will experience their faith in gender specific ways. Therefore, continuing to explore the ways that women may be making meaning within their religious

contexts could provide valuable insight into paths forward and the possible impact of scholarly work on the lives of Christian women.

A preliminary review of the literature, as discussed above, corroborates this view, and shows that this gap warrants further investigation. The research demonstrating the integral role that spirituality, often mediated through a religious framework, plays in women's identities means bridging this gap from theory to practice is essential. Explorations into the ways women are experiencing their own spiritual lives through the religious framework of the Anglican Church of Canada may provide valuable insight for psychotherapists working with women in their identity development and increase awareness about the ways that religion may be impacting mental health. The intent of this research is to explore, from the perspective of women, how they make meaning of and understand their identity in relation to their gender, religion and spirituality and to gain greater insight into identity development processes as it may relate to these factors. Further, by exploring the experiences of women's spirituality being practiced through a religious institution, this study may reveal areas requiring further investigation and theological reflection by offering insight into processes and experiences that may be unique to one's gender identity.

## **Chapter 2: Methods**

“To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act,” (Gilligan, 2003, p.xvi).

This chapter will outline the rationale for the chosen methodology, the theoretical underpinnings that inform the specific qualitative methodology utilized, as well as provide a thorough description of the approach and steps taken in conducting the research. In keeping with the nature of qualitative methodology in psychology research, this chapter will also include

reference to the continual reflexive process required by the investigator in various forms throughout the study in order to ensure accuracy, quality and overall ethical standards of the project.

### **Statement of Purpose**

As outlined in the previous chapter, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women within the Anglican Church of Canada, with regards to their identity development, gender, religion and spirituality on women's experiences of developing, and making sense of, their own identities. By examining the ways that women navigate their spirituality within an Anglican Church framework one gains insight into a particular context in which individuals are making meaning of their lived experience. Explorations of the meaning women found in their spiritual contexts over their lives, and the ways this shaped their identities were explored in an effort to address the following questions:

- a) How do women understand their identities in the context of church and their image of, and relationship to God?
- b) Do women's experiences within the context of church, practicing their Christian faith and their personal spirituality relate to their identity development?
- c) How do women make sense of their experiences in this context and how does this inform the work of mental health clinicians, spiritual leaders and other women?

### **Research Paradigm**

**A qualitative approach.** Qualitative approaches to research are an increasingly utilized method in psychological studies as a way to explore meaning, in other words, how an individual makes sense of their experiences and the meaning they attribute to events, objects and relationships from the specific way in which they are situated in the world (Creswell, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A qualitative approach is based on a different epistemological

stance than quantitative research which seeks to disconfirm theories by eliminating claims that are shown through research not to be true and therefore the elimination of possible explanations is a moving toward the truth (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In contrast, qualitative research is focused on the quality of experience, providing rich descriptions and incorporating both the participants' and researcher's interpretation of the phenomena and emphasizing a continuing reflexive process on the part of the investigator at all stages of the research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This inductive process allows for patterns, theories and possible explanations to emerge from the data itself. Within qualitative research, the analysis is conducted on multiple levels: on the general level, employing the principles of qualitative analysis and secondly, within the specific guidelines of the most suitable methodology to address the research questions, as well as the subordinate levels that exist within these specific approaches (Creswell, 2014). There are several specific approaches that provide both a comprehensive framework and a theoretical foundation, in order to guide the process and standardize the design and analysis; one of these is interpretive phenomenological analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### **Rationale for the use of IPA**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is focused on examining and understanding personal lived experience of a particular phenomenon such as an event, process or object (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Hermeneutics, phenomenology and idiography are all essential components of an IPA framework which lends itself to particular formulations of research questions as well as certain methods of data collection and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). When selecting an appropriate research design, the present researcher identified the need to explore the chosen area of investigation, based on a lack of available information in the existing literature and the unique experiential and interpretive nature of spirituality, gender identity and identity development. An exploratory approach and the topic of investigation lends itself to a qualitative

design, specifically IPA (Creswell, 2014). Further, the necessity of accessing historically silenced voices, empowering individuals, reducing the potential power imbalance, the complexity of the issue and the inability to easily measure variables all indicate the need for a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014). The value of individual stories and the inability of a statistical mean to capture the complexity of factors present in each story, as well as the practical element of identifying overarching themes and the essence of experiences and meaning across individuals makes IPA an effective choice of method, as it seeks a balance between the particular and the general (Smith et al., 2009).

### **IPA's theoretical orientation**

IPA is generally considered to have originated in the field of psychology and has grown in popularity as a particular methodology that focuses on the examination of potentially meaningful responses by participants, the development of meaning units through interpretation, and the generation of themes that captures the essence of the individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2014). In other words, IPA seeks to reveal how people make sense of life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA assumes that individuals are actively and consciously interpreting the experiences of their lives, including events, people and objects (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The concept of experience is, in itself complex, and requires an understanding of the key informers of this approach; IPA has a basis in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography and has come to be increasingly recognized in the field of psychology as an awareness of the value of the experiential within psychological research continues to grow (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology is a broad field, though all phenomenologists are interested, in some capacity, in *what it is like* to experience certain phenomena as a human being (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al., (2009) Edmund Husserl, and later his student Martin Heidegger, are central figures in the development of phenomenological inquiry, with Husserl

emphasizing the importance of going, 'back to the things themselves' with a focus on what is consciously experienced. Smith et al., (2009) link Husserl and Heidegger to the subsequent work of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre who highlight the importance of seeing individual experience as an interaction with a complex world shaped by culture, language, objects, relationships, questions and concerns continually being interpreted through a particular perspective (Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation, and more specifically the methods and purposes of interpretation and questions around the possibility of accessing the original meaning of a thing (Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic circle, which seeks to deepen understanding by engaging the parts and the whole in a dynamic relationship in which each informs the other, is widely cited as an accurate reflection of the interpretive process (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger noted that phenomenological inquiry is an intrinsically interpretive process, since the analyst is engaged in making sense of the experience, which is interpreted through a lens shaped out of former experiences and understanding of those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In this sense, IPA does not suppose the possibility of an objective description or understanding of phenomena or of another individual's experience, although efforts are usually made to bracket personal experience (Creswell, 2013). Rather, IPA holds within it, a double hermeneutic as the participant first tries to make sense of their experience and then the researcher tries to make sense of the participants' meaning making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Idiography is concerned with the particular experience of a phenomenon. This is in contrast to many other approaches to psychological research which seek results that are representative of a group or population and may be generalized to explain human behavior (Smith et al., 2009). Instead, idiography is focused on in-depth, detailed analysis that purposefully selects particular people and contexts, and offers a different perspective than

nomothetic approaches (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, an inductive approach to analysis, such as in IPA, can be fruitful in generating tentative hypotheses based on drawing together multiple cases, showing the inextricable link between the particular and the general and the value of examining both in psychological research (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative research demands continual consideration of ethical conduct throughout the entire research process and especially in the data collection and analysis phases (Creswell, 2013; Thompson, 2002). This study received ethics approval from the Saint Paul University ethics board prior to participant recruitment (see Appendix I). Due to the personal nature of the interviews, the researcher ensured all participants were aware that the study was completely voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time, or choose not to answer any question. An Invitation to Participate document (see Appendix II) was provided to all participants prior to scheduling an interview in an effort to fully inform participants of the purpose of the study, the time and steps required in participation, potentially emotionally triggering topics of discussion and steps taken to ensure confidentiality throughout the research process. All foreseeable risks and potential benefits, as well as data collection procedures were clearly outlined in the Informed Consent document (see Appendix III), which participants signed prior to beginning the interview. Participants were provided with the contact information of both the researcher and the thesis supervisors, as well as a signed copy of the Informed Consent document. Anonymity was maintained by assigning all participants pseudonyms which were used in every stage of data collection and analysis, and will be maintained in all future publications.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

**Sampling.** Criterion sampling was used, as recommended in phenomenological research, in which it is essential that all participants in the sample have experience of the phenomenon

being investigated (Creswell, 2013). Criteria for participation in the study included that individuals be over the age of 18 for the purposes of obtaining informed consent without parental permission and for the participants' cognitive and emotional capacity to reflect on their childhood and adolescent experiences as well as possible shifts in the meaning they ascribed to personal life events or interactions over time (Erikson, 1968; McLean & Syed, 2015; Thompson, 2002). Criteria also included self-identification as a woman, self-identification as a practicing Christian and as a member of an Anglican Church. Recruitment was limited to the Anglican Church of Canada in order to maintain some level of a shared basis of experience through a uniform liturgy, the lectionary and creedal statements common across Anglican Churches in Canada and much of the world (TACC, 2018). Maintaining a relatively homogenous sample is recommended in IPA, in order to analyze similarities and differences within a group with the sample being similar in terms of important variables (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were informed as part of the recruitment process that they would be required to reflect, in depth, about topics relating to gender, spirituality, religious affiliations and their personal experiences of these topics, since ability and willingness to discuss the phenomena in question is an essential aspect of IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). Measuring the criteria for participation was done solely through self-identification of eligibility, without the researcher presupposing the possible impact of multiple intersecting factors, such as ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. While maintaining an awareness of the potential effects of these intersecting factors, for the purposes of this study the participants' ability to reflect upon and discuss the phenomena of interest was the primary focus. From within this framework, the researcher aimed to explore, to the extent possible, the perspectives of women, rather than a specific sub-population within this gender identity.

**Participant demographics.** Twelve participants were selected for the study, ranging in age from 22 to 73, with a mean age of 47 and a standard deviation of 17.2. All the participants were living in the same geographical region at the time of data collection and currently attending churches in the region, including both churches in the urban center or surrounding rural areas. Participants all self-identified as women, practicing Christians and members of the Anglican Church. No formal evidence of membership with the Anglican Church was required, and participants were asked to expand on what membership meant to them during the interview. Participants were not required to be Anglican Church members for any specified amount of time prior to the study, and several noted that they had spent substantial amounts of their lives as members of other denominations or not affiliated with any religious institution. Some participants had experiences in multiple denominations, including four participants with the Roman Catholic Church, four with the United Church, three with the Pentecostal Church, with some also having spent time affiliated with Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Plymouth Brethren and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Four participants indicated they had in the past, or currently have, connections to Eastern spiritual practices, including different types of yoga, meditation and as well as an interest in Buddhist philosophy. Only one participant stated that all her religious affiliations and experiences have occurred exclusively within the Anglican Church, though her children attend churches of different denominations and she has had some exposure to these denominations through them. It became evident throughout the interviews that the vast majority of the women had Christian faiths that were informed by an eclectic blend of religious experiences and backgrounds that took place both within and outside of Christian religious institutions, as well as important figures in their personal lives, only some of whom were religious.

Of the twelve participants, seven are mothers, and three are grandmothers. Several participants emphasized the importance of family to their identities, noting the names and genders of their children and grandchildren and described the spiritual journeys of their children, including what church their children and grandchildren are currently attending, or if they no longer have religious affiliations, and what that is like for the participant. Nine of the participants are currently married or in a long-term relationship, all of which are heterosexual relationships. Three of the participants are single, two have been divorced, one of which has remarried. Levels of education range from high school graduates to doctoral degrees. None of the participants identified their ethnicity or racial heritage in the interview, and only three made an explicit indication of their perceived socio-economic status as below average.

***The participants.*** All identifying information for participants has been altered and pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.

Sue is in her mid 40s, she grew up attending a Mennonite church and spent some time in the United church as a young adult, as well as having her own Kundalini yoga practice. She has a PhD in English literature and has spent extensive time examining the spiritual dimensions of many well-known writers' work. Sue currently works full-time as well as taking on various teaching positions, freelance writing and continuing her own research. Sue is married, she does not have children, but she identified strong relationships with friends, family and the writing community.

Dora is in her late 60s, she was raised in the Anglican Church where she has remained her entire life in various different parishes. She has an interest in Buddhist philosophy and practices meditation and yoga. Dora was divorced and then remarried; she has three children, and three grandchildren. She has lived in many different places in Canada, as well as several years

internationally. She has worked in several different jobs, including teaching at a post-secondary level, and taking time to be home raising her children.

Amy is in her 60s, she grew up in the Anglican Church, and although she gave up all religious affiliations for several years as an adult, she returned to the Anglican Church to raise her children and is now a very active member. Amy is retired from a long career in teaching, she is married with two children and three grandchildren.

Beth is in her mid 20s, she grew up in the Anglican Church with parents who were very involved in leadership roles in the church. Beth has studied various issues related to justice at university and is passionate about integrating these issues with her Anglican faith. She has lived in several cities in Canada, and is currently working for her local parish in children's ministry. Beth is single.

Ella is in her early 20s, she did not grow up in a religious family, though she did spend some time attending a United Church and a Mennonite Brethren Church. Ella began attending an Anglican Church approximately two years ago. Ella moved to Ottawa with her partner to begin full-time work, she does not have children.

Kayla is in her mid 40s, she has been involved in various churches for most of her life. She grew up attending a Plymouth Brethren Church, as well as spending some time in a Roman Catholic Church, she became an Anglican as a young adult when she married her husband. Kayla is currently married, and she has one daughter. Kayla works fulltime in a position that requires extensive international travel, and as a result has been exposed to many different religious practices and denominations.

Sarah is in her mid 70s, she grew up in the Anglican Church and has attended various Anglican churches for most of her life. She has always identified as an Anglican though she has

spent some time in United and Pentecostal Churches as well, and continues to seek out learning opportunities in other denominations and through university courses. Sarah is married and has two children. Sarah worked at various jobs as a young adult, and then stayed home to raise her children.

Esther is in her mid 60s, she was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and became a member of the Anglican church in mid-life, after several years working for an Anglican organization. Esther is married with two children, and has recently retired from a long career in social work. Esther has worked to integrate her spiritual and professional life, and to encourage this integration by others in her field of expertise. Esther finds spiritual fulfillment in activities such as cycling, yoga and being present to important others' key life events.

Joan is in her mid 60s, her parents had Anglican upbringings but her family did not attend Anglican Church during her childhood. Joan's personal interest in religion led to her participation in the United Church through connections with family friends. Joan did not attend church for many years as an adult, but returned to the Anglican Church when she was considering marriage. Joan is single and does not have children, though she noted a strong relationship with her now deceased parents and her church community. Joan is a retired teacher and now works as a writer and volunteers in various community arts projects.

Dani is in her early 20s, she grew up attending a Pentecostal Church, as well as a year of Bible school within this denomination. Dani left the Pentecostal church and began attending an Anglican Church approximately three years ago, at the encouragement of her husband who is also a member of the Anglican Church. Dani is currently married and does not have children. She works part-time and is also a part-time student. She is interested in pursuing a career in ministry within the Anglican Church.

Sandy is in her mid 40s, she grew up attending a Roman Catholic Church, but lost interest as she got older, eventually leaving her religious affiliations behind until she returned to the Roman Catholic Church as a single mother. When Sandy met her current husband she transitioned from the Roman Catholic Church to the Anglican Church that he was attending and they have been part of several Anglican parishes since that time. Sandy has worked at various jobs throughout her life, though her main role has been as a mother. Sandy has three children.

Ciara is in her mid 50s, she lived in many different areas of Canada as a child and young adult, and has had experiences in many different denominations, though her parents brought her up as an Anglican and she has consistently identified as a member of the Anglican Church. Ciara works full-time. Ciara is divorced; she has two children and one grandchild. She is very involved in different community service and volunteer activities as well as projects within her church.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited by contacting the appropriate “gatekeepers,” generally the presiding priest or administrative staff, of a variety of Anglican parishes in the Ottawa area. This was done through email, in most cases with an introductory email from a faculty member at Saint Paul University who already had an established relationship with the leadership in that parish. Initial email communication provided an outline of the purpose and rationale of the study, participant criteria and what would be required of the participants in terms of time and personal disclosure of information (see Appendix IV). Written permission to contact potential participants directly was received from each “gatekeeper” before recruitment proceeded. After being granted written permission, recruitment occurred in several ways. In some cases, information was distributed to the parish members through email, or placed in the church bulletin. This information was provided by the researcher in the form of an Invitation to Participate. At the suggestion of the priest in one parish, the researcher communicated the

information from the Invitation to Participate document orally, during the announcement portion of a Sunday service. Word-of-mouth within parishes in which permission had already been provided by the “gatekeeper” also resulted in volunteers. Initially, this study was designed with the intent to interview a maximum of ten participants; however, over fifteen participants contacted the researcher with interest in participating and twelve participants scheduled an interview. Interviews were scheduled using email, or phone in the case when this was preferred, and whenever email communication was possible, participants were provided with a copy of the Informed Consent document and the Invitation to Participate through email, prior to scheduling an interview in order to ensure the participants were as informed as possible.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected using a single semi-structured, face-to-face interview with each participant (see Appendix V); a widely recommended method of data collection for IPA research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Whenever possible, interviews were conducted on Saint Paul University campus using a secure room in order to maintain the highest level of confidentiality. In several cases, this arrangement was inconvenient for participants and another confidential location of the participant’s choice was requested. As part of the ongoing reflexive process, the researcher made note of how the space in which the interviews occurred may have impacted participants’ responses, including an interview that occurred in the participant’s home and a few that happened in the church office of the participant’s church. In the cases where interviews were not held at Saint Paul University, it was always at the participant’s request, in a place that the participant felt comfortable and able to speak openly on the topics discussed.

Before the interview began, each participant was provided with a paper copy of the Informed Consent document and given time to read it over, ask any clarifying questions and choose whether they wanted to proceed, by signing the document. All participants were informed

that the interview would be audio recorded and then transcribed, and the researcher confirmed that participants were comfortable with this before turning on the recording. Participants were also informed that a copy of their interview transcript would be sent to them over email for review and clarification of any discrepant information, or if the participant wished to expand on her ideas. The participants were verbally reminded, as well as in written form, that participation is voluntary and that the participant was free to withdraw at any time or to choose not to answer any question she wished. All participants who scheduled an interview completed the interview fully.

As part of conducting research using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the development of interviewing skills and questions that draw out meaningful responses are an important part of generating quality research (Patton, 2002). The researcher developed an interview guide to facilitate focused conversation and the exploration of potentially meaningful areas, including but not limited to, participants' thoughts, memories, associations, perceptions, evaluations, hopes, and inspirations (Patton 2002; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This was done by generating a list of potential questions which was reviewed with both the researcher's thesis supervisors, as well as with two pilot participants whom the researcher knew personally and who fit the study participant criteria, in order to gain feedback on the structure, clarity, depth and relevance of questions. The interview script was re-worked several times, and was used as a general guide, with possible prompts to probe for meaning and illuminate certain topics within the subject area when appropriate (Patton 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

Since the interview involved questions that could potentially be deeply personal and sensitive in nature, the researcher had to take steps to develop a level of rapport and trust quickly (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This included greeting the participant warmly, and providing a

welcoming physical environment to the extent possible, as well as beginning the interview with simple, descriptive questions to allow the participant time to get comfortable (Smith et al., 2009). With an awareness of the power differential that often exists in research, the researcher worked at creating a nonhierarchical relationship with the interviewee (Harding, 1987). This was done by allowing for flexibility in the interview questions to create a conversational tone and a flow of communication, and utilizing a face-to-face interview method to further humanize the process (Patton 2002; Campbell & Schram, 1995). As with many qualitative forms of data collection, the process is relational, engaging and often involves high levels of personal disclosure by the participant. In order to ensure ethical procedures in data collection, the researcher paid continual attention to the participant's non-verbal communication, tone, laughter, possible indications of discomfort, and sharing too much (Patton 2002; Thompson, 2002).

Interviews lasted between 27 and 74 minutes, depending on the length and speed of participants' responses. Some participants took substantially more time than others in silence to reflect on their answers, and some had a robust story telling style, with many background details. All interviews were completed in a single session, and participants were reminded as they left that they could choose to edit the transcript they would be receiving by email, or leave it in its original form, in which case the researcher would assume after three weeks, if the participant had not responded, that the transcript was accurate. Three participants responded to the email containing their transcribed interview in order to provide clarifications, and further reflection on the questions.

**Data storage.** To ensure participant confidentiality, all transcripts, audio-files and documents related to participant interviews were transported in a locked briefcase or stored in a secure location in the researcher's office. Only the researcher, inter-coder research assistant, and

thesis supervisors had access to participant data. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and any identifying information was altered from the first step of transcription to ensure anonymity at every phase of analysis (Creswell, 2013). Participants' data will continue to remain anonymous in all future analysis, publications and presentations, and audio-recordings will be destroyed after the research is published.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to beginning data analysis, the researcher began a reflexive journal, which continued throughout the data analysis process. This involved identifying possible researcher biases, including the researcher's internal reactions to certain participant's responses and reflection on possible explanations for this, the overall experience and atmosphere of the interview process as well as any hopes or expectations the researcher may be bringing to the interview and the potential influences of any presuppositions on data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

Guidelines offered for IPA data analysis were followed in an effort to enable study repeatability and utilize a standardized model that has been found effective in other studies of a similar nature, while also acknowledging that IPA analysis is a non-linear and flexible process (Smith et al., 2009). Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) outline the core components of IPA: the phenomenological aspect that is focused on the participants' experiences, the interpretative aspect which considers the role of environments as they attempt to make sense of the experience, and the renewed insight gained by the researcher through the analysis process.

The researcher endeavored to keep these principles in mind as an overarching framework to guide the following process: in the first step, multiple close readings were done, and this was achieved, in part, by manually transcribing the interviews from audio to written format. This time-intensive process allowed the researcher to immerse herself in the data, noticing the

participant's tone of voice, excitement level, anxiety, and other auditory clues of the participant's possible underlying affect (Patton, 2002). After transcription, in order to ensure accuracy, any alterations indicated by participants were then incorporated into the transcript (Patton, 2002). The researcher then read through each interview again, to gain an overall sense of the breadth and scope of answers and the diversity of voices, as well as to enter into each participant's world as much as possible (Smith et al., 2009). Following the steps of IPA, in the following reading of each interview, a highlighter marker was used to identify any phrases, words or ideas that stood out to the researcher as holding potential importance for the participant and in shedding light on the study questions (Creswell, 2014).

The next step was exploratory and relatively unstructured in nature, focusing on content and language by taking notes on the unique ways that each individual feels, talks about and understands their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). To begin this stage, the researcher read through each transcript again, making initial notes on content, including descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments, and the researcher's reflections (Smith et al., 2009). Throughout this familiarization and deepening of engagement with the meaning of the text, the researcher found she was able to recall with clarity, the distinctive voices and personalities of the women as they spoke. This experience by the researcher reflects the relational dimension that is present as part of anyone telling their story, and provided a helpful reminder to the researcher of the people behind the data (Gilligan, 2003).

The following step required the development of emergent themes by identifying units of meaning (Creswell, 2014). Each original transcript, notes and observed patterns, as well as the overall arc of the participant's story were used in the process of coding for emergent themes present within each interview (Smith et al., 2009). This step required a slight level of abstraction

from source material as well as honing in on specific fragments of the transcript or notes to encapsulate themes that reflect psychological concepts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Following this, the researcher engaged in looking for possible connections between emergent themes within each interview, in an effort to map how themes might fit together (Smith et al., 2009). This involved abstraction by clustering themes, looking for polarizations, frequency of themes, noting narrative elements, and development of themes in particular contexts (Smith et al., 2009). As outlined in IPA, this step involved finding a balance between the abstract and the particular, as the researcher attempted to make sense of specific themes for each individual in the context of the participant's whole story.

Finally, the researcher examined her sample as a whole, searching for connections across individual cases (Smith et al., 2009). This more theoretical step was undertaken first alone, and then in collaboration with the researcher's supervisors to identify superordinate and subordinate themes that possibly connected participants' experiences. Concept maps, tables and other visual representations were used in this process. Writing the final IPA analysis was done by utilizing the participants' own words and interpretations, integrated with the researcher's analysis and interpretations, further demonstrating how analysis is a collaborative effort between the researcher and participant (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Accuracy and Quality**

Taking steps to ensure the quality of the research occurred at every phase of the study process including selection of the appropriate study design (Morse, 2018). Approaches to verify validity and reliability have often been adopted unquestioningly from quantitative methodologies, resulting in their misapplication (Morse, 2018). Within a qualitative study design, a distinctive approach should be taken to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of one's findings (Creswell, 2014). Yardley (2017) outlines key areas to consider when addressing

validity and quality in qualitative research: *sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance*. *Sensitivity to context* was sought early in the research process with initial interactions with gatekeepers, attention paid to the relational nature of the interview process, and throughout analysis as the researcher worked to make sense of how participants were making sense of their experiences (Yardley, 2017). The nature of IPA requires personal *commitment and rigor* as it is a time-intensive and deeply engaging process. The researcher was required to develop her interview and analysis skills in accordance with IPA protocol, paying attention to both the idiographic and interpretive elements of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). *Transparency and coherence* were achieved by thoroughly outlining the data collection procedures and demonstrating the flow of analysis with adequate reference to the raw data to show how interpretations were derived (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2017). Finally, Yardley (2017) states that *impact and importance* is concerned with the generation of knowledge that is useful in some way, which the researcher has attempted to attend to in the formulation of the research question, a review of the existing literature and clearly linking the findings to the field of psychotherapy practice (Creswell, 2014). As Yardley (2017) notes, these criteria cannot be applied prescriptively and there is great flexibility in the ways that these criteria can be fulfilled. Below, I further describe specific steps taken to address Yardley's areas of concern.

**Reflexivity and bracketing.** First, the data collection method, including the use of open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, allowed for the emergence of thick, rich descriptions, capturing as much as possible, the participants' experience from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2014). As well, the interpretive nature of phenomenological research requires the researcher to be aware of her own subjectivity and role in the study. Clarifying one's biases and continuing reflexivity by the researcher in attempts to bracket one's self are essential to

accurately focusing on participant experiences (Creswell, 2013). This was done through reflecting upon and stating the researcher's positionality and examining how her role in the study shaped her interpretation, including the themes identified and the meaning found in participant responses. This goes beyond simply identifying biases, to acknowledging and monitoring how a researcher may be shaping the direction of the study (Olesen, 2018). A reflexive journal was kept by the researcher throughout the data collection and analysis stages, allowing for greater transparency and intentional time for reflection on the process and to ensure continual efforts at bracketing researcher biases.

**Inter-coder reliability test.** The researcher used an inter-coder reliability test with a graduate school colleague to check the accuracy of interpretation of the data by comparing codes and emergent themes (Morse, 2018). While this type of reliability test is not always appropriate in qualitative research, the consistent structure and order of interview questions made this a reasonable validation strategy (Morse, 2018). This step was taken by providing the inter-coder with two complete transcripts, as well as the research objectives and a brief outline of IPA analysis. The inter-coder coded the transcript, and identified emergent themes and connections between these themes. The researcher and inter-coder then compared and discussed their identified emergent themes. Apart from small differences in terminology, the themes were the same and full consensus was met.

**Member-checking and interview quality.** Reliability of data was sought by thoroughly documenting all procedural steps in recruitment, data collection and analysis, as well as personally transcribing all interviews (Creswell, 2014). Further, after raw data was transcribed, member-checking was used before beginning analysis, to verify accuracy of the information (Morse, 2018). This was done by sending a copy of each interviewee's transcript to them with an

invitation to change or clarify any part of the interview. Patton (2002) notes the importance of consistency in interview quality, therefore, the researcher carefully developed an interview guide with the continual feedback of her thesis supervisors and pilot participants, in order to effectively use the interview time available, and to make interviews more comprehensive and replicable (Patton, 2002). The researcher also drew upon experience conducting this type of research in previous academic courses, as well as active listening skills developed through clinical practicum classes.

**Researcher positionality.** As with all qualitative research, the personal experience and identity markers of the researcher informs the choice and application of theory, method and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As an individual situated within a specific gendered, cultural, ethnic, classed and spiritual context, I come to this research with a framework of ideas and questions that impact every step of the process, and require my continual acknowledgement and awareness of my interpretive lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I approached this study as a psychotherapy intern, a student, a researcher and a practicing Christian actively engaged in a spiritual community. I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, privileged to be living in a city where I am safe to openly discuss the intersection of religious beliefs, spirituality and gender. My interest in the chosen topic of research is generated from personal life experience in various churches, spiritual communities and academic courses, including frustration at a lack of contemporary resources and conversations on the area in question. I am not currently a member of an Anglican Church, though I have spent several years of my adult life attending an Anglican Church. I am aware that my own experiences and education have shaped my research area and design, and I have made a concentrated effort to attend to and manage my impact on the research through a continual process of reflection and bracketing, as described in this section.

### Chapter 3: Analysis

“I want to be able to see the image of God in myself, and myself in the image of God,” (Dani, study participant).

#### Overview

The study was designed in order to access the lived experiences of women’s identity development within a spiritual framework. Specifically, this study explored twelve women’s experiences of their spirituality over time, and their process of making sense of their own identities in relation to God, themselves and others. While all the women involved in this study are currently members of an Anglican Church, their past experiences span many denominations and spiritual practices. The results of this research are explained through the emergence of a framing theme, three superordinate themes and more specific nested themes, in an effort to capture the essence of the participants’ experiences and the meaning they found in these experiences. The themes identified include the overarching theme of: an inter-generational journey through a non-linear progression, and the superordinate themes of: disruption in integration; differentiation; and authenticity in integration.

The findings are broken down into three parts: a brief summary of each participant’s narrative related to the phenomena in question, as a way to demonstrate the journey-like quality of identity development that is seen across interviews, as well as to capture the complexity and uniqueness of each individual’s experiences. Secondly, the proposal of a model that situates the identified emergent themes within a narrative framework and aims to illuminate the essence of the participant’s experiences on a holistic level by connecting themes, commonalities and shared experiences across interviews. Thirdly, an in-depth examination of the recurrent superordinate and nested themes that were generated through the analysis of individual participant responses which are embedded in the model.

**Part 1: Summary of Individual Participant Experiences**

The brief summaries provided are intended to add clarity and transparency to the process of identifying emergent themes and thematic synthesis across interviews, as well as demonstrating the narrative arc that frames each individual's experience. The summaries are also meant to highlight the intricacies and complexities of each woman's experiences in a way that honours their individual voices and stories, and the unique perspectives they offer. The condensed summaries are presented in order of age, with the youngest participant presented first.

**Dani.** Dani's journey of identity development is marked by a keen awareness of gender issues within the church, and a passion for being part of changing what she perceived as gender discriminatory practices. She told of a painful personal history of feeling undervalued and oppressed in the Pentecostal church of her childhood. Rather than internalizing the gender roles espoused by her church, Dani fought for an identity that was in opposition to her spiritual community's expectations, leading to a sense of alienation and disillusionment with church and God and forcing her to seek ways to construct an identity outside her spiritual community. She notes how, "I was rejected culturally while at Bible college because of my love of feminism and my desire to see women promoted to leadership roles."

Dani showed strength, resilience and commitment to her internal sense of the value of her faith by re-establishing herself in an Anglican church that valued her and promoted gender equality, despite a period of time where she linked church rejection to a rejection by God. She notes how, "the atmosphere and the environment and the spiritual culture of [her Anglican church] was almost like rehab for me because by the time I moved here I was so frustrated and I felt really, kind of alienated from God." Dani described how intertwined experiences of church were to her image of, and relationship with God, and the resulting questioning of her own worth and identity as a woman. Over time, she was able to re-imagine her gender identity, transforming

it from a source of shame and alienation to a gift and calling from God to be embraced. She describes the transformation from an identity of shame to one of, “leaning into more of my interests, that I believe now God has laid on my heart and convicted me to be passionate about.”

Over time she has developed an appreciation of approaching her spirituality in conjunction with other sources of knowledge, critically evaluating spiritual ideas within a larger framework of feminist theory, academic discourse on theology, church history, social justice and personal experience, and she shows both humility and openness to integrating new ideas. Even though Dani has found a church in which she feels welcomed, she continues to be actively engaged in critiquing prevailing ideas about gender, femininity and womanhood. In response to feeling limited by the idea of a male God, she states, “when I consider who I am and who God is, I think there has to be something of me that is in God.” She notes that her current church still holds within it a diversity of opinions, but there is openness to dialogue and that a sense of belonging does not hinge on agreeing with others.

**Ella.** From childhood, Ella had a strong internal sense of the value of spirituality and a spiritual community, possibly instilled in her by her grandparents. Ella refers back to the positive spiritual role of her grandparents several times, comparing her relationship and image of God to her relationship with them. She shows an early differentiation from her parents and a strong sense of self by pursuing her faith in secret, in opposition to her parents’ wishes. Upon reflection, Ella saw that Ella’s sister’s illness was a pivotal moment in Ella’s spiritual life, as she interpreted the meaning of the event through a spiritual lens that was positive and shifted the trajectory of her life in a way that was very different from her parents.

She clearly described how central approaches to gender can be, in relation to felt levels of belonging within a community. Ella noted how gender inequality made her uninterested in

engaging with a Mennonite Brethren church community, and how gender equality is an essential piece of feeling part of her current Anglican church community. She notes, “I guess the idea of a woman would be someone who is just, a person, and in my current Christian community that’s exactly what it looks like.” Ella voiced an appreciation of the openness and acceptance of her current church community, and the value she places on women being encouraged in leadership roles, affirmation of all sexual identities and a non-binary approach to gender. Ella sought a church that fit her values, rather than conforming to a church that held different ones. Ella shows an awareness of gender issues both in society and within churches in general and a desire to see continued change within churches. Though she struggled to define womanhood for herself, she noted the value she brings to discussion from a woman’s perspective and the heightened awareness of gender inequality and related global injustices that she linked to her gender identity.

**Beth.** Beth shows a deep appreciation, and respect for her Anglican faith, possibly due to her strong connection and admiration of her father who holds a leadership role in the Anglican Church. Beth’s upbringing and parents played crucial roles in the development of her spirituality and identity, including a reverence for nature and engagement with church activities. Beth identified her strong relationship with her father as both a gift and a challenge through a process of differentiation, sometimes standing in opposition to his viewpoints on gender issues and having to navigate more of defining womanhood alone. She notes how their relationship, “created a bit of a split, in that my spirituality and faith influence was a man and it caused me some confusion and uncertainty in that I’ve had to discover my own role as a women in my faith a little bit more on my own.”

For Beth, her spiritual life as a practicing Anglican, her professional life as an activist and mentor and the cultivation of her own character and traits as a woman are something she has actively worked to integrate in the formation of her identity. Initially her growing awareness of injustices, suffering and environmental degradation gave her cause to question the inconsistencies between what she had been taught at church and what she was witnessing as a reality in the world. However, after what she described as an intense spiritual encounter with God, she has pursued both a deeper understanding and examination of her Anglican faith, as well as a commitment to it. She is open to God's guidance in her life while also establishing a basis for who she is as an individual, informed by her identity as a feminist, environmental and social justice activist and global citizen. In recalling a disagreement with her father she noted, "it wasn't exactly a spiritual thing but it was a church related justice and feminist thing that was a jarring experience for me. And that's when I started thinking, okay there are different perspectives here, I might not see the world the same way as him because I am a woman."

Beth occupies the tension of an awareness of and resistance to gender stereotypes, with her own experience of strongly relating to and naturally embracing what she sees as traditional feminine traits. Beth highlights the link between sexuality and her gender identity and notes how damaging the silence of the church can be in understanding one's sexuality. Her explorations of gender identity appear to have happened outside of, and possibly despite, her church involvement, rather than fostered or encouraged by it. However, Beth's action based approach to faith means she sees herself as responsible for being part of the changes she identifies still need to happen for women in the Anglican Church.

**Kayla.** Kayla has been involved in various Christian churches for most of her life and she has been exposed to many different denominations and religions as she has travelled extensively

for work. She takes a pragmatic approach to her religious affiliations, attending different denominations depending on her location and available childcare. Kayla appreciates the liturgical aspect of the Anglican church and the structure that provides, as well as the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, and theology that aligns with her own beliefs and political views. Her image of God was intellectually robust, as she worked to integrate Old and New Testament theology, and imagine God in a way that reflects the complexity and multi-faceted nature of life. This may also be informed by her international work and travel as a researcher that is consistently exposing her to new perspectives and requires an image of God that can encompass this. She sees the unique potential for churches to be involved in addressing global injustices. Kayla notes that her description of “God as love” informs her self-image and her interactions with others, and provides an alternative to the cultural narrative about what it means to be a woman, and instead she can, “just be the way God made [her].”

Kayla links motherhood and breastfeeding to womanhood, as well as a heightened awareness of global gender issues and a continued need for advocacy. However, her identity as a woman does not lead to a sense of solidarity with women in her immediate surroundings, as she believes she has more shared interests with men. She states, “I don’t think I necessarily would have chosen to be a woman given the choice.” Childhood experiences of oppressive gender roles in her Plymouth Brethren church may be connected to her currently conflicted feelings about her gender identity, seeing it as an inconvenience rather than something to be embraced. Despite Kayla’s upbringing in a community where women did not have a voice and were undervalued, she is currently using her voice to draw attention to gender related concerns in her church. Her desire to transcend gender divisions makes gendered activities and groups a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging in her church community. She has been active in trying to deconstruct these

divisions, as well as the separation between older and younger women which she links to the sexualisation and prizing of the female body and youth. She noted in conversation on her fight to break down gender divisions, “I don’t find [gender and age divisions] a healthy approach to spirituality. And I don’t see it as Biblical, because when Jesus was here he had time for widows, and you know, for people that didn’t have men with them, he was willing to do different approaches as far as gender roles go.”

**Sue.** Sue’s positive childhood experience of a Mennonite church as a place of equality, continued learning and with an emphasis on faith as an informed decision, seem to have shaped her approach to her spirituality as an adult as she seeks evidence of God’s existence, a belief system that makes logical sense based on her observations of the world and one that supports her creativity. Creativity is central to her spirituality, and she utilizes beauty as a doorway to closer connection to God, both personally and with others. She notes, “I have this really strong belief that there has to be some connection between God, whatever God is, and beauty and creativity...we are created creatures and we exercise creativity as well.” She doesn’t rely on the more traditional church disciplines to maintain her faith but rather identifies spiritual fulfillment in various multi-sensory, creative experiences outside of religious contexts, and through learning from spiritual teachers, both Christian and otherwise.

She described approaching belief in God from a stance of seeking God’s intellectual justification and a critical examination of if, and how, she can make sense of God’s existence and character based on her observations of the world around her. She showed a dedication to rationality that may be a reflection of her extensive studies and time spent in academia, and also indicated a trust in her own ability to discern, over the acceptance of tradition or authority. In balance to her critical approach to understanding her faith, she is also open to being guided and

shaped by God, continually working to grow and change and using Christian principles, morals, and her personal relationship with God as guideposts for this growth.

Her identity as a woman has been informed by her own research, growing awareness of gender oppression throughout history, as well as presently, and this awareness has led to action. The example she provided in which she took action to argue against oppression was linked to the arts, showing her connection between gender equality and creative expression as a spiritual discipline. She was keenly aware of how gender can play out within churches of different denominations, in ways that are limiting and destructive to women's identities, and she notes that in general the Anglican Church does better than others in fostering gender equality. She is able to differentiate her own belief in her understanding of God as "truth, beauty and goodness" from the actions of the Anglican Church as an institution, as she notes she, "fell out of love with Anglicanism as an institution," after witnessing her female friend being barred from ordination.

**Sandy.** Sandy is focused on living her faith in practical ways through caring for others and the planet with integrity and authenticity, taking an approach that challenges her to grow in love and acceptance of others, rather than focusing on doctrine, legalism or ritual. Sandy's faith and image of God shifted when she became a mother, from one that was guilt and shame-based to a relationship of love and hope for the future and from an image of "God as Father" to be feared and obeyed, to "God as Child" to be supported and nurtured. Sandy clearly connects the destructive approaches to gender in her upbringing in the Roman Catholic Church, to her identity as a woman. She notes her feelings of inadequacy as a girl through the limited and highly controlled roles she could play. Sandy currently struggles with the identity of woman, and is more comfortable with the idea of being a mother and a female than a woman. Her association between the identity of woman and traditional ideas about femininity, which Sandy participates

in, means she chooses to be disconnected from discourse on gender issues and sees herself more as “sexless.” This approach to gender fits well with her experiences in her Anglican church in which she sees herself being valued as a person and not through her roles, sexualisation or idealization of herself as a woman. She finds she is able to be more authentically herself within her current church context, rather than fitting into the limiting cultural box of womanhood in wider society. Sandy has come to a place of valuing her own spirituality and approach and wanting to share her unique perspective of “God as Child” with others, in a hope of enriching and deepening others’ spirituality and offering a more emotion-based alternative to what she sees as men’s strongly structured, word-based approach. In part due to her difficulty with gender as an identity marker, which may have its roots in her negative experiences of being a girl in church when she was a child, Sandy hopes to break down gender-based divisions or groupings in church settings as she does not see this facilitating belonging and welcoming to all.

**Ciara.** Ciara’s diverse childhood and early adulthood experiences fostered an incredible openness, flexibility of thinking and adaptability to new ideas. Other faiths, and the integration of others’ approaches to spirituality, enriched rather than threatened her own faith. Ciara finds continually engaging with new ideas, discussion and sharing about faith as a spiritual experience and she shows an appreciation of universal spiritual values, with little concern for religious affiliation. She takes a pragmatic approach to belonging to a spiritual community, noting the value of a support system and how a church can fill the social needs of different people, whether they agree with the doctrine or not. Ciara’s early experience in a wide variety of faith contexts as well as times of adversity and struggle seem to be reflected in her image of God which is expansive, metaphorical and gives ample space for one to carve their own path, make mistakes, take responsibility and yet always feel supported, but certainly not immune to hardship. Despite

being deeply hurt by a leader of the Anglican community, she showed an ability to separate her faith from the actions of the church, noting, “one person doesn’t make or break my faith.”

She embraces her identity as a woman, stating, “I couldn’t imagine being anything else.” She talked about taking on both the more traditional roles of nurturing and helping while also describing womanhood as marked by strength and resiliency. This may have been fostered by her father’s approach to gender equality that encouraged self-sufficiency and competence. It seems as if the early formation of her identity as an equal, acted as a buffer to potentially hurtful or undermining responses from others. She showed an impressive lack of anger, self-doubt or victimization when describing events that could have been interpreted as dehumanizing, limiting and discriminatory. Ciara demonstrated a strong sense of personal boundaries, never feeling that she needed to limit herself or fit into societal expectations of womanhood or to make others more comfortable. Ciara noted an awareness of how experiences outside of church and her own family dynamics were powerful factors in shaping her spirituality, so that she entered into institutionalized religion with a variety of other sources to inform her beliefs about herself and the place of church in her life.

**Amy.** Amy’s grandmother appeared to play a significant role in both the way she practices her faith and her strong emphasis on certain rituals, as well as her image of God, which reflects both her grandmother’s role in her life and how her grandmother approached her faith. She described her grandmother as, “the matriarch of the family and she had very strong ties to the church and a very strong faith.” Amy’s negative experiences of being a woman in the church as a young adult were eventually transformed through her own self-reflection and growth, as well as later being welcomed into leadership roles within the church. Amy identified herself as a trailblazer within a family of strong women role models and she sees a key piece of her identity

as a woman in being a role model and source of hope for young girls. Her Christian faith is linked to cultivating hope and meaning in young women; her awareness of social justice issues that developed over her teaching career has solidified her belief in God as the remedy to despair, and the role she plays in sharing hope. Amy has a strong sense of the value of relationships as a way of transmitting and fortifying the Christian faith. In Amy there is conviction of the truth of her beliefs, the need for others to know these truths in order to provide hope and moral structure and disciplines that exemplify a faithful life, and this energizes her as she offers her time to the church and works for greater representation of women in leadership.

**Esther.** From an early age, Esther struggled with gender discrimination in the Roman Catholic Church, because of this, she never felt she “fit” within the denomination despite years of trying to make it work. Esther has been outspoken with her family on gender issues her entire life, and unapologetically takes on the role of feminist within her family. She sought connection outside the church with other feminists and her feminism has deeply informed her life work and her spirituality, though at times she experienced opposition in trying to incorporate the two. Esther noted that despite her disillusionment and the hypocrisy she saw within the church she realized through her work with vulnerable women, that spirituality is an essential dimension of life. Esther demonstrates a trust in herself and her personal spirituality through her use of activities such as cycling, yoga, valuing events that evoke a full range of emotions from joy to grief, and serving others, as ways to access her spirituality. She notes church is not needed and she no longer prays in a conventional way but rather sees every interaction and act as sacred. She applies critical examination to her view of the Anglican Church and its leadership, and is continually checking the church against her own moral compass.

Esther connects her spirituality and identity to motherhood and the way being a mother required her to grow in many ways. Esther's professional work with vulnerable women also informs her ideas about what it means to be a woman, as she notes both the internally generated aspects and the negative societal factors that shape gender identity, describing womanhood as, "relationship; community; creativity; discrimination; controlled; at risk." She expressed the importance of women role models in the church and her life who have challenged her to grow and think critically, and the anger she continues to feel when women are underrepresented in leadership.

**Joan.** Joan clearly differentiated between being a "believer," and affiliation with a church, as her faith was exemplified by her as an ethic rather than a doctrine. She had an open and expansive vision of spirituality, an interest in history and the study of religions and a universalist approach that sees humans as all following different paths towards the same God, which she describes as "the light." Joan notes the importance of strong women role models in her life, and several strong women within her family who were independent, matriarchs of the family. Joan's admiration of her mother was based on her character; though she was not religious, Joan saw her mother as deeply spiritual. She takes a practical approach to her current affiliation with her Anglican church, identifying her need for support and community, and her commitment to remain, despite disagreement because her character and ethics require her continued presence. Joan finds the arts to be spiritual and actively works to incorporate creative expression and performance into church services. Her image of God reflects a chosen stance of optimism, acceptance of others and her own agency in bringing God into the lives of others. Her sense of connectedness to others, regardless of religion, leads to an identity that is based more in her common humanity than her gender. While she identifies societal and cultural factors that

shape her gender identity, including the emphasis on women's physical appearances, she sees these issues as separate from spirituality, in which all people are equal in the eyes of God.

**Dora.** Dora identified her childhood experiences as being spiritually formative. Seeing gender discrimination in contrast to the generosity of the women she admired as a young girl, was a source of anger and cultivated a sense of justice at an early age. She noticed how these women made her feel included and empowered and how this desire for inclusivity has been the central marker of her chosen spiritual community across her lifespan. Dora shows an openness to engaging in spirituality in a range of ways, including yoga, Buddhism and liturgical dance. She notes the importance of embodied experiences, connecting with movement and self-acceptance and her own belief in God is rooted in experiential, emotion-based events and dreams.

Her mother was an influential figure, encouraging imaginative engagement with spirituality, including the feminine divine, and a whimsical, free-spirited approach to faith that Dora adopted early in life. This is evident in her image of “God as wonder”, linked to the natural world and addressed as “She”, “just to put the balance back into it, you know?” Dora emphasized the importance of language in shaping experiences and identity, and the anger she feels when this is not respected. Her identity as a woman is linked to God’s creative power, her own motherhood and her ability to nurture her children, though she remembers disliking the limiting roles of her gender as a child, noting, “when I was a little girl, I wished I was a little boy.” She expressed particular sadness about other women who resist the deconstruction of gender roles. As she continues to work for change in her church she noted that she is also engaged in continual reflection on whether she is pushing her own agenda or is aligned with God, and expressed a belief that God supports her efforts for inclusivity and feminine representation of God.

**Sarah.** Sarah appears comfortably situated and content with her lifelong Anglican faith, as well as curious about continually learning from other denominations and in academic settings. She showed a settled confidence in her spiritual identity, so that rather than new experiences undermining her faith, she incorporates them in an enriching way. Sarah has experienced continual affirmation over her lifetime of gender equality, both from her father and husband, though she is aware this was not the case for many women around her. Perhaps due to this strong sense of her own worth and value, she did not internalize her gender as a barrier or a limiting part of her identity at church, despite gender roles being evident.

Her unwavering belief in her capacity and full personhood means Sarah took an active role in advocating for herself and asserting her own desires within the church. She recalled, “when I first became a server, the minister had asked around to a few men, and I said, ‘I will be a server for you.’” She seemed to have either been unwilling to acknowledge or impenetrable to, the discrimination that was occurring around her. However, she also showed an awareness of issues around gender equality globally, and how the abuse of women may impact their spirituality. Sarah also described how the traditional gender role of staying home to raise her children facilitated her spiritual growth since she had more time to invest in spiritual practices. She noted that many women’s current ambitions to balance life at home and their careers has spiritual costs. Sarah took note of the inter-generational development of her faith, noticing how her mother’s faith shaped her own, how she influenced her mothers, and the role she plays in her daughter’s faith development.

## **Part 2: A Proposed Model Incorporating the Emergent Themes**

Analysis, both individually and collectively, of the participants’ transcripts and the subsequent notes as well as the narratives presented above, generated a framing theme that encompassed three superordinate themes, recurrent across participants, as well as several sub-

themes nested within the superordinate themes that demonstrate different aspects and dimensions of the phenomena for different participants.

**Framing theme.**

*An intergenerational journey and a non-linear progression.* In the initial phases of data analysis it became apparent that much of the meaning that the participants brought to their stories seemed to be shaped by the overall narrative form in which they spoke of their experiences. These narratives were inter-generational and mapped a journey of exploration and experiences that began in early childhood, with participants noting they were aware that they were both affected by and have an influence over, other generations. Ciara noted, when describing the role of her parents, “how we are brought up and our experiences help to shape the way we think about things.” The significance of grandparents and parental relationships as well as childhood church experiences highlighted the importance of revisiting a holistic view throughout the different levels of analysis, when examining the participants’ responses. The journey was non-linear in the sense that it was marked by periods and events that disrupted and transformed participants, leading not simply to repair to the original state, but rather helped shape and shift the trajectory of their lives. When discussing the influence of the negative experiences of her childhood Plymouth Brethren church, Kayla said:

It really impacted everything...I didn't have that much freedom...it just wasn't a broad context. It was helpful in that sense because I knew I had to get out of it. So that gave me focus. So it made me really focus on my academic achievements. So if I was in church I was thinking about how to structure my essay.

The trajectory of participants’ journeys were also impacted by a variety of influences and informers outside their spiritual communities and familial contexts, often giving momentum to, rather than undermining, the integration and development of a sense of self, along one’s spiritual

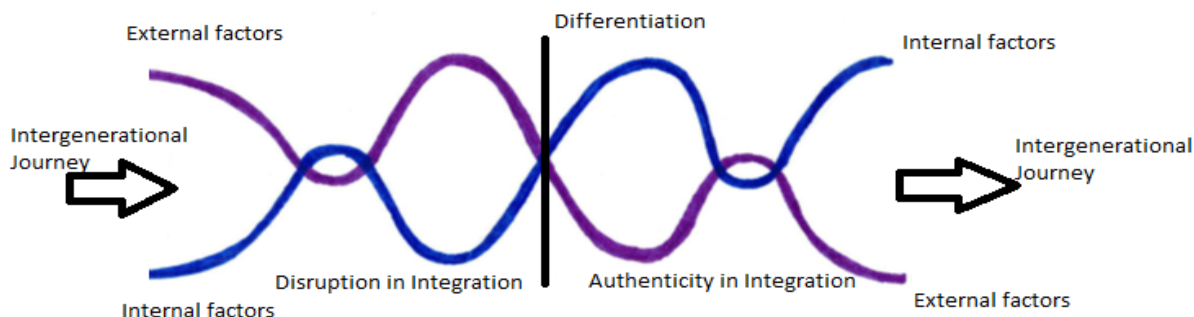
journey. Dani demonstrated this when she spoke of how her post-secondary studies influenced her:

So taking that class was really fundamental for me in opening up my mind to other possibilities and also looking at the history of Christianity from the beginning, and how there was a stronger feminine presence in theology and discussions about the Trinity, and how that informed practice...And I guess taking that class gave me permission to consider it more, because in my background any time you talk about the Divine Feminine or the idea that God could be a woman, everybody gets their back up because God is a man and the Bible says so.

Because the importance of early childhood experiences and influential figures in the participants' lives were embedded in one's life story and could be traced most effectively over time as a non-linear journey, maintaining the integrity of each participant's narrative as a unique meaning unit both added depth to the overall analysis and honours the personhood of those sharing their stories. The themes discussed below, occur within the context of the non-linear journey that participants used to frame their narratives. They demonstrated the self-reflective capacity to see themselves as both situated in a context, and responsible for contributing to that context. This was shown through their reflections on the influential power of their parents and grandparents on their early experiences, as well as looking to the future and the role they will play in shaping future generations.

**Model.** The following figure provides a visual representation of the framing theme: an intergenerational story through a non-linear progression, in which the superordinate themes are

embedded.

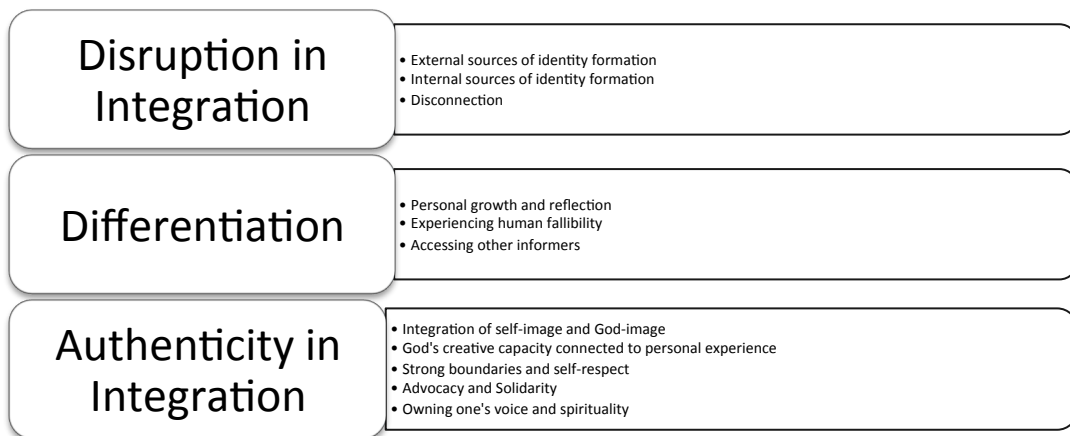


*Recurrence of emergent themes within the model.* The following table demonstrates the recurrence of the emergent themes, from which the model was generated. Though there is no predefined standard that qualifies a theme as recurrent in IPA, for the purposes of this study, recurrence was defined as the theme being present for at least half of the participants:

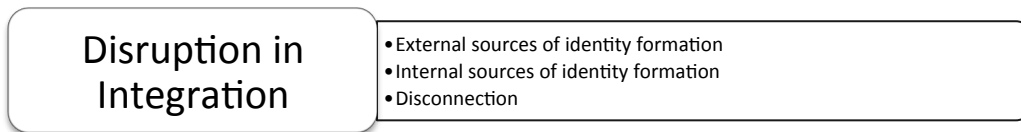
<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Non-linear Journey</b>	<b>Disruption In Integration</b>	<b>Differentiation</b>	<b>Authenticity in Integration</b>
Dani	YES	YES	YES	YES
Ella	YES	NO	YES	YES
Beth	YES	YES	YES	YES
Kayla	YES	NO	YES	YES
Sue	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sandy	YES	YES	YES	YES

Ciara	YES	NO	YES	YES
Amy	YES	YES	YES	YES
Esther	YES	YES	YES	YES
Joan	YES	NO	YES	YES
Dora	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sarah	YES	NO	NO	YES

**Part 3: An In-depth look at the Superordinate and Nested Themes**



**Theme 1- Disruption in integration.**



This theme marks the first phase of the non-linear journey, and for most participants it is a phase of increasing levels of conflict as they navigate a continually growing internal sense of

identity and the strongly influential external factors of family and church context. The impact of gender roles and expectations in the participants' early life experiences was greatly varied, but whether predominantly positive or negative, all participants identified gender as a factor in shaping their early experiences of church and their sense of self.

***External sources of identity: The powerful role of church and family.*** Every participant but one, spoke of the role of her family in the development of her sense of self. Parental roles ranged from reinforcing traditional gender roles taught at church, to offering an empowering alternative that acted as a resiliency factor, shielding participants from potentially internalizing harmful messages from other contexts, and often inspiring participants through strong women role models. Dora described the importance for her of her parents' approaches to spirituality and gender, which she had to navigate as a young girl, stating:

So my dad was old school Anglican, he didn't want to receive communion from a woman...whereas my mother was like, 'Ok! Yes God can be a woman, why not?' I love that, she's very artistic and they didn't fight about it, she was wise enough to know that it would upset my dad, but I knew that it was okay, that I could think these things and she was on my side...She lived in her imagination in a spiritual, beautiful, beautiful way. So I think there was that sense of wonder and I think that's what God is, that sense of wonder about the world. And I got that from her. But then my dad had a strong faith too. So I was lucky that I grew up in a family that believed in God.

Ciara, who was strongly impacted by her parents' approach to gender described how gender equality at home shaped the lens through which she saw herself in other spheres of life, and helped prevent her from internalizing suggestions that she didn't belong or wasn't competent:

I've been working on my own car since I was 16. My dad had me under the hood and said if you are driving, you are going to know how to change the oil, do your tires, do your spark plugs...I don't have a problem with that type of thing, people try to make a problem but I knew what I was doing and I didn't make an issue of it. So maybe that had a lot to do with it, mixing our life experiences outside the church with church and then that kind of combines into the spirituality.

The powerful role of churches of various denominations in childhood experiences was cited by all the participants, with half of them noting that their identity and their experience of spirituality was negatively impacted by their church at a young age. Sandy described the connections she made between her sense of self and her experiences of growing up as a girl in her Roman Catholic Church:

The roles of women in the Roman Catholic Church were so structured. You know a woman could be a nun, she could be a teacher, and she could only practice her faith in the context of being subservient to the priest. So as a child, it never felt like I was good enough to follow Jesus, because I was a woman. I wasn't good enough to be a child of God because only men could do that. So it was very limiting as a child to feel that my relationship with God would never be as good as what a man's was.

While other participants recalled their childhood experiences of church as ones that did not distinguish between genders, and encouraged full participation, most of the participants identified a period of time or event of disruption in which their beliefs about church, God and spirituality were deeply challenged. Dani described this experience throughout her adolescence and young adulthood:

So that cultural rejection from a denomination that I had grown up in and spent the first twenty years of my life giving time and energy to, it felt like I was being rejected by God. That was really hard to overcome because I think what happens when people spend their entire lives in one sort of situation or culture, to have that challenged or to feel, the way you perceive God is through that lens.

***Internal sources of identity: a sense of injustice and gender identity.*** However strong the external forces of identity formation were, most participants also demonstrated an ability to challenge these ideas from a young age. Several participants recalled feeling a deep sense of injustice at what they perceived as gender discrimination in their childhood churches, and many took action to challenge this. Dora described her strong feelings about the women who stepped in to lead her church when she was a child:

They were wonderful, but they weren't allowed to give us communion. We had to wait for the bishop to come. Which I thought, 'that's crazy! What is wrong with this?' I was seven years old then and there was something wrong with it and I was really not happy with it, and my parents couldn't really explain it to me.

Despite growing up in a highly controlled and socially isolated Plymouth Brethren community, Kayla showed her belief in the need to challenge her church's ideas about gender roles as an adolescent:

I taught Sunday school and it tended to be girls in the Sunday school, so what I did was, my whole series was on the perspective of women, so I retold all of the Biblical stories from the perspective of whoever was on the sidelines and happened to be a woman...the parents would try to reinterpret it from the male side, and the girls would say, 'no that was not the story, the story was about Miriam, it was not about Moses.'

***Disconnection.*** Several of the women took on the role of trailblazer, advocate and challenger from a young age, but for most of the participants, experiences of discrimination, inadequacy and other negatively perceived events led to a time of separating or distancing oneself from their churches and in some cases their identification with spirituality. Amy recounted an experience of being unfairly accused of being irresponsible when she was in fact seriously ill, which led to her leaving organized religion for several years:

He didn't say my name but it was evident that it was me that he was talking about. So I got really angry because no one from the church had even come and discovered that I had been in the hospital or had done anything to visit or anything. So I, those days being black and white, I wanted an apology from this man publicly.

Esther recalled her growing sense of disillusionment with the Roman Catholic Church, that reached a breaking point when she was investigating an abuse scandal in her parish:

I think from the time I was ten I struggled within the church and I challenged the discrimination against women and just the rigidity of the Roman Catholic Church...I had a moral and ethical compass that I felt the Church didn't have. And really they, the Church, couldn't tell me what to do, how to live, how to make

decisions in my life because I didn't believe that they used any of those rules to govern themselves. And this is the Roman Catholic Church that I had been raised in and tried to figure out for a whole bunch of years and then finally left.

While all the participants were able to identify events, moments or realizations that challenged their faith, these disruptions did not, in every case, lead to periods of inner turmoil or participants stepping away from or confronting their church or faith. For Sarah, her spiritual journey was relatively smooth, despite strong gender divisions in her childhood Anglican church, she was not troubled by this and only noticed it later in life:

I certainly noticed it about 30 years ago, when our daughter was a teenager I certainly noticed it then, but as I said, we drove to the Pentecostal Church for a good youth group and they had women coming in, although they don't have women pastors I think even now, but they have the same education. But I don't think it impacted me because if I was interested in something I would just keep going, keep pushing and keep bothering the minister.

## Theme 2: Differentiation.

### Differentiation

- Personal growth and reflection
- Experiencing human fallibility
- Accessing other informers

The second phase of the journey was marked by the recurrent theme of differentiation between one's church, and God, in which participants demonstrated an increased capacity to trust themselves and their growing internal sense of self as "knower", coupled with their desire for a space and framework to practice their spirituality. This phase was marked by personal growth and reflection, experiences and acceptance of their own, and others' fallibility and accessing other informers as sources of knowledge that provided an alternative to church doctrine and practices.

***Personal growth and reflection.*** As participants grew older they showed an increasing ability to navigate complexity, as they were faced with the paradox of church being both a source

of connection to others and God, as well as a source of disconnection, often linked to ideas about gender identity. Their valuing of community and a relationship with God was evident in their willingness to remain in this tension, rather than collapsing their view of God and their experiences of church. Amy recalls how, through a process of maturing and self-examination, she shifted her perspective on an earlier incident that led to her leaving the church:

You reflect back on these things and you realize that he didn't need to [apologize], that was me telling him what he needed to do, and I can only control me, I can't control anybody else....because really the only loser in all this was me because I took this and left the church and really I am the one that suffered from it.

Despite Ella's early childhood experiences of strong gender divisions in church, she showed a strong sense of the importance of gender equality and continued to attend various churches, seeking a place that fit her values. She recalls of the Mennonite Brethren church she attended before she found her current Anglican church:

I would never have considered myself part of the congregation; I was just there because my friend needed someone to go with. I didn't take any steps to grow or learn because I was like, I show up, I leave. And partially the reason was because most of the church just didn't support the way that I was thinking about things, like women are equal to men.

***Experiencing human fallibility.*** Part of participants' personal reflections and ability to differentiate the people who make up a church, from God, came from their life experiences, both of becoming aware of their own flaws and weaknesses and understanding others'. For some participants, this was facilitated by a differentiation from one's parents or other close relationships. As Ciara recalled thinking in the midst of a painful relationship breakdown connected to her Anglican church, "one person doesn't make or break your faith." Beth's father

held a prominent leadership role in her Anglican church, so part of differentiating between church and her understanding of God, required seeing her father as a fallible human being:

I've struggled with theology points or things that my dad holds, because I've always been so close to him and he has been my faith influencer and guide, having very different opinions or views has been a struggle at times for me...I've run into points where my very strong feminist, female views don't necessarily align with what my dad would hold to be his views...It's meant I've had to have my own, a bit of a breakaway from my parents, and moving away from home and leaving your parents, my faith was part of that for me, learning to be a Christian and to hold faith and spiritual views that were different from my main influencer.

Sue described the challenge of this differentiation process when she was part of a diocese in which the bishop did not allow the ordination of women, including her personal friend. However, her awareness of what she described as her own "sinfulness" and need to continually work towards being less judgmental, seemed to act as a mediating factor in her willingness to accept others' shortcomings:

That impacted me because I was living there at the time and I was worshipping within the Anglican Church that was under his leadership. And it really made me feel so angry and cynical too about going to the church...It was so clear to her that she needed to do it and yet this man, this human being was standing in her way because of her gender...it certainly affected my relationship with the Anglican Church, I mean as an institution it made it so I fell out of love with Anglicanism as an institution.

*Accessing other informers.* As part of the experience of disruption, and the disconnection from church that often accompanied these negative events, some women looked to other sources of knowledge, communities, practices or approaches to provide a broader frame of reference for understanding themselves, their values and their spirituality. Esther recalled her efforts to seek community outside the church, in her professional circles, while also incorporating spirituality:

I was forced to go outside the church to explore, and I didn't really put a label on it as spirituality, but looking for community...the women working the shelter were aghast that I would even suggest [church to the women accessing shelter services]

because they were coming from this feminist perspective. And I too was a feminist, but I also knew as a feminist I had this need to nourish my spirit, I hadn't found it yet, but I kept searching and I kept trying because I knew it was important. But I also recognized that it could be damaging as well.

Joan also spoke of the power of other informers in shaping her approach to God as distinct from her church. For Joan, these informers were her parents, the arts, and her educational interests.

Her parents were not religious but she saw them as deeply spiritual and instilled her with a strong sense of ethics which later she applied to her approach to church, remaining committed despite disagreements. Of her time with her parents and before becoming an Anglican she noted:

My mother was one of the kindest, finest women ever. She wasn't necessarily a church goer but you could count on her to hell and back. And so was my dad, and so we were expected to live up to some standards, if you call that spirituality, and to make an effort to choose the right way...I always was a believer. And I actually, you know, believe in prayer. And I think the history background has always made me very interested. And I even did a little bit of teaching of world religions and this kind of thing. So I've always found it fascinating but that still didn't mean I went to an actual building. I didn't

Importantly, all the participants noted the experience of community as a grounding factor in their spirituality, and the power of shared experiences of joy and pain. Several participants described the deep level of care and support they felt from their church communities, and how these experiences informed their image of God, even when others in the community may have hurt them. Beth spoke of, "meeting God in other people," and Ciara noted how she found the people in her parish to be, "a mix of God's people together." She went on to describe the value of relationships with others of her faith, despite differences:

It's nice to be able to go and be amongst a warm group of people, regardless of where it is, of just total support. You feel that extra connection that sometimes your workmates don't have because they may not have much of a faith at all...Not everybody [in her church] embraces [change] at the same speed and time as others. And so you know, everyone's journey is different. So we just agreed to disagree but it didn't affect our friendship in a negative way.

**Theme 3: Authenticity in Integration.****Authenticity in Integration**

- Integration of self-image and God-image
- God's creative capacity connected to personal experience
- Strong boundaries and self-respect
- Advocacy and solidarity
- Owning one's voice and spirituality

This theme is characterized by participants taking ownership of their faith, including taking an active role in shaping their spiritual environment, both for themselves and others. During this phase, participants were often motivated by a desire to open up new possibilities for future generations, challenge the status quo and offer unique contributions, from a place of knowing and valuing one's authentic self. This often looked like advocacy for one's self and other women, a sense of solidarity with both other women and humanity in general around the world, as well as stepping into one's spirituality and using one's voice without apology. Many of the participants demonstrated an ability to assert themselves and their opinions even when they were in conflict with the majority, while also maintaining a sense of belonging and acceptance by their community. It appeared as if honouring their own difference, and offering it to others as a valuable contribution to the whole, was a doorway to authentic spirituality in community.

This was demonstrated by an inverse relationship in the interaction of external and internal identity factors from the disruption in integration phase, and a shift in the prioritization of these factors by the individuals. Within the theme of authenticity in integration, participants came to understand their relationship with the church, not as one of primarily being influenced by the church, but as an influencer with a responsibility and a desire to cultivate their own spirituality, and act with authenticity within their church communities. This is achieved by integrating their self-image with their image of God, connecting the creative capacity of God to

their own personal experiences, and continuing to strengthen the boundaries between self and church that began in the differentiation phase, as a way to better honour their own spirituality.

***Integration of self-image and God-image.*** For most participants, they cited the importance of identification with the divine for a fuller realization of their own human identity. This was done in a variety of ways. For some it was through a re-imagining of “God as Mother” or as the “Divine Feminine,” in order to more fully relate to God specifically as a woman, by seeing God as a female figure and with feminine characteristics. For others it was a process of separating both one’s self and God from identification with any gender, and realizing a deeper relationship through God as genderless or formless. When Dora was asked if she made any links between her understanding of her sense of self and God, she responded by talking about the importance of inclusive language to her sense of belonging:

That’s why I want Her to be feminine you know? If we just talk about God as male, where do I fit in? I don’t...I have to believe God is female though. God is really nothing, it is Alpha and Omega but if we want to put a personal thing on it.

In contrast, Ella was comfortable using conventional male language to refer to God, however, her description of God showed she did not take this way of addressing God, literally:

“I think of Him as somehow involved in everything. It’s like, I don’t think of Him like He is a person, or necessarily like one being. It’s more like a pervasive presence I guess.”

***God’s creative capacity connected to personal experience.*** Several participants spoke of creativity as a powerful source of spiritual connection. This included a shift, over time, from more traditional and ritualized spiritual practices and a focus on legalism and doctrine, to a growing comfort in identifying and relating to God in personally meaningful ways. Specifically, a woman’s own creative ability realized through motherhood was identified by participants who

both were, and were not, biological mothers. Sandy described how becoming a mother radically shifted her image of, and relationship to God:

So there's this idea that God is this big omniscient thing that you are looking up to, but as a woman and a mother it is about taking care of the world, to make it better for this, this thing that needs to be nurtured and cared for a supported...I found the idea of God as parent, given my parents, I would not want God as my parent. My parents were really mean, alcoholic drunks, so you know God as Father is not a good person. But God as child, as someone to be loved unconditionally, because we don't love our parents unconditionally, we go through stages, but we will always love our children. We always love that spark of new life.

Creative expression, and participants' perspectives on how this was mirroring God's creative character, also spiritualized otherwise mundane activities, and offered a conduit for deeper connection to, and identification with, God. Sue's image of God as "truth, beauty and goodness" means connection to God is felt powerfully through creative writing and singing:

I have this really strong belief that there has to be some connection between God, whatever God is, and beauty, and whatever God is, and creativity...that's also what makes Christianity a very powerful thing, because it talks all the time about creativity and about the fact that mankind, womankind, humankind that we are all created creatures and that we exercise creativity as well.

Similarly, Beth finds a connection to God as creator through her experiences in nature. When she spoke about experiencing God in the forest she said:

To me, God is just as much in the forest as it is in a person...So learning about how much a forest provides in all it's different parts and how we then rely on that forest, to me that's proof of the kind of interconnected love and value we all have to each other.

***Strong boundaries and self-respect.*** The theme of authenticity in integration is also characterized by the establishment of boundaries between self and church that were often instigated through the theme of differentiation discussed above. As participants worked to

separate their ideas about church from experiences of God, the meaning of church shifted in their lives. This shift corresponded to a greater trust in themselves, increasing levels of self-knowledge, and a willingness to integrate their personalities and preferences into their spirituality in a way that led to a deeper connection with God. Some participants spoke about their challenging relationship with prayer, and a growing ability to let go of perceived religious expectations of what prayer should look like. Esther described how she has re-imagined prayer in a way that works for her:

I don't pray. I don't physically think out words to say, but as I was saying before, I feel my actions, the way that I am with people, how I relate, my actions are my prayers...I always believed that the work I did at the center, that every moment was sacred, that every interaction was a sacred interaction, and that I didn't need to go to church really, because I was living my faith.

***Advocacy and solidarity.*** Several of those interviewed talked about how their gender identity as women had led to greater awareness and solidarity with women struggling with gender discrimination and gender issues, both locally and around the world. This awareness seemed to foster a sense of solidarity and responsibility to help women who may not have all the resources available to them that the participants had. In this phase some of the participants transformed their feelings of victimhood as children and young adults into empowered agents of change. Kayla, who experienced a highly isolated and controlled religious upbringing, spoke of the importance of women making connections between the church and the broader world, as she voiced the questions:

How does what is happening in the church have implications to the close community but also the global community? And then how does your role as a woman shape that? So when you look at the community, there's certain issues that are normally defined as gender issues, though in development assistance who do you give money to?...And I think the church can look wider because usually there is some connection to giving money overseas, in peace and development.

Most of the women expressed a desire to see more women in leadership roles, and many had personally supported women they knew through the process of ordination in the Anglican Church. The tone expressed by the participants was one of celebration at the steps that had been taken, and several identified their awareness that there is still work to be done relating to women in the church. Amy stated with pride:

Hopefully we keep moving forward and we'll see more and more women in those positions. I just think our diocese here and I'm trying to remember when the first women was ordained, and I believe it was in the 70's, and now I'm sure if you did a listing of all the priests in our diocese I would say that over half of them would be female. So we really have come a long way in allowing women to live out their callings. So hopefully we keep moving forward and that translates to upper levels of the structure.

A key perspective to note is that the women interviewed were committed to creating change within their current Christian communities, without denying the flaws and shortcomings of their parishes. They saw the church community as an important source of spirituality, and sought to transform the existing church structures, rather than abandon them. Esther highlighted the tension of seeing how the church can be damaging as well as an important source of support and spiritual growth:

My personal belief is that it is unethical to ignore the spiritual component of a person's life when providing professional support because it is part of who they are and it could be a good part or a damaging part...and I would say, you know we've got to connect women with churches in the area because they are missing that part.

Ciara spoke of how little doctrinal agreement mattered to her, and how the support of a church community was primary:

I've often found that even though we say we belong to the Anglican Church, not everybody in the congregation or part of that family is actually Anglican by background. They sometimes come for different reasons, because they found that particular parish is offering something at a particular time in their life, and then

they just stick around. Not technically an Anglican but part of the community, and I think that's something I really like and find very good.

***Owning one's voice and spirituality.*** Many of the women took their experiences of disconnection and discrimination and used them to transform their spirituality and their sense of self in ways that were reflected in their spiritual practices and approaches. This took place both personally, and in the context of sharing their gifts with the wider church community, with most of the women acknowledging the vital role they, and other women play, in the health of the church. Sandy, in reference to her shifted image of "God the Father" to "God the Child", talked about the value she sees in not only embracing this unconventional idea for herself but in sharing it with others:

So for me I find [leading prayers of the people] really rewarding, to think of new ways to pray, to encourage other people to pray, to not see God as someone who is just hearing our prayers but as someone who is present with us and hearing our prayers. So in that way, because I am a woman and a mother, how I see God and the things that speak to me are very different from what speaks to a man, so teaching my kids to pray I find really rewarding.

Dora and several others highlighted the value of bringing creative, multi-sensory forms of worship into the church to facilitate an embodied experience of spirituality. She finds deep spiritual connection through practices like liturgical dance, and she talked about her continued efforts to have this as part of church services:

I'd like to see everyone dancing. I'd like to see people comfortable in their own bodies. You know, not to be embarrassed. You have a God given body. It's beautiful!..That's my next challenge, to get everyone dancing out of the church at the end of the service.

Beth talked about her vision for integrating her political and social concerns, with not only her personal spiritual life but also her church. In the context of discussing the need for women's gifts to be recognized in the church she stated:

I think it also comes back to social and environmental issues and so I think we can always be growing, that there are a lot of issues in our society around gender and justice. I think the church can lead us in a more positive direction in terms of lifting up women and lifting up their experiences and being a source of strength in the community and an example to the rest of society on how to do that and how to do that lovingly and gently. A gentle revolution, a quiet revolution.

**Summary: Returning to the inter-generational journey and a non-linear progression**

Within the superordinate theme of authenticity in integration, the framing theme of an inter-generational journey is brought to the forefront again, as the women interviewed spoke about witnessing their children's and grandchildren's experiences of church, as well as their hopes for both their parishes and religious institutions in general. Just as the women had been deeply influenced by their parents and other role models of previous generations, the likes of which include Mother Theresa, Jean Vanier, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero as well as the participants' neighbors, family and friends, so, many of the women have earnestly taken up the task of mentoring younger generations and advocating for change in the church. In this final theme, the non-linear journey is also clearly evident as the women have traced their paths through to their current spirituality and sense of self. Those paths were often punctuated by disruptions in the form of challenges, disappointments, feelings of hurt and betrayal and a continual process of re-orientation, re-imagining and re-calibrating as they sought integration and authenticity along their journeys. While the impact of the specific events along the journey were unique to each individual, Esther reflected on the underlying process when she said, "I think when you struggle your spirituality gets engaged, and I was looking for something...Either my spirituality forced me to grapple or the grappling grew my spirituality."

### Chapter 4: Discussion

“None of us is the sole author of the stories that compose our life. We interlive with others; we find roles in institutions and communities; we emerge onto the stages of our lives entering into dramas that are already underway,” (Fowler, 1996, p. 54).

#### Introduction

Various theories have attempted to capture and explain the process of identity development by referring to different models, conceptual frameworks, and philosophical assumptions about the nature of personhood and experience (Erickson, 1968; McAdams, 2011; Piaget, 1969). The phenomenological methodology used in this study seeks to draw out emergent themes through an inductive, interpretive approach to analysis that focuses on participants’ experiences of the phenomena in question, namely the experience of one’s identity development as it relates to one’s specific religious faith, spirituality and notions of gender. The emphasis on lived-experience offered the researcher insight into *what it is like* to have one’s identity develop as a woman, engaged with organized religion as the framework for one’s personal spiritual beliefs and practices. The descriptive dimension provided by participants was mediated through, and supplemented by, their own interpretations and meaning making of these experiences, as well as by the researcher’s interpretations of the participant’s reflections. This double hermeneutic that is an intrinsic part of IPA is therefore a shaping element in the analysis, as well as in the application of existing literature and the researcher’s reflections on the research process and analysis. This approach, that prioritizes subjective experience as the particular lens through which the phenomena is understood and a tentative model is developed, does not attempt to offer an exhaustive explanation, or one that considers all the psychological and spiritual processes that may be factors in identity development, nor can it be generalized beyond the participants of this study. Nevertheless, the results of this study offer insight into the topic through the experiences of twelve women in a dynamic meaning making process and points to the need for future

research and further investigation into the nature of identity development as it relates to spirituality, religion and gender.

### **Constructing a Model of Identity Development**

**Incorporating spirituality.** Analysis of the research data's emergent themes resulted in a model that attempts to integrate both the dynamic, non-linear progression of a journey, as well as identify stages or phases that mark defining changes or transitions along the journey. Like any model of development, it aims to capture characteristic patterns and general features; it therefore cannot capture the complexity and diversity of each individual's experiences (Fowler, 1981). The concept of a journey offers space for fluidity, individual variance and moving back and forth along the continuum, and like all conceptual frameworks, does not claim to fully capture the dynamic process (Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). Similarly, McAdams describes, in his theory of narrative identity development, how the construction of one's story entails characters, settings, themes, plot, and an overarching explanation for one's commitments and morals (2011). This description aligns with the present researcher's data which captures an overarching journey-like quality, with identifiable, recurrent themes present across participants over the course of their journeys, with no two journeys being identical but nevertheless showing marked similarities. This is in keeping with Hagberg and Guelich's (2004) Critical Journey theory of spiritual development, in which they note that a journey analogy, as a dynamic process, complete with surprises, stops and starts, change, and movement, most accurately describes the experiences of the spiritual individuals they observed. Hagberg & Guelich (2004) define a journey as, "an extended trip whose process is as important as the destination" (p.17). This acknowledgement of the essential aspect of specific events, people and periods along the journey in shaping the traveller indicates the potential value of identifying phases or stages that inform the experience and particular path for the individual. Along this vein, some narrative approaches to identity

development, as well as identity status models, operate from the stance that life is lived with directionality, or at least understood by reflecting upon one's past and future trajectory, and that this direction helps an individual to find coherence in her story (McLean and Syed, 2015; Habermas & Kober, 2015). This directionality fits with both the journey narrative, and the sequential phases that are part of the proposed model.

Within both faith development and identity development theories, the concept of moving through stages or phases has a long history and a large body of supportive literature (Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1996; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). While a model that utilizes stages cannot map a progression that can be applied universally, it does offer a helpful framework that demonstrates a step by step progression forward, with the meaning of "forward" being addressed by theorists within their respective theories. For participants in the study, movement "forward" was marked by an increasing depth of integration of self-image and God image, an increased valuing of one's self as a source of authority and trustworthy "knower" and the development of an authentic personal faith, while also remaining actively engaged in a faith community and contributing to the wellbeing of others. Progress along the journey was marked by the increasing harmony of a strengthened sense of self, and a sense of social identity and belonging to something greater than one's self. This movement described by participants is reflected in similar descriptions of faith progression, such as in Fowler's (1981) Faith Development Theory and Westerhoff's (2012) model of faith development.

**The interplay of spiritual development and identity.** While it may be important to differentiate between identity development models and spiritual development models as they pertain to different fields of research and different populations, analysis in the present study suggests that identity and spirituality are inextricably intertwined. Even in situations where the

interviewees were describing periods of their lives where they had no religious affiliations, they still spoke of the importance of spirituality in their lives. For the women being interviewed, identity development was a multi-dimensional, dynamic and interactive progression that was in constant dialogue with one's spirituality. Hagberg and Guelich (2004) note the importance of the spiritual journey; "it is life itself" (p. xxi). Peck has been highly influential in the area of integrating faith and psychology at the client level, and he speaks of his extensive clinical experience pointing to the inextricable link between one's worldview, which he broadly calls religion, and one's personal development in many other areas, as he witnessed it with his clients (2003). The interviewees' experiences are also supported by Fowler's (1995) research that identified faith as close to one's sense of self, and continually informing the individual's meaning making process.

This process, as it relates to identity and spirituality was shown by the women to be an interactive one, in which one's internal sense of identity and external forces, were at times, easily integrated and other times were in conflict, and required re-orientation. Similarly, Fowler (1995) also describes a relational engagement between internal and external sources of identity throughout spiritual development, and the push and pull of that interplay, especially at the transitions between stages in his theory. Using Fowler's (1981) definition of faith which extends beyond the confines of religious content or institutions, to the way in which we find coherent meaning in the many dimensions that together constitute our lives, it logically follows that one's spiritual development and identity development cannot be separated. And more specifically, for the participants of this study who all identified as practicing Christians and members of the Anglican Church, their faith possesses both internal meaning making as well as external social, structural components, all of which were identified as integral to identity development. Poll and

Smith (2003) address the importance of spiritual identity development for overall healthy identity development, as well as the related positive mental health outcomes of a strong sense of personal identity. They note that, in general, identity development models neglect the spiritual dimension of a person, despite research that connects healthy spiritual development to overall psychological wellbeing, resilience and ability to effectively handle change across the lifespan (Poll & Smith, 2003).

### **Approaches to Identity Development**

As McLean and Syed (2015) outline, there are several different approaches to identity development which can be traced through history. The emergent themes generated in this study point to two key approaches to identity development that will prove useful in an examination of the research findings. These approaches are: an interactional model of identity development commonly seen in social psychology and sociology, and; a narrative model of identity development, made popular by McAdams (McLean & Syed, 2015). The two models are far from mutually exclusive, and while they may emphasize different aspects of the development process, they also provide support and evidence for each other and are in many ways, complementary (Korobov, 2015).

### **Interactional identity.**

*Navigating one's inner and outer worlds.* The process of identity development that participants in the current study described was experienced as a dynamic and multi-dimensional progression. In other words, the women described continuous efforts to navigate interactions between their shifting internal sense of self, family values, church structures and expectations, relationships with others and their own spirituality, among other factors, within a framework of seeking meaning. Fowler, in his emphasis on faith and identity development as both relational and social, notes how we are all in a continual process of composing and re-composing our ideas

of self, others and world in relation to sources of value and power in which we have chosen to entrust ourselves (1981). The interplay between internal and external identity markers that the participants showed is consistent with a substantial body of research that documents this experience (Korobov, 2015). Many scholars and researchers in the field of identity development operate from the stance that the process is a mutual interplay between one's interior world, including one's perceptions and subjective experiences and the exterior world of language, social organization and categories (Hammack, 2015). Identity development has been described by social psychologists as the link between self and society, connecting the individual to ongoing social processes, and this appears to be the case for the participants (Hammack, 2008). From this approach, identity development does not occur only in the individual mind, but through a continuous series of interactions (Korobov, 2015).

The mapping of this interactional process through the development of a visual representation shows that the interplay between internal and external factors is not uniform or equally weighted across time. As was evident in the participants' responses and the model that was generated, identity development that occurs early in life, is often strongly influenced by external sources, such as authority figures, transmitted principles and doctrine, and one's efforts and pressures to internalize or behave in ways that are in line with these external factors (Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). Considering the shifting power of these forces, Erikson (1968) described how cognitive development in adolescents provides the capacity for more complex reasoning, perspective taking and self-reflection which in turn leads to an identity exploration of values, beliefs and worldviews. As part of this process, Martinez, Penaloza and Valenzuela (2012) note that relationships with others and ideological commitments that determine one's belief system and role in social institutions are often questioned and re-evaluated, as one moves

from adolescence into adulthood. In their qualitative research, they highlight how the development of one's identity happens through a series of internally driven processes mediated by different contexts, interactions and significant relationships that influence their definitions and understanding of self, and how the way these are interpreted shift over time (Martinez et al., 2012). The results of the present study also demonstrate how earlier identity development processes are characterized by a focus on attempting to make sense of the values of external sources of authority, especially parents and church, in relation to one's sense of self. As Hagberg and Guelich (2004) described, and as was shown by the women in the present study, over time their relationship with the external standards that often shaped their sense of self and spirituality earlier in life began to be transformed through journeys inward. This was sometimes marked by a re-emerging sense of self based more heavily on one's self-reflections and an understanding of spirituality and faith that transcended any single institution, but was still informed by, and engaged with, spiritual contexts. This shift is also documented in Chirban's research; he notes that as one moves through Fowler's stages of faith, the previously strong extrinsic motivations for commitment to a religion begin to wane, and intrinsic motivations to pursue one's faith become predominant (as cited in Fowler, 1981).

***The power of church.*** It is worth noting the importance of churches as especially salient spaces of social interaction for the participants' identity development in the current study. As Fowler (1981) states, "our commitments and trusts shape our identities, They determine (and are determined by) the communities we join" (p.18). For most of the participants, throughout childhood and adulthood, church played a key role in how they saw themselves and how they behaved in certain social contexts, including ways they were controlled or limited by the narratives and gender roles that were normative in their respective religious settings. The

interactional nature of identity development between one's interior and exterior worlds was highlighted in these spaces, especially in times when the worlds were in conflict. The participants' experiences are supported by proponents of psychosocial approaches to identity development theory who stress the unavoidable role of institutions in identity development (Korobov, 2015; Penuel & Werstch, 1995). Martinez, et al. (2012) observed in their participants, that the development of one's personal identity became intertwined with institutions and organizations, with participants often integrating the institution's values into their own. However, they also noted that this process was not static, but was rather a continuous search and effort to find coherence between one's internal values and the organization's goals. Similarly, for the women in the current study, their commitment to spirituality, community and meaning making required a continual and active engagement, as well as periods of intentional distancing from church institutions. Penuel and Werstch (1995) note that spaces of public discourse, such as churches, are key areas, in which identity may be contested, undergo transformation, and the dominant ideas may be integrated or struggled against, all of which were evident, to some extent, in interviewee responses.

*The relationship between God and self.* The complex interplay of ideas about self, God and others has been cited by scholars from a range of disciplines (Gall, Mallette, & Guirguis-Younger, 2011; Martin, 2003; Pargament, 2007). Poll and Smith (2003) in their summary of existing identity development models, state that an individual seeks to make sense of herself in relation to others. Expanding from this, they argue that, "individuals will strive to develop a spiritual identity that corresponds with what they believe God to be" (p.134). In the current study, who or what one believes God to be, was demonstrated through participant responses to be a continually shifting process, including unlearning beliefs about God based on early

interactions with parents, church authorities or other important relationships. This process of unlearning was also noted in the study by Poll and Smith (2003). For the women in the present study, their image and relationship with God was deeply intertwined with their internal sense of self as well as their identity within various social contexts. This was demonstrated in the emphasis that some of the participants placed on imagining God as a woman, addressing God as “She”, and identifying the feminine aspects of God, including God’s life giving creative power, seen as similar to giving birth.

This approach to God was not only important for some of the women personally, but they also stressed the importance of belonging to churches that used inclusive language and encouraged reflection on ideas about gender and God on a collective level. The emphasis by the interviewees on the need for both internal and external congruence in understanding one’s self image and God image is supported by interactional theories of identity development (Hammack, 2015). These responses also align with Martin’s work on young women’s identity development in religious contexts where she discusses the challenge of constant translation that young women must undertake if they want to identify with God (2003). She noted that how we speak about God deeply affects the way young women understand themselves, and that even if inclusive language for God is adopted, culture and history have imbued the word God with a deeply entrenched masculinity (Martin, 2003). Similarly, in Westerhoff’s model of spiritual development, he also notes how masculine language to refer to God can estrange many, he expands upon this by saying “...every statement about God is finally a statement about persons” (p.33, 2012).

Westerhoff’s model is a noteworthy dialogue partner for the current study, because like the women in the study, he operates from a theistic stance that acknowledges a theistic

worldview, namely the Christian story, as the narrative through which one may understand her life (Westerhoff, 2012). From this position, Westerhoff (2012) discusses how the Christian story portrayed in the Bible, the story of one's faith community and one's own personal narrative, and experiences of God interact together to constitute the self. Like interactional models of identity development, Westerhoff emphasizes that the self is formed and revised in relationships with others, but unlike many other models he includes God as a crucial relationship in our identity development, and also links the nature of one's relationship to others as a perceived measure of the depth of one's relationship with God (2012). Westerhoff's specifically Christian perspective may be important because the personal relationship with God that is emphasized as part of Christian faith points towards the importance of God-image and one's understanding of her relationship with God in the present study. God is not a tertiary character among others in a wide array of social contexts that the women interviewed might find themselves in. Rather, as many of the women noted, God is central to their identity: in how they view themselves, others and the natural world, their actions, motivations and values, and where they find meaning, hope and a framework for understanding the world. Therefore, at least for some populations, the importance of a model of identity development that adequately considers gender and spirituality will likely provide a depth of insight into the process that would not otherwise be possible.

**Narrative identity.**

*Building a meaningful story.* The semi-structured nature of the interviews as well as the topics being discussed seemed to facilitate participant narratives that captured the meaning making available through constructing and reflecting upon the story of one's life. McAdams (2011) notes how narratives serve to explain how one came to be where they are, and where they are going, thus situating an individual in their current circumstances in a way that makes sense to her and others. Identity development theorists that take a narrative approach emphasize the

unique capacity of a life story to establish individual continuity, especially in times of change or disruption to existing identity (Habermas & Kober, 2015). If one considers “life story” to be one’s life as remembered, thought about and shared, then constructing an identity this way facilitates a reflective process of integrating personal changes and life developments into a coherent whole, forming a story that incorporates a continuous sense of self (Habermas & Kober, 2015). In the present study, participants demonstrated this process in their narrative accounts, in the way they linked seemingly distant events and relationships to make sense of changes in their identity over time, and find meaning in challenging circumstances.

Burrows (2018) speaking of the power of storytelling in explorations of identity, indicates in her research how, “stories keep us alive as they emphasize a reality more profound than fact” (p.11). Participants seemed to reach both enlivening and powerfully peaceful moments through the act of talking about their experiences by weaving them into the form of a story. Some participants even spoke of the deeper levels of meaning that they drew from events by telling their story to the researcher in the data collection interviews, by their continued engagement in making connections, causal inferences, and reflecting on the impact of certain experiences on their overall life story. In support of this aspect of the data analysis, Fivush and Zaman (2015) describe how sharing one’s self through telling stories of everyday experiences is how one both embodies and creates one’s identity. Here one can see how interactional approaches to identity development and narrative approaches converge as they go on to describe how this is an interactive process of co-constructing narratives with others, through family stories, interactions with others and social organizations (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). Further, McAdams (2011) also emphasizes the interactional nature of developing one’s narrative, noting

that an individual is heavily influenced by her culture, including images, themes and societal norms.

As Hammack (2008) points out, individuals are undertaking a simultaneous process of developing a personal narrative of identity that forms the social, emotional and cognitive lens through which they engage with the world, while also engaging with what Hammack refers to as “master” narratives of identity that operate as the dominant discourses within a group or society. We can see this engagement through the participants’ efforts to make sense of their unique personal life stories within the larger context of some version of the Christian story that is offered by a religious institution, namely the Anglican Church or other previous denominational affiliation. As is evident in the proposed model, the process of navigating personal narratives and sociocultural narratives is neither linear, nor static, and elicited varying levels of disorientation across time, depending on the level of emphasis placed on one’s internal and external sources of knowledge about self and world. For example, in the integration and authenticity phase, some participants perceived a significant level of disparity between their personal meaning making narrative and the church’s, or other “master” meaning making narratives, without feeling that their identities were threatened or needed to be revised. Whereas, in early phases of integration, the conflict between narratives often caused substantial emotional distress and disruption in some participants’ lives.

*An intergenerational, gendered story.* The majority of the participants interviewed highlighted the importance of parents and other caregivers in instilling core values, ideas about faith and God. Fowler (1981) described how parents communicate, in myriad ways, their own loyalties to institutions and causes and beliefs about the world, including gender roles, long before children develop language comprehension or can clearly identify their parents beliefs.

Fowler described this interaction between the individual and the family as both essential to the formation of selfhood and the source of deeply influential *shared centers of value and power*, embedded within family stories (1981). Peck (2003) also identified through his work with clients, one's particular family as the most influential culture in the shaping of one's beliefs about the world. While this process is not static, and includes influences outside the family system, nor does everyone grow up within a family, the emphasis on constructing shared values points to the relational nature of faith especially with one's immediate relationships over time. The key role of family influences in identity development is supported by Martinez, et al. (2012) study that showed parental values and commitments were often internalized and continued to impact participants' views and understanding of themselves and the world well into adulthood. This is in keeping with narrative theories of identity development that highlight the role of intergenerational narration in constructing one's identity (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). Some women in the present study noted this influence when they linked their own ideas of exemplary faith to the behavior they saw modeled by parents and grandparents, and the ways participants were continuing to follow those examples. Further, intergenerational narratives were described by participants, a few of whom noted they are aware they have adopted the spiritual imagery and language of previously family generations.

In support of these findings, Westerhoff's faith development model also highlights how early ideas about faith are shared through the use of stories and interactions with others, and through modelling behavior are incorporated into one's spirituality that continues throughout their lifespan (2012). This emphasizes the critical importance of significant relationships in childhood for the shaping of one's ideas about God, self and others, and also sets the stage for the potential expansion into later stages of faith (Westerhoff, 2012). This so called, setting the

stage, was described by some of the women in the way that early experiences seemed to positively or negatively predispose them to a certain denomination, and that this stance was still evident many years later. Of particular salience is the role that Fivush and Zaman (2015) observed of mothers in their daughter's identity development, in which mothers' intergenerational storytelling impacted their daughters' personal narratives in a way that led to a greater association for girls with family stories than for boys. When comparing these findings to the responses of participants in the current study, one can find relevant examples of the powerful impact of participants' mothers' approaches to faith, and perhaps most strikingly, the seriousness with which participants took on their roles as role-models to their daughters and future generations of women.

As personal narratives are co-constructed by the sharing and internalizing of narrative structures, especially the narratives of parents in early life, the consideration of the role of gender in the narratives is essential (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). In Fulton's (2017) discussion of gender socialization she notes that gender disparities often begin before birth, with the expectations, social meaning and gender associations that come with the anticipation and preparations of having a boy or a girl. While the significance of the role of biological determinants versus socialization continues to be debated in efforts to explain gender differences, the socio-cultural impact of gender norms on gender socialization and the adoption of a gender identity are widely accepted (Fulton, 2017). In light of this, and with the descriptions of the participants of various Christian approaches to understanding gender within their religious contexts, it is understandable that gender was a key piece of the women's experiences in the current study.

Specifically, the women in this study all described a current affiliation with an Anglican Church community, as well as other churches throughout their lifetimes, including the church

affiliations of their parents and grandparents. It is evident that the concept of an intergenerational, gendered story is not as simple as a woman's interactions with their parents and grandparents or her children and grandchildren at home. These interactions are also embedded in, and interact with, various social structures, one of which, for the women in this study, is church (Fulton 2017). Fulton (2017) notes how gender roles are impacted by cultural contexts, including sub-cultures such as religious communities, and that nonconformity to gender norms can have significant negative social outcomes. Based on the preceding discussion, as well as participant responses that outlined the importance of one's spiritual community as a way to connect to and understand God, as well as a source of belonging and social connection to one's family and others, the pressure to conform to gender norms is substantial. Westerhoff (2012) discusses how a spiritual community is also an intergenerational family of sorts that is interacting with a living tradition. In other words, one's church community comes replete with its own set of social scripts, expectations, principles, rituals and vision, which not only the participants but in some cases many generations of the participants' families have been exposed to and internalized to varying degrees. For the women participating in the present study, this was described as the added challenge of navigating not only one's own beliefs in dialogue with church doctrine, but also the beliefs, expectations and potential disappointment of parents and other family members.

### **Themes and Phases**

**The value of disruption.** As participants made sense of their non-linear journeys, several identified key moments of crisis, disruption and disillusionment as life altering shifts in the trajectory of their faith development, and subsequently, their identity development as well. Habermas and Kober (2015) identified in their research how self-reflection and identity exploration are prevalent when one's current identity becomes problematic and requires reassessment and revision. Participant reflections on past events or times that were particularly

destabilizing or challenged their existing ideas about their religious beliefs, showed a meaning making process in which those events were perceived by the participants as positively transformative both for their spirituality and their sense of self. Halberg and Guelich (2004) note how periods of crisis can be catalysts for questioning meaning, expanding one's views, and energizing one to move forward in both their personal and spiritual development.

Poll and Smith (2003), describe the process of identity development in narrative theories as a series of crises in which a currently problematic aspect of identity must be re-interpreted in order to create a unified, more meaningful story. Some of the women interviewed in the present study demonstrated this process by reflecting back on events earlier in their lives that were at the time, deeply troubling and destabilizing, and then traced a thread of meaning that connected that previously negatively viewed event to feelings of gratitude for how it led to their current circumstances. McAdams and McLean (2013) describe this reconstruction of negative events as a *redemption sequence*, noting that adults who take this perspective are more committed to the wellbeing of future generations and improving society. In Fowler's stages, he notes many sources of disruption including: disillusionment with one's compromises, contradictions between sources of authority and one's internal moral compass, leaving home, realizing the relativity of one's beliefs in relation to people from other backgrounds, among other catalysts, and how these provide the groundwork for transition to the next stage of faith (1981). The example of leaving home, either physically or more figuratively was cited by several women interviewed, as a time of transformation of their beliefs, changing engagement with spiritual communities, and ultimately a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to their spirituality.

**Growing into spiritual maturity.** Many of the women in this study demonstrated an ability to hold within their spirituality, the tension of both a deep commitment to a church

community and an awareness of the inevitable partiality, distortions and flaws of the institution and even the limiting confines of the Christian religion. Fowler (1981) describes the later stages of faith as, “alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions” (p.198). In this tone, several women spoke with a sense of ease about the conflicting interior and exterior worlds they experienced as members of church communities, without indicating that their spirituality or sense of self was threatened by disparities. Rather, they seemed comfortable with their awareness of the way they have been shaped by their pasts, a curiosity about new experiences and an openness to the beliefs of others from different spiritual traditions, which is reflected in the later stages of Fowler’s model (1995).

In the final stage of Westerhoff’s model, he identifies a characteristic of the stage of “owned faith” as a desire to put one’s faith into action, and a willingness to stand up for one’s beliefs, even in opposition to one’s family or church (Westerhoff, 2012). Fowler also describes an “activist incarnation” of mature faith, in which an individual seeks to live out her spirituality by transforming her current reality, and that of others, with little concern for threat to self, or loss of group acceptance (1981). People in this stage are often disruptive of existing power structures (Fowler, 1981). Elements of this were demonstrated by some of the participants in the present study who spoke of being actively engaged in changing the current church structures that they saw as unjust, and their belief that they were morally responsible to advocate for these changes.

Importantly, Westerhoff’s model, represented as expanding tree-rings, also notes that reaching this final stage does not exclude previous stages and that doubt and struggle continue to be present, though they may be approached differently (2012). This was also evident for many of the participants as they continued to examine their beliefs and spirituality, while simultaneously feeling noteworthy periods of liberation, spiritual health and strong personal identity that

Westerhoff associates with this final stage (Westerhoff, 2012). In his final stage, Fowler describes how universal values of compassion and love extend beyond group affiliations, and drive actions that challenge society's preoccupations with justice, security and acceptance (Fowler, 1981). While he notes individuals in this stage are not perfect, they seem to be rare (Fowler, 1981). They both love life, and have a sense of their mortality and fragility, seeing their community as universal, while also treasuring the particularity of human beings, as expressions of the universal (Fowler, 1981). Evidence of at least glimpses of attributes mirroring this final stage are found in several participant responses. Participants spoke of a spirituality that transcended religious divisions, of seeing interactions with every human being as sacred, of honoring other religious traditions as paths seeking the same universal truths, of bravely challenging the status quo with the belief that a deeper and more inclusive truth could be revealed.

It is worth noting, that the farther along the participants moved in their journeys, their growing disregard for fitting in to the expectations and norms of one's spiritual community did not necessarily lead to feelings of isolation or alienation as it did for some participants earlier in their journeys. Participants spoke of feelings of belonging in the midst of disagreement and diversity in their current religious communities. As Fowler describes, the way towards truth is often through a particular religious community, however in the final stage, conforming to that community is not the goal, but rather living in a complementary and dialogical relationship to it (1981). For some of the women in the study, their spiritual community appeared to be a conduit to an underlying universal source of meaning, with church supplying images, representations, community and particular scaffolding for a journey that would ultimately transcend any one religious tradition. As described above, the responses of several women in the study correspond

in striking ways to various spiritual development theories, with the added complexity of experiencing life as a woman, which appears to offer an enriching dimension to existing theories.

### **Contributions to the Field and Future Areas of Study**

Analysis of the current study leads to further questions of how and whether women are moving through their spiritual and identity development journeys in ways that are unique to their gender. This study also points to the importance of future exploration into the potential impact of the transforming of traditional ideas around gender identity, a more fluid view of gender and greater gender diversity, on the phenomena being studied (Delaney, 2017). The experiences of genderqueer, transgender, gender nonconforming and intersex individuals would very likely provide a different set of perspectives than the ones offered in the present study. There is ample evidence from both existing literature and participant responses to suggest that one's identity as a woman, whether one embraces it or not, impacts her interactions with others, herself and God. This has been elaborated upon in the preceding sections, pointing to the importance of considering how gender identity and gender expression might be shaping how people are experiencing their spirituality and forming their identities from different lenses and sets of experiences specifically as they relate to different religious contexts, spiritual practices, and important others' beliefs. How might something like Fowler's Stages of Faith (1981), Westerhoff's model of faith development (2012), or Hagberg and Guelich's Critical Stages theory, as well as the many identity development theories currently in use, be altered if one was to critically examine these theories for the impact and role of gender identity in interaction with other development factors? To this date, the available literature indicates that this task does not appear to have been undertaken in any considerable depth. The model proposed draws on both narrative and interactional identity development approaches, demonstrating how the differentiation sometimes delineated between the two approaches may have more room for

integration. This emerging model contributes to the field of identity development research, as scholars continue to seek greater integration between approaches (McLean & Syed, 2015).

There is reason to argue, based on the androcentric history of most Christian traditions, and indeed several other major religious traditions, that further examination of gender identity and spirituality as key elements in an interactional approach to identity may provide valuable insight into the field of developmental psychology, theology and psychotherapy. The results of this study suggest that there may be something particular about women's identity and spiritual development. This study highlights some of the challenges faced by many of the women interviewed, in navigating limiting gender roles, feelings of oppression and discrimination based on gender, a struggle to see one's self as the image of God, or to feel fully human and other negative experiences related to gender and spirituality. Similar concerns have been noted in the feminist research of, among others, Daly (1973), Johnson (2008), Martin (2003), and Schussler Fiorenza (1992).

All the women in the current study described links between their experiences and their gender, the women's descriptions suggested the presence of phases of disruption, disorientation and re-assessment of themselves, their religious affiliations and their beliefs, that may not have occurred in the same way had they not self-identified as women. In keeping with the journey analogy of the proposed model, these experiences altered the shape and course of their journeys, as the women continued to seek forward progression albeit from an altered place and sometimes with different informers and sources of experience and knowledge than they would have had if they had not faced challenges related to their gender. For these reasons, it is important for mental health clinicians, especially those working with women who identify with, or have previously identified with an organized form of Christianity, to be sensitive to what it may be like to be a

woman in her spiritual community. Further, considering the role of caregivers, parents and grandparents, it is likely that many of the women seeking psychotherapy will have in some way been impacted in their identity development by the intersection of spirituality, religion and gender, even if they do not claim any spiritual dimension to their lives (Fowler, 1981).

While this study focused on the experiences of women, the experiences of men and people who do not locate their gender identity within a binary system are also areas in need of further investigation. Just as women's experiences appear to be unique, it is reasonable to imagine that so too may be the experiences of men, and other gender identities. Greater insight into the particularities of the spiritual and identity development processes for other populations may provide valuable tools for assisting in healthy development and understanding the factors that shape experience as it relates to gender identity. Future research, examining these phenomena within the context of other denominations and spiritual and religious traditions may also yield valuable information for people operating within those belief systems, as well as those following other faiths who may benefit from learning about the wisdom, approaches and experiences of people with differing worldviews. Gender identity could well be a bridge of sorts, connecting the experiences of people from different spiritual journeys through this shared identity marker, creating solidarity in the midst of possibly vastly different experiences of what this aspect of identity means and insight into the potential of what it *could* mean. In other words, this study may offer a platform, not only for understanding different women's experiences but in the transformative power of opening up the often silenced and radically diverse worlds of women to other women, and to people in general.

### **Clinical Implications**

**The dimensions of gender and spirituality.** As clients continue to ask questions around meaning and values connected to one's identity, this demonstrates the need for psychotherapists

to be well versed in developmental theories, potential clinical applications as well as cultivate an awareness of significant factors that may be interacting in one's identity development, both adaptive and maladaptive (Singer & Kasmark, 2015). Questions of identity, including disturbances and crises of identity, both of one's internal sense of self and one's identity within one's socio-cultural context, may not be found within the DSM-IV, but nevertheless constitute, at least in part, a substantial portion of clinical issues (Singer & Kasmark, 2015). Addressing issues of identity can occur within a variety of theoretical orientations when providing psychotherapy, and often present concurrently with symptoms of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses, and should therefore be considered in treatment planning (Singer & Kasmark, 2015). The current study focused on two dynamically interacting factors in identity development, namely, gender and spirituality, indicating the potential value of addressing these factors in psychotherapeutic treatment.

Providing gender sensitive psychotherapy requires an awareness and examination of the contexts, relationships and other significant factors that are interacting in the development of an individual's identity (Wong, 2017). Similarly, Griffiths and Griffiths (2002) emphasize the importance of addressing a client's religious beliefs and spirituality in counselling. If one adopts an approach to counselling that acknowledges the centrality of spirituality and gender to identity development then having a framework for understanding the processes at play would help clinicians in identifying both helpful and unhelpful interactions between self, religion, spirituality and spiritual communities (Parker, 2011). Parker (2011) states that identifying a client's current faith stage helps to inform a strengths based approach, drawing on client's existing resources, and helping to identify possible directions of growth. Utilizing a tool like a developmental model also helps to avoid the tendency clinicians sometimes have of over-

pathologizing religious beliefs. Further, research has shown that a counsellor's attitude towards a client's faith impacts clinical outcomes, and therefore taking seriously the particularities of a client's spiritual development can facilitate the therapeutic alliance (Parker, 2011). Similar to spirituality, gender identity development can be examined through an array of theories, however, most agree that whatever the mechanisms involved in gender identity development, it is a central element of identity, likely influenced by multiple factors (Delaney, 2017). Delaney notes that counsellors will inevitably work with clients who are struggling with gender identity, whether clients are fully aware of the impact of gender in their lives, or not (2017).

Familiarity with various identity development and spiritual development theories, as well as the flexibility to work with individual differences that resist containment in any one theory, can operate as a helpful beginning place for working with clients grappling with a wide range of issues. However, the results of this study suggest that the existing models of development may not be sufficient. The application of popular faith development models such as Fowler's Faith Development Theory (1981) in clinical practice may not adequately account for the role of gender, which was shown in this study to be an important factor throughout identity and spiritual development for the participants interviewed. In fact, the roles of gender identity and spirituality in the development of identity can hardly be delineated from identity itself, as gender and spirituality have been found to be core aspects of self (Gall et al., 2009; Delaney, 2017). So it may well be that one cannot speak of theories of identity development, spiritual development and gender identity development as separate phenomena, without ignoring the mutual and ongoing interplay of these factors in the development of the others.

### **Limitations**

This study contains some potential limitations which should be noted. While the sample size was quite diverse in many ways, all the participants were Canadians who had spent most of

their lives in Canada, and none of them identified themselves as an ethnic or sexual minority. As per recruitment protocol, all participants, at the time interviews were conducted, were members of an Anglican church, and therefore these findings cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the individuals in this study. Though generalizations are not possible, the advantage of a large sample size, and the rigorous analysis process provided an in depth understanding of the topic at hand and may provide valuable insight into the experiences of other women. The researcher also wondered if the recruitment process and the topic may have self selected for volunteers who were particularly engaged and reflective about their experiences of gender and spirituality. While this led to rich and meaningful discussion, the participant responses may not have been representative of women in the parishes where recruitment took place. However, in qualitative research, where representation of the population is not the aim, this self selection may be observed, but is not necessarily problematic. Another possible limitation is that while this study did not explicitly operate within a gender binary paradigm, the terms used in recruitment did not encourage potential volunteers whose gender identity does not fit within a man/ woman gender binary. These possible participants may have had experiences relevant to the phenomena being examined and perhaps would have offered a more complex and nuanced picture and opened up questions for further study.

Another limitation may have existed in the interview questions. As recommended in a phenomenological approach to interviewing, terms used within the interviews were not predefined by the researcher, but were left open for the participants to define for themselves within the interview (Smith et al., 2009). This posed a challenge for several participants, especially related to the question of what it means to be a woman. Some participants stated that this was not something they had ever considered before, and they struggled to articulate their

ideas on the subject. While the nature of their responses, including efforts to explain womanhood indirectly, sometimes in comparison to what it means to be a man, also contributed meaningfully to the data, it appeared to be a source of discomfort and frustration for some of the participants and they did not feel adequately prepared to discuss the topic. Additionally, as the researcher moved through the interview process, it became evident that the interview questions, as originally formulated, did not adequately address the importance of childhood experiences and the role of family in influencing the participants' journeys. Fortunately the semi-structured interview design allowed for flexibility on the part of the researcher and the use of probing questions to access these experiences, however, this area of the interview could have been more comprehensive.

Often one of the more significant limitations of a study utilizing IPA, is the potential for researcher bias. Though steps were taken to minimize the impact of researcher bias, IPA is inevitably an interpretive process (Smith et al., 2009). The personal experience of the researcher in various religious and spiritual communities and her struggle with navigating these spaces as a woman were a substantial motivation for the pursuit of research in this subject area. As a result, it is unavoidable that one's experiences impact the formulation of the interview questions, as well as the choice of probing questions used during interviews. Upon reviewing interview transcripts, it became evident that the researcher sometimes focused on interviewee responses that favored a feminist lens, and often asked more follow-up questions when responses indicated struggle and dissatisfaction with the status quo then when responses expressed contentment and lack of conflict with current church structures or gender roles. In this way, the investigator may have unintentionally guided the direction of some parts of the interviews in a way that reflected personal bias and turned the focus away from some potential meaningful areas of exploration.

As indicated in a previous chapter, the semi-structured interviews most commonly utilized in IPA are unavoidably a relational process. My relative lack of interviewing experience meant that the data collection process was also a learning process in which I was engaged in reflexive activities to assess both interview content and the process of the interviews themselves, including my own and the women's body language, how to create a welcoming space while maintaining an appropriate professional distance, refinement of my listening skills and guiding the direction of the interview to maintain focus when necessary. This proved to be a sort of dance that was unique to each participant, and one that I am certain I did not always perform gracefully. However, overall the interviews elicited thoughtful, meaningful responses and several participants expressed gratitude at the opportunity to reflect on, and share their experiences.

### **Strengths**

While this study had some limitations, it also had several strengths. A sample of twelve participants is considered robust in IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). The size of the sample and the age range of participants offered insight into women's experiences at various phases of their journeys and also led to a saturation point in which no new themes were being identified in the final interview analysis. This saturation point likely would not have been possible with a smaller sample. The in-depth analysis process that is outlined in the IPA methodology was also a strength in this research as it required an intensive, multi-step approach to analysis with continual validity checks to ensure ongoing researcher reflexivity and trustworthiness of the emergent themes. This process included an inter-coder reliability check, outlined in the methods section. This check resulted in complete inter-coder consensus on emergent themes, further indicating the reliability of the analysis as an accurate reflection of participant experiences. Investigation into, and a focus on, measures of ensuring trustworthiness and credibility that are

specific to qualitative research meant that careful attendance to accuracy, the appropriateness of the chosen research design and consistency in data collection and analysis were achieved.

### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrated the dynamic interplay of gender, religion and spirituality in identity development for the twelve women who generously shared their stories and the meaning they found in their journeys. The narrative structure of their experiences showed how the women made sense of their journeys by situating themselves in an intergenerational story, both influenced by others, and influencers of others. While each woman's story was unique, emergent themes generated a model that was helpful in mapping characteristics of the journey that were recurrent across individuals. Their stories were deeply shaped by their families and their early childhood experiences of religion and spirituality. From within their individual contexts, the participants experienced the continual interaction of external and internal aspects of their continually shifting identities as they sought integration and congruence between their sense of self, and their identity within their socio-cultural milieu. Early life was marked by the powerful impact of external sources of identity, such as church and family, with times of disruption or conflict causing periods of questioning and reassessing one's identity and the priority one gives to external aspects of self. Most of the women's journeys were marked by a time of differentiation between external sources of religion and one's internal sense of God and spirituality. This differentiation enabled the power differential between internal and external sources to be inverted, so that internal sources were then prioritized. External and internal aspects of identity continued to inform each other, but in this second phase of integration, the women's ability to define and embrace their spirituality on their own terms led to greater authenticity, a stronger sense of self and a shifting role in their spiritual community to one of ownership and advocate for change.

This study was a gift to the researcher. It was a privilege to be welcomed into the stories of truly remarkable women who shared deeply personal, and sometimes painful experiences, as well as the meaning they found in them. Even though efforts at bracketing are a necessary aspect of IPA, the stories could not help but be personally inspiring, providing hope and powerful insights into the ways women are navigating their spirituality. The women were both wholeheartedly engaged in their churches and authentic to themselves, which meant that engagement did not always look like agreement with the majority, but that the women continued to believe in their right to belong to their spiritual communities, as they took ownership of them and responsibility for shaping the future of the communities they believe in.

Through speaking with these unassuming women, one is given an intimate look into the vibrant, analytic, creative inner lives of the women one might sit beside in church; women who are engaged in a dynamic tension of both critically examining and also embracing liturgy, community, doctrine and their own spirituality. This study showed women of all ages active in, and reflective about, their spiritual communities, their own development and their relationship with God. The oldest participant in this study, at 73 years of age, emailed the researcher after her interview to express her gratitude at the self-reflection that the interview had sparked in her, how she was considering questions and ideas she had never thought about before. This interaction highlighted the lifelong process that identity development can be, and that the researcher sought to present through the data analysis. It also pointed to what hopefully was a mutually life giving process of constructing meaning that took place between the researcher and the women interviewed. Thank you to the women who participated in this study, your stories are beautiful examples of courage, determination and compassion.

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## Appendix I- Ethics Board Approval



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14-08-2017  
dd-mm-yyyy

Bureau de la recherche et de la déontologie  
Office of Research and Ethics

### Ethics Certificate Research Ethics Board (REB)

**REB File Number**      1360.2/17

**Principal Investigator / Thesis supervisor / Co-investigators / Student**

<u>Last name</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Richey	Meghan	Faculty of Human Sciences	Student-Principal Investigator
Martin	Miriam	Faculty of Human Sciences	Thesis Supervisor

**Type of project**      MA Thesis

**Title**                      Women and God: An Exploration into Women's Identities and Experiences of the Sacred Within a Christian Framework.

<u>Approval date</u>	<u>Expiry Date</u>	<u>Decision</u>
14-08-2017 (dd-mm-yyyy)	13-08-2018 (dd-mm-yyyy)	1 (approved)

**Committee comments:**

The Research Ethics Board (REB) approved the project.  
The researcher is invited to use the reference number 1360.2/17 when recruiting participants.

In accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, the Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board has examined and approved the application for an ethics certificate for this project for the period indicated and subject to the conditions listed above.

The research protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB. This includes, among others, the extension of the research, additional recruitment for the inclusion of new participants, changes in location of the fieldwork, any stage where a research permit is required, such as work in schools. Minor administrative changes are allowed.

The REB must be notified of all changes or unanticipated circumstances that have a serious impact on the conduct of the research, that relate to the risk to participants and their safety. Modifications to the project, information, consent and recruitment documentation must be submitted to the Office of Research and Ethics for approval by the REB.

The investigator must submit a report four weeks prior to the expiry date of the certificate stated above requesting an extension or that the file be closed.

Documents relating to publicity, recruitment and consent of participants should bear the file number of the certificate. They must also indicate the coordinates of the investigator should participants have questions related to the research project. In which case, the documents will refer to the Chair of the REB and provide the coordinates of the Office of Research and Ethics.

**Signature**

Louis Perron  
Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB)

1/1

## Appendix II- Invitation to Participate



### Invitation to Participate

#### Faculty of Human Sciences

#### **Women and God: Explorations into Women's Experiences of the Divine, Spirituality and Identity Within a Christian Framework**

**Researcher:** Meghan Richey (mrich130@uottawa.ca)

**Supervisors:** Dr. Martin ([mmartin@ustpaul.ca](mailto:mmartin@ustpaul.ca)) and Dr. Bilodeau (cbilodeau@ustpaul.ca).

This study has received clearance from the Research Ethics Committee, Saint Paul University. You will be asked to sign a consent form should you choose to participate.

#### **What is the study about?**

You are being invited to participate in a study about your experience of being a practicing Anglican woman, navigating your spirituality within a Christian framework. This study will seek to explore experiences of gender, identity development, and God.

#### **What will I be Expected to Do and How Much Time Will it Take?**

Participants will be expected to discuss their experiences and their ideas relating to God and their identity as a woman during a face-to-face interview, as well as read over a transcription of the interview at a later date to confirm accuracy. The time demand is approximately one hour for the interview and thirty minutes to confirm and clarify the interview transcript approximately two weeks later.

#### **Will Anyone Know What I Said or Did?**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by using pseudonyms in interviews and changing identifying information and features when reporting data. Anonymity is not possible in the data gathering phase due to the data collection method (face-to-face interview), however participants will remain anonymous in the reporting of findings. Data will be stored on a password protected computer and destroyed five years after study completion.

#### **What Happens If I Change My Mind and Want to Withdraw?**

Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no consequences or explanation, in which case your data will not be used and will be destroyed immediately. You may also choose not to answer any questions you wish, without withdrawing from the study.

#### **What Are the Potential Risks and Benefits Associated with Participation in the Study?**

There are minimal potential risks to you by participating in this research, including possible psychological distress when discussing personal experiences that may illicit strong emotions. The potential benefits of your participation in this research include the availability of global findings after study completion and contributions to the growing body of research relating to women and spirituality.

**Where Do I Get Questions Answered and How do I Volunteer to Participate?**

The research supervisors listed above are available to answer questions you may have regarding this research. If you are interested in participating please contact Meg Richey (mrich130@uottawa.ca) or call 613-294-5450 to arrange an interview at a time of your convenience.

**Appendix III- Informed Consent**

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## *Participant Consent Form*

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### **Women and God: Explorations into Women's Identity and Experiences of the Sacred within a Christian Framework**

**Researchers:** Meghan Richey is an MA candidate in Counselling and Spirituality at Saint Paul University and you may contact her if you have further questions by emailing [mrich130@uottawa.ca](mailto:mrich130@uottawa.ca) or calling 613-295-5450. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Prof. Cynthia Bilodeau ([cbilodeau@ustpaul.ca](mailto:cbilodeau@ustpaul.ca)) and Prof. Miriam Martin ([mmartin@ustpaul.ca](mailto:mmartin@ustpaul.ca)) both in the Faculty of Human Sciences.

**Invitation to Participate:** I have been invited to participate in a study entitled Women and God: Explorations into Women's Identity and Experiences of the Sacred Within a Christian Framework that is being conducted by Meghan Richey, under the supervision of Miriam Martin and Cynthia Bilodeau.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to explore how women are experiencing their faith within their Christian tradition. The intent of this research is to shed light on the current state of women and their identity within their Anglican tradition and to bring to light, any insight that may be offered to women seeking to deepen their Christian faith while also fostering an empowered identity as a woman. Explorations into the ways women are experiencing, and possibly transforming their own spiritual lives through a Christian lens may provide valuable insight for psychotherapists working with women struggling with spiritual issues.

**Participation:** I am being asked to participate in this study because I have identified myself as fitting the participant criteria of being a practicing Anglican laywoman, and willing to speak to experiences relating to gender, faith, identity, God and Christianity. My participation will consist of an initial face-to-face interview of approximately one hour, at a time of my convenience at a location on Saint Paul University campus to be confirmed prior to meeting. As well, a summary of the themes from my interview will be emailed to me within one month of the interview in order for me to confirm the accuracy of the data analysis and provide any supplementary information or make any clarifications if I wish. The interview will be recorded and a transcription will be made.

**Risks:** My participation in this study may entail that I volunteer personal information, if I so choose, and this may cause me to feel some emotional and psychological discomfort. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, including the ability to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences or any explanation from me. As well, I will be directed to resources for further support, if I request them.

**Benefits:** Benefits of my participation in this study will include the global availability of findings after study completion which may provide valuable insight and alternative perspectives on the topic, both for myself and other readers. This research will contribute to the existing literature on the topic and attempt to bridge the gap between academic discourse and women's hands-on experiences of faith relating to gender. As well this study aims to offer practical considerations for Anglican women, spiritual leaders and mental health clinicians by exploring the ways that women are experiencing, and possibly

transforming their relationship with God or re-imagining God in ways that positively impact their lived spiritual practices and their identities.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for data analysis and that my confidentiality will be protected by storing all data on a password protected computer. When reviewing the summary of themes from my interview, via email, in order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality it is recommended that I use standard safety measures such as signing out of my account, closing my browser and locking my screen or device when I am no longer using them.

In terms of protecting my anonymity, due to the face-to-face interview method anonymity is not possible in the data gathering phase. However anonymity will be protected in the dissemination of results by changing identifying features and information and with the use of pseudonyms. The results of this study may be shared with others in the form of a thesis, publication and poster presentation; however, full anonymity will be maintained.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including audio recordings of the interview, transcripts and summaries will be kept in a secure manner on a password protected computer and in a locked file on the Saint Paul University campus, for the duration of the study and for five years following completion. After this point, data from this study will be disposed of by erasing electronic data, including audio recordings and paper copies will be shredded.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw from the study my data will not be used and will be destroyed immediately.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Meg Richey of the Department of Social Sciences, Counselling and Spirituality, at Saint Paul University, which research is under the supervision of Prof. Miriam Martin and Prof. Cynthia Bilodeau. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisors.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research and Ethics, Saint Paul University, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, ON K1S 1C4  
Tel.: (613) 236-1393

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

<i>Name of Researcher</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

**Appendix IV- Email Recruitment Information**

Dear ...,

I am a graduate student in the school of Counselling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality at Saint Paul University and I am looking to speak to women about experiences of practicing their spirituality within a Christian framework. This study will receive ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Committee before data collection begins and is being supervised by Dr. Cynthia Bilodeau ([cbilodeau@ustpaul.ca](mailto:cbilodeau@ustpaul.ca)) and Dr. Miriam Martin ([mmartin@ustpaul.ca](mailto:mmartin@ustpaul.ca)). I am contacting you because I am seeking your permission to recruit participants from within your faith community. My intention is to interview laywomen within the Anglican denomination to gain an in-depth perspective on their experiences and engagement with their faith in order to shed light on how gender, identity development and one's relationship with God and self are being experienced.

I am looking for women over the age of 18 who consider themselves members of the Anglican Church laity and self-identify as practicing Christians. In agreeing to participate in the study, they will be asked to speak about their experiences of being women within their church, their ideas about God, themselves, and connections between gender and faith.

I am hopeful that this study will continue to open up the conversation about the experiences of women practicing Christian spirituality, and contribute to the growing awareness of any challenges, transformative experiences and various ways that women are navigating their faith experiences in relation to their gender.

I would like to request your permission to seek participants from within your parish, if you agree; a written email confirmation of your agreement is needed before potential participants may be contacted. The recruitment process can take on different forms, depending on what you feel best suits your community. I would be happy to speak during the announcement portion of a Sunday service, otherwise recruitment can be done online via email or social media, or any other avenue you suggest. I would love to meet with you to discuss the details of this study and provide any further information at a time of your convenience. Please do not hesitate to contact me by email ([mrich130@uottawa.ca](mailto:mrich130@uottawa.ca)) or by phone [613-294-5450](tel:613-294-5450)

Thank you for taking the time to read this email,

Meghan Richey (MA Counselling and Spirituality candidate, Saint Paul University)

### **Appendix V- Interview Guide**

Introductory statements: This interview is part of an exploratory study examining Anglican women's experiences of spirituality within a Christian framework. The interview will take approximately one hour, depending on the length of your responses. If you do not wish to answer a question, for any reason, you can simply request to skip it. We can also come back to a question if you need more time to think or want to add something later. There will also be an opportunity for you to review a copy of the transcript, which will be emailed to you, and to add any ideas you feel are missing or would like to elaborate on.

Before we get into the topic, could you tell me a bit about yourself? How old are you? Where did you grow up? What is your educational background? Have you belonged to, or had experiences in denominations other than the Anglican Church? Do you belong to other spiritual communities or groups? How frequently do you attend your current church and how long have you been part of your current faith community? Is your current faith context different from your experience growing up? Are there other aspects of your life or who you are that are very important to you, which we have not addressed?

By volunteering to participate in this interview you identified yourself as a practicing Christian and a member of the Anglican Church. What does that mean for you?

How would you describe God?

How would you describe your relationship with God?

Can you identify any times when you experienced an important shift in your relationship with God? If so, what did that mean for your spirituality?

Does your understanding, and experience of God impact your own identity? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Earlier you described God as (refer to responses from questions above). Do you make any links between this way of describing God and your understanding of yourself?

Can you tell me what being a woman means to you?

How does your description of being a woman connect, or not, to the role of women within your current Christian community?

Previously you mentioned that your faith context growing up was... (refer to previous responses). Looking back on it now, did your gender impact your experience of spirituality as a child (if applicable)?

Have there been times in your life when being a woman practicing your faith within a Christian framework has been particularly difficult? Or rewarding?

Do you feel supported as a woman of faith in your Christian community? If yes, how? Do you feel that there are any challenges? If so, what are they and what changes do you feel need to happen?

Can you identify a role model for you personally, within the Christian faith, someone you admire for the way they are living out their spirituality?

Do you have any comments about women in the church, either in general or for yourself?

That concludes the questions I planned to ask you. Is there anything you would like to add, questions you would like to revisit, or a question I could have asked that you feel would have been useful?