

Running head: WOMEN'S SEXUALITY, EMBODIMENT & EVANGELICALISM

THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN REGARDING SEXUALITY AND EMBODIMENT  
WITHIN A CANADIAN EVANGELICAL CONTEXT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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A thesis submitted ins partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in

Counselling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality

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## Abstract

The experiences of women regarding sexuality and embodiment within a Canadian Evangelical context is an area of limited research and the issue that this study specifically explores. For centuries, God has been depicted through a predominantly masculine framework that has left women devoid of relating to the Divine in her woman-ness. It is important to note that the role of the feminine among the monotheistic God is scarcely mentioned in the discourse of religion. How women are meant to understand their sexuality and bodies within the religious dimension can feel insurmountable. The topic of women and their experiences of sexuality and embodiment within the phenomenon of Evangelicalism is an important one, as it explores an area of women's experience that can, and often does, get overlooked. Women's sexuality within the Evangelical church in a Canadian context remains a topic that is often not discussed, and as seen throughout this study's findings, has remained silenced across generations. This study looks at the convergence of three areas of human experience: sexuality, embodiment and religious/spiritual experience within this specific church context. How women experience or have experienced this religious phenomenon impacts the way they experience themselves as sexual and embodied beings. The findings of this study revealed the need for a Narrative approach to therapy when working with specific issues around sexuality, embodiment and spirituality, and an understanding of the deconstruction and reconstruction process in one's spirituality. It also revealed the importance of embodiment practices and the need for sexuality and sexual issues to be included during the intake assessment within a therapeutic context.

*Keywords: women, evangelicalism, sexuality, embodiment, spirituality, therapeutic context, church, identity, intergenerational dialogue, integration, disintegration*

### Acknowledgments

I would first and foremost like to thank my twelve participants who gave of their time and energy to this research. This study would not have been possible if it weren't for your willingness to share so openly and honestly about your experiences. This project is just as much yours as it is mine. I would like to say a huge thank you to my thesis supervisor, Buuma Maisha, for his support, encouragement, and insight into this work. Thank you for considering all of my questions and thoughts throughout this process and providing helpful feedback all throughout this journey. I would like to also express my gratitude for my thesis committee, Ramón Martínez de Pisón and Judith Malette, for your support in bettering my work, aiding me in the research process and being willing to sit on my committee. I express my deepest appreciation to my dear friend Justin Eisinga for believing in me when I could not and for pushing me to pursue this project before it was even a fully formed idea. Thank you for editing the final work and never ceasing to cheer me on. To my beloved friend and supportive colleague Stephanie Kale, thank you for your continual encouragement, for being my second pair of eyes in the cross-coding process, and for walking many hours with me to process and brainstorm my ideas. To my Mom, Dad, and sister - your belief in me from the start has carried me through. And last but not least, to my friends and roommates. Thank you for cheering me on so steadily. For the cups of coffee bought and meals made. I am indebted to all of you mentioned here. Thank you.

Dedication

To all the women who have struggled with their sexuality and bodies, who have carried shame because of their physicality, and who have suffered in silence and been silenced. May you know that you are good, that your body is holy and the Divine lives and delights in you and your pleasure.

“Waking to the sacredness of the female body will cause a woman to ‘enter into’ her body in a new way, be at home in it, honour it, nurture it, listen to it, delight in its sensual music. She will experience her female flesh as beautiful and holy, as a vessel of the sacred.”

Sue Monk Kidd

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The Experiences of Women Regarding Sexuality and Embodiment within a Canadian  
Evangelical Context: A Phenomenological Study

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last five years, there have been a small number of books and memoirs written by women, specifically within the American Evangelical Church, speaking out about their experiences of sexuality, purity, and shame. These topics of purity and holiness are prevalent within the Evangelical Church, and as Klein (2018) mentions, though these issues pertain to all gender expressions, the themes of purity, virginity, and the notion of being a “stumbling block” have more commonly been directed towards women. It is my perception, along with Klein (2018), that women in this context were often made to feel like purity was ultimately their responsibility.

The situation of women within the Evangelical Church is inserted into a larger framework. In this regard, the link between religion, sexuality, and psychology is inextricable, and yet throughout the history of the church, the duality between religion and sexuality has often been reinforced (Murray, Ciarrochi and Murray-Swank, 2007). However, these are not separate dimensions within a person, but rather unique dimensions that are part of one whole. Helminiak (1998) argues this very thing by stating that “the integration of the sexual and spiritual is nothing other than the harmonious functioning of the integrated human being – organism, psyche and

spirit" (p.123). This integration of the whole person is not only the goal of psychotherapy, but also the goal many people have for one another and for themselves. Thomas Groome (1991, as cited by Martin, 2003) writes, "religious education is intended to make a fundamental difference in how people realize their 'being' in relation with God, self, others and the world" (p. 69). Believing this to be true, women therefore realize their "being" in a unique and somewhat unfortunate way due to the narratives surrounding their sex and gender-defined bodies within a theological and anthropological framework (Martin, 2003).

For centuries, God has been depicted through a predominantly masculine framework that has left women devoid of relating to the Divine in her woman-ness. It is important to note that the role of the feminine among the monotheistic God is scarcely mentioned in the discourse of religion. How women are meant to understand their sexuality and bodies within the religious dimension can feel insurmountable. Leeming (2003) points out: "Nowhere is the antagonism between sexuality and religion more evident than in the three great monotheistic or Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as they have evolved." (p. 105).

These monotheistic religions have historically operated under a predominantly patriarchal system (Ruether, 1982). How this has informed the way women relate to not only their spirituality but also the entirety of their person is extremely important to consider. As cited by Martin (2003), Soskice writes, "This is the feminists' real objection to the rhetoric of patriarchy, not just that it subordinates women but that it also gives justification to a hierarchical reading of the world invariably conceived in terms of powerful/powerless, superior/inferior, active/passive, male/female" (p. 80). Therefore, for women seeking to obtain a healthy sense of self in relation to God and the world, they already begin from a place of difficulty due to the fact that they are female (Martin, 2003).

Similarly, Besserman (2007) implies that one of the objectives within the monotheist religious discourse, can be to restrain female sexuality. Since the Judeo-Christian sacred scriptures were authored by men, whom at times societally believed that women were inherently evil and dangerous, women were reduced to the domestic role as wife and mother, having no place in the public sphere (Besserman, 2007). Thanks to feminist and liberationist paradigms, there is now greater freedom for women to adopt new narratives while learning to speak about and take ownership over their own bodies and sexuality (Harris, 2005). Yet, with this greater acceptance of expression and ownership, women do not always know *how* to engage in such conversation and express this freedom. For so long women have been taught that their own sexuality and desire are unacceptable to talk about, most especially within the context of religion (Ussher et al., 2017).

Besserman (2007) writes in *The Female Face of God*, that since the monotheistic traditions have been so steeped in stereotypical expectations of male dominance and female submission it has become extremely difficult for women to recognize and accept their own agency towards self-actualization and “enlightenment” (p. 135). Unless women are able to rid themselves of the negative images associated with materiality, sexuality, and uncleanness, it will remain a difficult task to reshape the sexual and spiritual narratives for women against the male-dominated monotheistic religions of the day (Besserman, 2007). These negative images ought to be held up against other possible images and narratives of women within the Christian tradition that evoke positive and even divine qualities. With the help of Feminist and Liberation theology there are other narratives to embrace, namely that of a radical incarnation where the Divine is revealed in and through the flesh of the human body as it is (Isherwood, 2004). The growing number of biblical feminists have also provided an alternative hermeneutic when approaching

the bible, which has been able to convince others that this approach to the text is still in fact, “biblical” (Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1974 as cited in Bishop, 2006).

### **Need for the Study**

The topic of women and their experiences of sexuality and embodiment within the phenomenon of Evangelicalism is an important one, as it explores an area of women's experience that can, and often does, get overlooked. Women's sexuality within the Evangelical church in a Canadian context remains a topic that is often not discussed and as seen throughout this study's findings, has remained silenced across generations. This study looks at the convergence of three areas of human experience: sexuality, embodiment and religious/spiritual experience within this specific church context. How these women experience or have experienced this religious phenomenon impacts the way they experience themselves as sexual and embodied creatures, which was what this study sought to explore.

### **The Study in Context**

When considering the ways in which women experience their bodies and sexuality within a clinical psychotherapeutic context, it is vital to understand the role that culture, and subcultures have played in shaping the narratives around female sexuality and the body. Tolman et al., (2014) suggests that our bodies become adjusted to behaving in certain ways that are normative to the societies and communities we are immersed in, “by living day to day in a society that makes certain demands on our bodies and psyches, we come to internalize these norms or discourses and embody them” (p. 761). This is universal to the human experience and through this study's exploration the impacts of this phenomenon on women were seen through specific narratives within the Evangelical contexts that these women were situated.

The participants of this study were either presently involved in an Evangelical church or had been previously involved in one. The women in this study came from different denominations that all fell under the umbrella of Evangelicalism including Baptist, Pentecostal, Non-Denominational, Anglican, Brethren, and Anabaptist. The literature regarding Evangelicalism alone is in no way a comprehensive view of the trans-denominational tradition that Evangelicalism is. However, a glimpse into the tenets of this specific religious community and how women have experienced themselves within it, has been illuminating and informative when considering the impacts of internalized messaging that can be seen through the results of this study.

In her own experience as a psychotherapist and her own study of women's sexuality, Blum (2015) discovered that what emerged from the women she interviewed were "deeply embedded belief systems regulated by well-developed rules regarding right and wrong" (p. 3). Blum (2015) continues by stating that when she would sit with her female clients within the therapeutic space and explore sexual issues and questions, it was as if another voice would enter the therapy room. This voice was not their authentic voice that she was used to witnessing, but rather a more intrusive, shaming, and regulating voice (Blum, 2015). She states that this was where she began to witness what researchers have identified as, "the process of cognitive internalization of cultural messages" (Blum 2015, p. 4). It is important to remember that as one observes the intersecting topics of women's sexuality, embodiment, and Evangelicalism, there is great vastness to these issues that this study could not encompass entirely.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objectives of this study sought out to do three things: 1) to explore the experiences of women regarding their sexuality and sense of embodiment within the Canadian Evangelical

context and how that has impacted their sense of self and overall health and well-being. 2) to provide greater understanding and insight for psychotherapists, mental health professionals, spiritual leaders and women at large around the ways in which our religious narratives live inside the body and impact the lived experiences of women. And 3) through this knowledge, work to enact change and healing where it is needed within these contexts.

### **Statement of Purpose**

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which women experience their sexuality and their bodies within a Canadian Evangelical church context. The purpose of this research is to give voice to women regarding sexuality and embodiment in a way that perhaps isn't always given, especially within a religious and/or spiritual context. Through this exploration of hearing the intimate and personal stories of real women in Canadian society, tangible examples and experiences are pulled upon to inform the way we understand how women experience their bodies. By examining the ways that Canadian Evangelicalism has impacted the formation of women's sexual and embodied selves, a larger understanding will hopefully unfold.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Embodiment**

Embodiment, as Tolman et al., (2014) suggests, refers to the ways in which we experience and perceive the world from the particular location of our bodies. The body itself is capable of genuine lived experience and not only through cognition or consciousness, but this lived experience reminds us that our bodies directly experience the world because our bodies are constantly entangled with the world around us (Tolman et al., 2014). Similarly, embodiment also refers to the ways in which our "social and historical environments enter into and become

entangled with our bodies” (Tolman et al., 2014, p. 761). This helps to understand sexual embodiment more robustly as it pertains to social and spiritual environments.

Sexual embodiment, as noted by Ussher et al., (2017) refers to “the experience of living in, perceiving and experiencing the world from the location of our sexual bodies. Women’s experience of sexual embodiment is located in the historical and cultural context in which they live” (pp. 1901). For decades, women have learnt the subtle art of remaining silent regarding their sexuality and bodies, and according to Ussher et al., (2017) this appears to be true across cultures as well. Furthermore, many women have not learnt *how* to speak about their sexuality and bodies to begin with; thus, there has remained a gap in the discourse (Ussher et al., 2017).

This has ultimately stemmed from a cultural narrative that has either implied or explicitly reminded women that to be connected to their bodies and to their sexual desires will disrupt and challenge the way culture, specifically religious culture, has positioned them in it. “If girls know their desire, what else might they begin to know about themselves and their situation in the culture?” (Tolman, 1991 p. 67). Giving voice to women regarding their experience of God, of their bodies and sexuality in light of their Divine image-bearing, may rupture the structures from which religious institutions have been built upon.

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir quotes French Renaissance philosopher Montaigne, who writes on similar matters: “It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. Women are not wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that have been introduced into the world, inasmuch as it is the men who have made these without them” (2011, p. 11). Tolman et al., (2014) continues by saying, “Our bodies are the permeable boundary between our individual sense of self and the society in which we live...Almost everything about sex is also about the body; sexuality is an intrinsic part of an embodied self” (p.759). To better understand

sexual embodiment, it is first necessary to point in the direction of the context in which this study was positioned – towards women's sexuality.

### **Women's Sexuality**

Suggested by Baumeister & Twenge (2002), the suppression of female sexuality has been considered to be a significant psychological intervention within the history and culture of the Western world. In order for society to develop through a male-dominant lens and system, women's sexuality needed to be suppressed (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). It is important to note however, that the *why* behind the suppression of female sexuality likely involves multiple perspectives and factors (i.e., cultural and religious influences, female sex drive, fear of pregnancy or stigma, female control theory, male control theory etc.) that are too vast to unpack in this study (Rudman et al., 2012). However, recognizing that more than one factor is likely contributing to the experiences of women's sexuality is necessary to having a comprehensive understanding of this study and the complexities involved in the expression of women's sexuality.

With that said, in their research, Baumeister and Twenge (2002) discovered that one of the main contributing factors on the suppression of female sexuality was the influence of adult female voices and their disapproval of sexual exploration and premarital sex. A survey conducted by King et al., (1965) as cited by Baumeister and Twenge (2002), showed that "Women who engaged in premarital sex were condemned as immoral by 91% of the women in 1965, as compared with condemnation by only 42% of the men" (p. 181). Therefore, it was the moral disapproval by other women's attitudes regarding female sexuality that appears to be a major component rooted in female sexual suppression.

It is noted that for a long time, old theories have taken the male experience to be the norm in research. Yet, when women's lives and sexualities are specifically investigated, unique findings emerge (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). As mentioned by Peplau and Garnets (2000), scholars have discovered that women's sexuality specifically is "fluid, malleable and capable of change over time" (p. 332). This is a comparison that is often made in regard to men, whose sexuality is less flexible and more instinctive in nature (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). According to Peplau and Garnets (2000), a new paradigm for understanding women's sexuality is necessary given the fluidity of their experience. This would involve theories that are more focused on the psycho-social aspects of sexuality (Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

According to Peplau (2003), women's sexuality has also been associated with committed relationships as a context for sexuality. There is a greater emphasis on the relational aspects of sexuality for women. In their study, Peplau (2003) found that for many women, the goal of sex was intimacy and connection, and that a committed relationship is the best context for pleasurable sex. However, in the article by Tolman (1991) women's sexuality is not solely considered through a relational context. The author looks at sexual desire and sexuality as an important part of women regardless of the relational component. Sexual desire within a woman, in and of itself, is a significant aspect to her person. Tolman (1991) argues that this is a necessary piece of information within the discourse on women's sexuality and sexual desire, and thus is important to reimagine women's sexual desire in general. When doing research, instead of looking to the male standards of sexual pleasure, it is crucial to rethink the framework and even the ideas of sexuality and sexual desire for women at large (Peplau, 2003)

### **Religion and Women's Sexuality**

The role of religion in the suppression of sexuality is an important factor to consider as well. According to Bellamy et al (2011), sexuality has proven to be a challenging term to define. Some argue that it has been one of *the* most difficult areas of human experience to describe. However, sexuality and sexual desire among women is a particular area of study that has surfaced since the rise of feminist paradigms (Shulman, 1980). Before the age of modern medicine, sexuality was understood predominantly through the lens of Christianity and its doctrine, which determined what was considered to be “natural” or “unnatural” (pp. 85-86). Historically, many women have experienced feelings of guilt around sexual pleasure, and religion has been one of the sources of such guilt (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

Historically, Christianity has had a restraining influence on sex and sexuality; Christian doctrine especially has emphasized sexual restraint and virtue (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Research shows that religious women feel more guilt around sexual activity than non-religious women, and religious women are less likely to engage in oral sex, anal sex, lesbian sex, masturbation, and other sexual practices (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Interestingly, though religion has been predominantly governed by men historically, it has been women who have made up the majority of church attendance, influencing their male partners to attend alongside them (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). When exploring how religion has influenced the restraint on sexuality and female sexuality in general, it is evident that religion has indeed played a role in delivering specific messages around sexual restraint and suppression (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Though it may be tempting to direct one's attention solely to the male influence within the religious context, it is interesting to note that when considering who is responsible for bringing young women into the religious sphere (i.e., church) where they hear these messages,

research points to the *mother* as the main source influencing daughters towards religion (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

While this section considers the ways in which women have historically understood their sexuality and relationship to their bodies and the role that religion has played in the suppression of female sexuality, it is important to consider what Protestant Evangelicalism is, and how it has evolved over the last century in light of this study.

### **Evangelicalism**

The Evangelical tradition has largely impacted North America since the early 19th century. After the American Civil War, two branches of Evangelical Protestantism developed and were encouraged (Hammond, 1985). Two religious “camps” within the Protestant Evangelical tradition developed in response to modernity and continued on for several decades, notes Hammond (1985). The first group agreed that religion could accommodate more worldly circumstances and greet the changes in the world with all the available resources provided through modernity. The second group, however, argued that religion should hold firm and hard to its convictions; no matter how much the world developed or changed, supernatural truths could not be altered (Hammond, 1985).

During the 1980's Evangelical Protestantism surfaced in Canada as quite a force seeking to establish a network of people and institutions that reflected the country's main concerns (Stackhouse, 1999). While to the south, American evangelicals were attentive to political campaigns and sexual scandals, Canadian evangelicals were situating themselves in their own context, predominantly leading the way in working with youth through camps, clubs, and various organizations (Stackhouse, 1999). However, defining “Evangelical” and characterizing it within a Canadian context has been an arduous task over the years.

A common definition of “Evangelical” has been used to identify a particular group in the Church of England that surfaced in the eighteenth century highlighting personal conversion, salvation by faith in the atonement of Christ, the ultimate authority of the Bible, the importance of preaching (with less importance on liturgy), and a focus on Christ’s second coming (Stackhouse, 1999). Similarly, in many Evangelical church traditions, Klein (2018) writes that the Bible is held to be the ultimate authority on moral, political, and cultural issues. Though Evangelicalism can be a broad term with various church expressions across the trans-denominational movement, having a more literal interpretation of the Bible is one of the convictions that is often associated within this tradition (Klein, 2018). Besserman (2007) states:

Although the term ‘Fundamentalism’ is currently being used as a generic for all contemporary right-wing monotheist religious movements, it actually refers to a specific sect of self-named Protestant Evangelical Christians who rigidly adhere to a fundamentalist – that is, literal—reading of the Bible as the single, inerrant guide to salvation.” (p. 125)

During the 1980’s, Canadian Evangelicalism was also described as a watered-down version of the worst extremes of right-wing American evangelicalism (Stackhouse, 1999). This intersection between the Canadian and American Evangelical church has continued over the years.

Other major tenets of Evangelicalism include obedience to the sacred scriptures and commandments, including personal piety, moral conservatism, and transformation that comes through repentance (Bunn, 2005). How this looks for men and women, seeing as they often have differing roles in many Evangelical circles, informs the way they ought to live (Ruether, 1982). However, it is important to note that when it comes to cultural, political, and at times theological

issues, Evangelicalism involves a far more diverse group than one might imagine, which makes it difficult to define consistently (Bunn, 2005). Subsequent to exploring the topics of embodiment, women's sexuality, and Evangelicalism, let's turn to how women's sexuality has been informed by the Evangelical church tradition.

### **Women's Sexuality and Evangelicalism**

Historically, the Christian church has influenced the restriction of women rather than support them in their development (Dreyer, 2011). Women have often been seen to fulfill their roles within the Christian church through sacrificing themselves for others, remaining in the background and falling prey to negative images (i.e., weak, passive, evil, wild, virgin or whore) frequently attributed to them due to the more male-dominant culture (Dreyer, 2011). Internalized messaging around women's sexuality, as stated above, can be a main contributing factor in her sexual identity formation (Blum, 2015). Through the results of this study, one can be curious about the ways in which silencing and sexual shame among women in the church informs her identity as a sexual being.

Distinct among Evangelicals is the way metaphor and imagery are used to express not only the spiritual life, but experiences of sexuality and sexual sin as well (Rine, 2013). Hillsong, a prominent global Evangelical church, often uses the biblical imagery of Christ being the husband to his bride, the Church. This is often used to reflect the marriage between a husband and his wife (Maddox, 2013). This imagery here denotes male headship which is representative of Christ and the woman's submission to her husband as his bride. As mentioned by Maddox (2013), this "healthy complementarity" is meant to demonstrate to the world what the ideal divine order for marriage is (p.18). However, specifically for women as cited by Maddox (2013), whether married or single, "dating or falling in love with Jesus" is unique to a woman and is

meant to ultimately satisfy any desire or need she may have (p. 17-18). According to Sydney Hillsong's youth pastor Donna Crouch, "Whether you're married or single, you can know Jesus as your husband. You can have the hottest and most rocking marriage. You don't need men's affirmation because you have that from Jesus – a link with Jesus that only women can have" (Maddox, 2013, p. 18). Though this is a specific teaching taught by the Hillsong church, the echoes of these types of messages are heard throughout many Evangelical churches.

Given the general belief within the Evangelical tradition that supports how men and women were created by God to fulfill different and complementary roles as stated by Burke and Hudec (2015), women are often encouraged to relate to Christ as their husbands and to learn what genuine submission is. This sacred relationship with God is also ultimately meant to be "enough" for women, as God is meant to be women's "main man" (Maddox, 2013, p. 18) while also implying that virginity is what ultimately makes women worthy or pure (Rine, 2013). I am arguing that the messages here are a bit conflicting. On the one hand, there is encouragement for women to be ultimately satisfied with their relationship to Christ and not need the validation from a man. And yet, women are also being limited to more specific roles that ultimately point to needing a husband (i.e., wife and mother).

Metaphors give off a powerful message, and many of these metaphors within the Evangelical tradition speak to a woman's worth when it comes to sexual purity. American Christian columnist and author Rachel Held Evans writes, "So much of the Evangelical purity culture focuses on identity, as if having sex with someone changes your very identity forever, making you unwanted and disgusting" (Rine, 2013, p. 3). Messages surrounding sexual purity have been too intertwined with identity messages in the Evangelical tradition. Messages of either worth or shame, depending on sexual purity standards, are where much of the narrative needs to

change, writes Evans (as cited in Rine 2013). For many women, having sex is compared to being chewed like a piece of gum and losing its flavour (Rine, 2013). According to Beck, as mentioned by Rine (2013), these metaphors surrounding sexual sin have a particular negative affect on women as “using the metaphor of purity imports a ‘psychology of contamination into our moral and spiritual lives’, and this contamination is viewed as a permanent state, beyond restoration” (p. 3). This idea then becomes an embedded truth for many Evangelical women and after engaging in any sexual activity, can result in a sense of being “damaged goods” (p. 3). Although metaphors regarding sexuality play a significant role in Evangelical women’s lives, the role that Complementarianism has played has also influenced the way women view themselves and their sexuality (Maddox, 2013).

### *Complementarianism*

Among more conservative Evangelicals, the role of women can be understood through a complementarian view, meaning that men and women have different functions within the church and home. Though this is not always the case in every Evangelical church, it is a common theme and value within the more conservative Evangelical tradition (Burke & Hudec, 2015). This idea of complementarianism asserts that men are the leaders within the church and home, and are able to exercise authority in preaching, teaching and decision-making (Maddox, 2013). Women, however, are seen as equal but cannot function as senior pastors who teach and preach, unless released by their husbands to do so (Maddox, 2013).

According to Bartowski and Read (2003), in many traditional Evangelical traditions the wife is cast as the “executive vice-president” who is allowed input but ultimately may not be heeded by her husband. The devout Evangelical wife is commissioned in carrying out her husband’s decision making, even if she disagrees with him. This notion of “male headship” and

“female submission” in the church, marriage, and family life has implications for other areas of a woman’s life as well, including sexuality.

For Evangelical Christians, the Bible is viewed as the ultimate authoritative text on sex and is believed to have everything one needs when it comes to knowledge about sex and sexuality (DeRogatis, 2005). According to DeRogatis (2005), beginning in the 1950’s and well into the 1970’s, there was a surge of American Evangelical sex manuals written for heterosexual married couples as a response to the sexual revolution and to the more secular literature written at the time. These manuals present the husband as the leader and main educator in the sexual relationship, while implying that the wife enters the marriage ignorant to her own body and emotions in the area of sexuality (DeRogatis, 2005).

### **Summary**

The literature provided here has helped shape the contours of the current study by revealing the ways in which women’s sexuality, the female body and Canadian Evangelicalism has evolved over the last few centuries. The interconnectedness of these topics has been a growing area of interest within North America as the voices of women have emerged more repeatedly.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter will summarize and outline the rationale for methodology used and the theoretical frameworks that support the chosen methodology for this study. It will also outline how the study was conducted, how the participants were chosen, and the data collection and analysis process. In light of this, this section will also discuss the researcher’s reflexivity and posture towards the data collection and analysis stage.

## **Research Paradigm**

**A qualitative approach.** A qualitative approach was used for this study as it sought out to explore the experiences of women regarding a specific phenomenon (i.e., Evangelicalism) in relation to their sexuality and sense of embodiment. Qualitative research is defined by exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups of individuals attribute to a human or social problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with how individuals make sense of the world and what meaning they ascribe to the events and phenomena they experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The qualitative approach as stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018) involves emerging questions and procedures. Data is collected through the use of interviews or within the participant's settings; data analysis is inductive in nature, building from the particular to general themes. Finally, the researcher interprets the meaning of the data that is collected (p. 4). During the data analysis stage, both the participant's and the researcher's interpretations of phenomena are considered, which requires reflexivity of the researcher; this is an important feature within qualitative research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). There is a great focus on individual meaning and experience in qualitative research, which allows for the complexity that is found within human experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Within qualitative methodology lies various approaches used to further explore and guide the research study itself (i.e., Narrative, Grounded Theory, Phenomenological etc.). Each of these approaches form the theoretical frameworks from which the research study itself is based upon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For this particular study, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used.

**Philosophical context for IPA**

IPA researchers are primarily concerned with investigating how individuals make sense and meaning out of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The belief here is that individuals are ultimately 'self-interpreting beings', implying that individuals are engaged in interpreting the events, people, and objects within their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). The historical and philosophical underpinnings of IPA shed more light on how this process works.

There is a strong philosophical component to phenomenology, which draws heavily on the works of the German mathematician Edmund Husserl and those who expanded on his views such as Heidegger and Sartre (Creswell et al., 2007). Across all of these perspectives and views, the main philosophical assumptions within phenomenology remain as thus: "studying people's experiences as they are lived every day, viewing these experiences as conscious and arriving at a description of the essence of these experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 253). In the more Heideggerian perspective, people are considered embodied and embedded within the world, in a particular historical, social, and cultural context (Shinebourne, 2011, p.18). Alongside Heidegger's perspective, IPA considers phenomenological inquiry as an interpretive process, involving both the participants interpreting of phenomena and the researcher's interpretations of the meaning ascribed by participants (Shinebourne, 2011).

Within IPA, a *double hermeneutic* is recognized as part of the interpretation process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Acknowledging that it is through the participants interpretation of their own experiences of the phenomena, the researcher then interprets the participants own meaning-making as part of the interpretive phenomenological process: "The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the

participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 20).

The challenge and therefore the priority for the researcher in this context is to, as best as one can, suspend their own biases and presuppositions when engaging with the subjects and data (Shinebourne, 2011).

Through the interview process especially, it is important for researchers using IPA to approach their subjects with a sense of openness and willingness to enter their specific experience, “Phenomenologists also concur about the need for researchers to engage a ‘phenomenological attitude’. In this attitude the researcher strives to be open to the Other and to attempt to see the world freshly, in a different way” (Finlay, 2009). Through understanding the historical and philosophical contexts of IPA, the rationale for using this method in this study became the most reasonable as it engages first with the particular and moves toward the general in order to understand the experiences of a phenomenon in a person’s life.

### **IPA’s theoretical orientation: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography**

The fundamental principles that IPA draws upon include phenomenology (as mentioned above), hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). These are important aspects to the process of IPA that are worth considering. Phenomenologists are dedicated to discovering the essential components of a phenomenon, and through this discovery, focus on how people perceive and examine the objects and events in their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Bracketing out one’s preconceptions as much as possible as the researcher is crucial to the IPA process so that the researcher is more able to enter into the experiences of their subjects as well (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

As mentioned above concerning the double hermeneutic of IPA, the role of the researcher is to interpret and make sense of their subject’s personal world through the access they gain into

their participant's experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The hermeneutics of IPA is ultimately all about interpretation of one's experience, and what makes IPA so robust is that it takes into account the interpretation of the participants *and* the researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) mention, "IPA synthesizes ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics resulting in a method which is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretive because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon" (p. 8).

Idiography, as explained by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) refers to an in-depth examination of each individual experience and perspective of each participant within their unique context. The idiographic orientation points to exploring every single case before stating anything general; researchers in IPA focus on the particular rather than the universal (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). From this place of particularity, the researcher is able to understand more fully the experiences of each individual and discover the themes, similarities, and differences that emerge from each participant's story (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### **Rationale for using IPA**

It became apparent to use IPA for this study because of its orientation towards the experiences of each participant regarding a specific phenomenon. The goal of this research study was to step into the very experiences of each of my participants, to enter their story, in order to understand and interpret the ways in which they have experienced the Evangelical church and its role in shaping the way they relate to their sexuality and body. Through stepping into their shoes, so to speak, I was able to get a taste of their unique experience, contexts, and personalities and how each of those engaged with their Evangelical church context. Through this deep exploration, it was then possible to see the most common themes emerge.

It was also the interpretive element of IPA that felt appropriate for this study.

Acknowledging the need to bracket out one's preconceptions as much as possible, while taking into account the interpretive nature of the human experience was necessary in moving forward in this study. As stated above, there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon, and thus the researcher is not without her own interpretation as well.

### **A Narrative Theoretical Framework**

For narrative theorists, as stated by Murdock (2017), "the way that we view ourselves, others and the entire social world in which we live is created (constructed) by social processes, and most significantly through our interactions with others" (p. 480). Not only are the conversations that we have with others about ourselves and our surrounding world a powerful force in the way we determine what is real, but also in the institutions and cultural norms we experience and participate in as well (Murdock, 2017).

As researcher of this study, I will be applying a Narrative Theoretical Framework to the collection of data and results. I believe that we are ontological creatures; that we are meaning-making people. It is through story that we are formed and through story that we shall be healed and made whole. It will be through this framework that I will apply further understanding and meaning to the data that is collected through women's stories of their experience in this specific phenomenon i.e., the Evangelical church regarding sexuality and embodiment.

Throughout the literature reviewed on this topic, it is evident that these specific narratives have influenced the lives and stories women believe regarding their sexuality and perspective of self. As mentioned by Uzun and LeBlanc (2017) "Within the narrative theoretical framework, there is an underlying assumption that the way in which individuals experience themselves and their situations is 'constructed' within culturally mediated, social interactions" (p. 2). This

framework highlights that people's actions are ultimately informed by the narratives that they tell themselves, along with those that others tell about them (Uzun & LeBlanc, 2017). Within the narrative theoretical model, culture is viewed to be the most influential factor in affecting people's lives (Uzun & LeBlanc, 2017).

Through a narrative theoretical framework, we come to understand that it is the narratives and stories that people have accepted that are what has formed and shaped their reality. In regard to this specific study, it will be important to keep this theoretical framework in mind as we explore the narratives and stories that have shaped these women's experience regarding their sexual, spiritual, and psychological selves within this specific context.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the personal nature of qualitative research, it is important to consider the ethical implications involved. It was important for me as the researcher to be as ethical as possible when dealing with the intimate and personal stories of my participants. This study received approval from the Saint Paul University Ethics Board (see Appendix I) prior to any advertising of the study or recruitment of participants. This study dealt with topics of sexuality and embodiment, which before the interview process began, was reflected upon consciously and sensitively as it acknowledges that this process may resurface trauma, negative experiences, or psychological stress for some participants. It was important for the participants to be aware before the interviews began that all participation was completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any point (see Appendix III). Similarly, it was necessary to outline the potential risks of participating in this research, which can be found in the Informed Consent form (as seen in Appendix III), along with specific support resources they may require if needed. These forms were sent to each participant and signed before any data collection took place.

Anonymity was also maintained by assigning each participant a pseudonym which was referred to in the data collection, analysis, and writing stages of this study. The participants were informed that any specific identifying information would remain confidential and were given the contact information of both myself, as the researcher, and my thesis supervisor Prof. Buuma Maisha, if any clarifying questions arose.

### **Participants**

**Selection criteria.** Selecting participants for this research required following the phenomenological approach by selecting individuals who reported having had experience with the specific phenomenon (Englander, 2012). Similarly, in keeping with IPA, it was also encouraged that the researcher exploring this topic had at least some vague idea beforehand what the phenomenon is about, and had an interest in the phenomenon (Englander, 2012). For this particular study, I was looking for women aged 18-35 who have participated in or are currently participating in a Canadian Evangelical church. It was essential that each participant had experience within an Evangelical community at some point in their lives and were able to identify that their church community was in fact Evangelical. They were also to be women who consider themselves as individuals who take their faith and/or spirituality seriously. Lastly, women chosen for the study were to be individuals I did not know personally or were not known personally by them prior to the study, to avoid any power imbalance or conflict of interest.

**Recruitment.** Due to the current COVID-19 circumstances, recruitment was done exclusively through online platforms. An online poster was created (see Appendix II) which circulated through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. An initial screening process took place by eliminating all those interested who the researcher had any personal or former association with. It was important for the researcher to not know any of the participants in

any personal way prior to the study. Participants were informed that they would be asked open-ended questions about their experiences within the Canadian Evangelical church, especially related to their sexuality and embodiment within this context.

Twelve women were selected for this study which was based off the average sample sizes within phenomenological research which states that on average about 3-10 participants are typically chosen (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the appropriate numbers for qualitative studies differ across the literature (Englander, 2012). Due to the large number of women showing interest in participating in the study (approximately 40 in total), choosing 12 participants felt reasonable and honoured the level of interest shown. Englander (2012) states that quantitative studies are concerned with “how many?”, whereas qualitative studies are concerned with the content of the experience and, in depth, seek the meaning of a phenomenon. Thus, the number of participants is not necessarily the biggest concern in qualitative study, if the researcher is able to grasp and understand the experiences of the desired phenomenon through the sample size they have chosen (Englander, 2012).

**Procedure.** The recruitment and research stages were as follows: (1) recruitment through online posters; (2) screening out those who don't meet criteria; (3) email exchanges that provided the invitation to participate form and informed consent form; (4) retrieval of signed informed consent forms; (5) email exchanges setting up interview dates and times through videoconferencing; (6) 50 to 90 minute interviews that were audio recorded; (7) transcribing of interviews; (8) a 30 minute follow up call reflecting back to participant what was heard throughout interview to ensure validity and authenticity of the participant's experience.

**Data collection.** In keeping with the IPA approach to research, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted via videoconferencing. This style of interview, whether in

person or through videoconferencing platforms, is typically the most popular method to achieve first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Open-ended questions were formulated before the interviews, which were given to each participant in the interview to keep with consistency across each interview (see Appendix V for Interview Guide) The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for more authentic dialogue and personal rapport to be had throughout the interview process as well.

Each interview was audio recorded and each participant was made aware of this and had given consent for it. The audio recording was strictly for the researcher's ability to transcribe verbatim and analyze the data more in depth post interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It was important for the interviewer to utilize both her interviewing skills and counselling skills when dealing with the personal and intimate nature of this topic (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Though the interviews were primarily about each participant, permission was given to each participant to ask any question they needed to feel comfortable sharing honestly and openly with me as the researcher. This also allowed for me to share my recognition of my own biases and the necessary role of reflexivity when in the data analysis stage. In keeping with qualitative research, this was important for me to be consistently conscious of (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, being open and authentic as the researcher and interviewer, this allowed for some of my more hesitant participants to share in an unfiltered way. The interviews lasted anywhere from 45 to 110 minutes, depending on the content shared within each interview.

**Participant Demographics.** Twelve women were chosen for the study, ranging from ages 23 to 35, with a mean age of 29. Ten of the participants were from Ontario, one woman from Alberta and one woman from Manitoba. Ten participants identified as white/Caucasian, one identified as black and one identified as mixed race (Chinese, Black, White mix). Four of the

twelve participants identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Four participants came from Pentecostal backgrounds, four from Baptist backgrounds, two from Alliance backgrounds and two from non-denominational Evangelical backgrounds. Five women were married at the time of the interview, three women were in relationships, three women were single, and one woman was engaged.

**Data analysis.** The data analysis stage required the researcher to be fully immersed in the data so as to really step into the experiences and shoes of each participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The first stage to this was, as recommended in IPA, to transcribe each audio recording verbatim, writing out the exact words said by each participant as much as possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, if there were words or content discussed that was completely irrelevant to the topic of study, they were not transcribed but referred to by stating the break in conversation. This, as stated by Wertz (2005), can be helpful when needing to eliminate redundancy unless the redundancy is meaningful to the topic being studied.

Throughout the first initial transcribing stage while listening to the audio recordings, it was important for me to enter into the world of my participants fully and shelve the main questions around this study. As stated by Wertz (2005), "Phenomenological research requires an attitude of wonder that is highly empathic. The researcher strives to leave his or her own world behind and to enter fully, through the written description, into the situations of the participants" (p. 172). It was especially helpful and meaningful to actively listen to the stories of these women without an end goal in mind or the research problem being explored. This highlighted the very relational component involved in qualitative research.

The next stage involved actively listening to the audio recordings for a second time and editing the transcribed interviews for accuracy. This allowed for greater understanding of the

overarching story of each participant and familiarized the researcher with each unique story. This stage also provided opportunity to make notes, ask questions, and highlight significant statements made by participants.

The following stage involved reading through each interview and identifying units of meaning by bracketing chunks of texts and assigning a word or phrase summarizing the participants words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Beside each unit of meaning, the number of times that unit of meaning was mentioned was put in brackets, which helped to identify the categories and emergent themes. The units of meaning were then clustered into categories that reflected the repeated phrases, words, and themes from each participant, while taking into account the tone and impressions of each interview. The interviews were reflected on and read multiple times to ensure accurate categorization of the most prevalent and repeated emergent themes.

The next step involved reviewing the categories and emergent themes and looking for the connections and consistencies within each interview, while also taking into account the anomalies and differences. Paying attention to the frequency of subcategories and themes mentioned were of utmost importance and were presented in a table to display how the units of meaning were assigned based on how many participants mentioned the unit of meaning and how many times in total it was mentioned.

It was necessary then to break down the subcategories into categories and finally, organize them into emergent themes. This was done by grouping the subcategories that related to one another, choosing the most descriptive wording to summarize the cluster; this helped to reduce the total list of subcategories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). From here, the same method

was used to gather the final emergent themes, by grouping the related categories and forming the themes accordingly.

**Cross-coder reliability.** The researcher used a cross-coder in this study to compare and contrast the units of meaning. The cross-coder was a graduate student within the same program as the researcher and had no background within the Evangelical church. This cross-coder was selected due to their understanding of research and thesis work, along with a trust in their objectivity around the topics within this study. About 17% of the transcribed interviews were randomly selected by the researcher's thesis supervisor and distributed to the cross-coder. The cross-coder then ascribed units of meaning to the text and once completed was sent to the researcher to compare, to reach full consensus regarding the units of meaning and emergent themes.

**Researcher positionality and reflexivity.** It was important for the researcher to keep a posture of reflexivity throughout the entire process of this study, as it is without question that biases and preconceptions regarding the topics at hand are at play, given that we are humans researching human experiences (Shaw, 2010). Reflected on from the very beginning of this study, the researcher had their own personal experiences and history with the topics of this study, thus informing the way they approached the research. It was therefore of utmost importance to the researcher to be continually conscious of the ways their own biases and experiences may shape this study. The researcher therefore approached the participants authentically and openly about the desire to suspend their own preconceptions as much as possible and to honour their stories by actively and unbiasedly listening as much as possible.

As the researcher began the study, it was important to formulate interview questions that were exclusively open-ended so as not to lead or guide the participants in any particular way.

This allowed for the participants to reflect on and answer the questions in a way that felt true to their own experience and from their own perspectives. Throughout the interview process, the researcher would ask clarifying questions of participants in order to really grasp the subjective experience in a more objective way, while also making sure to document and inquire about any anomalies or variances across the interviews.

It was also important for the researcher to schedule shorter follow-up interviews with each participant while in the data analysis stage to ensure accuracy of data collected and general care post-interview. These interviews were between 20-30 minutes in length and consisted of the researcher checking in with each participant, reflecting back to the participant what was heard in the interview, and asking if the content was an accurate representation of their overarching story and experience with the phenomena.

Lastly, as mentioned above, having a cross-coder also ensured reflexivity by having another set of eyes assign units of meaning to the transcribed texts and confirming that the researcher was as objective as possible in the data analysis stage.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

#### **Overview**

This section will outline the findings that emerged from the data collection process and the analysis that took place. First, an introduction to each of the twelve participants will be essential as this project would not have been possible without their shared experiences and vulnerability. Introducing each of them will help give the reader a glimpse into the background, history and overarching themes that colour their experience of the phenomenon. All of their identifying information has been altered and their names have been given pseudonyms so as to

keep with the confidentiality and anonymity assured throughout this study. All of the twelve women had a great deal of experience within the Canadian Evangelical church at some point in their lives. Seven participants expressed that they were no longer attending church at all at the time of the interview. Three participants expressed that they were involved in a church community that is not explicitly Evangelical but has Evangelical undertones and leadership. One participant was presently still involved in an Evangelical community at the time of the interview and one participant stated that she was “observing the Evangelical church at a distance”.

Two tables will display the process of charting and clustering of subcategories into categories and finally, into emergent themes. Following this step, further exploration and analysing of the emergent themes will ensue. This third stage will pair participant quotations with the emergent themes so as to display how these themes came to be and what these themes say about the participants' experience of the phenomenon.

### **Part 1: Individual Participant Experiences**

These condensed summaries are meant to let readers into the lives of each woman who participated in this study as it relates to their experience with the Canadian Evangelical church. It was important for the researcher to honour each woman by sharing a brief introduction to who they are and how they have experienced their sexuality and embodiment in light of their experience with the phenomenon of the Evangelical tradition. The women will be presented here in the order in which they were interviewed.

**Lauren.** Lauren is in her early thirties, married for five years and started her journey with the Evangelical church beginning when she was born. She states, “Days after I was born my mom always says, ‘she was already in Sunday school’. I very much grew up from infancy in the church”. For much of Lauren’s adolescent, teenage and young adult years she was heavily

involved in youth and young adults' groups while also attending church on Sundays. Lauren notes that it wasn't until she got married that she started to realize the things she learnt about marriage and being a wife, and what her life was "supposed to be", began not making sense to her. It was from here that Lauren really began to feel that the church environment and culture was not so much her "space" anymore. Presently, Lauren is still trying to figure out what her spirituality looks like apart from the Evangelical church. For Lauren, her faith, in the Christian sense of the word, has been largely impacted because of her journey and experience in regard to her sexuality and body. She notes, "I think there is a big difference between the church's understanding of God and who God actually is."

Lauren describes her experience with her sexuality and her body in light of her faith background as quite disintegrated, "Because they [the church] kept it [sexuality] so separate, it has been ingrained in me to keep it separate." Lauren showed much courage in her vulnerability, sharing how her past experiences with certain teachings have impacted her present embodied and sexual experiences. Lauren expressed that in many ways she is still trying to convince herself that she is a sexual being, that part of her feels very disconnected from the rest of her. Lauren notes that she picked up on certain messages growing up in the church that told her to "ignore" any sexual desire or impulse. She states, "I got so good at this that recently one of my struggles is like, I just ignore all of those impulses just automatically now. They have kind of just stopped coming." Lauren shared that she currently struggles with Vaginismus, a condition defined as "The persistent or recurrent difficulties of the woman to allow vaginal entry of a penis, a finger, and or any object, despite the woman's expressed wish to do so" (Crowley et al., 2009). Lauren expressed that this has been something she has experienced since her teenage years but became even more apparent when she married. Lauren expressed in our interview that she associates this

condition with how she was taught to think about her body in the church, “Which was to protect it...protect your body, don’t let other people do whatever, like anything with it, don’t let them look at it the wrong way, don’t let them into it.”

Lauren spoke with genuineness and earnestness around these issues, as something she is actively seeking to integrate in her life. She vocalized that she would like to be able to experience sexual pleasure when she wants to experience pleasure. Lauren expressed a desire to have control over her sexuality; to be able to have a sense of agency over her sex drive, which she attributes to having in her younger years, “Just to have pleasure when I want it, whether it’s because I’m giving it or I’m having a moment with my husband...I think that would be the biggest thing.”

**Angela.** Angela is in her late twenties, recently married and grew up in one Evangelical church her entire life, until recently where she attends a different community church with her husband. Angela grew up in a female dominant household, attributing all of the women to being “fairly strongheaded and type A”. Angela expressed that she grew up with a strong father who empowered all of the girls in her family to be women, which she felt was very powerful for her. She also spoke about how she grew up in a very body positive and sex positive home. She notes, “So when I say sex positive as in like I always knew my parents were intimate...those conversations always existed in our house. My parents did instill that sex was for marriage. So, when I started having sex before I was married like it wasn’t something I talked to with them although they for sure knew and then eventually we talked about it.” Angela spoke with a sense of joy when talking about her body and sexuality, as something to be celebrated in her woman-ness.

Angela goes on to say how though there wasn't shame around nakedness in her family it was interesting for her going to Bible college where she reflected on getting in trouble the first day for changing in front of her roommates because it was seen as "immodest". Though there was safety in conversation within her family life around these topics, she notes that her church community and within Christian summer camp circles, sexuality was never really talked about. She goes on to say that she really only heard about intimacy and sexuality talked about in the church from a very reproductive side and teachings around the "open womb" concept. This idea insists on no birth control and that the womb is "open", meaning that if you get pregnant it was because it was what God wanted. Angela notes, "So essentially it's like an open thing, so you get pregnant, and then the concept of you don't withhold your body from a man...which never felt good to me".

Angela ended the interview by saying that she wants to raise her children in the church one day and she questions how she will speak to them about sexuality. She asks:

How do I not pass along my own hurts around it and then also how do I teach it [sexuality] in an affirming principled way? How then do we productively change the narrative, and I feel like I don't have an answer for that...? I think for me it comes down to safety in community and I think that you need to build patterns of vulnerability and in that they'll be safe for these conversations.

Angela spoke with a sense of joy and freedom when talking about her body and sexuality and her belief in how God designed us to work in harmony, including our sexuality. She openly shared about her own sexual experiences and how feelings of safety with her partners both past and present, and safety within her family life contributed to these positive feelings around her sexuality and body.

**Holly.** Holly is in her early thirties, single and grew up heavily involved in her Evangelical church community. She notes that her life was sports and church, and that she was the “memory verse queen” as a kid. Holly reflects on her life in the church and how her journey has evolved over time, where she now states, “Church and Jesus are separate things for me. I am observing from a distance the Evangelical church.” For Holly, certain career and geographic transitions opened her up to different ways of thinking and seeing the world and her faith. She mentions that she began encountering people who expressed their sexuality in completely different ways than she was used to and that a lot of her “internal biases and stereotypes were being challenged”.

Holly notes that the narratives she was taught around her body was that her body was a “temple”, that it was an object that was not really involved in one’s Christianity other than if it was being objectified. She goes on to say, “Growing up my body was not really at the forefront and if it was it was like, ‘control it and keep it under control’”. Holly states that she has been in a time of deconstructing the narratives that she was taught for so long in the church, and though she still believes her body is a temple, that means something different for her now. Now it is more about how her body is meant to be loved and respected not so much that it is “defiled or never again redeemable”. For Holly, she notes that though she is experiencing new ways of being in her sexuality and body compared to what she was taught, she feels that she is operating in greater freedom and health. Holly notes that she believes that God celebrates these things and ultimately God must be a part of this process.

Holly shared with much vulnerability and courage and it was evident that a reclaiming of trust in herself and how God trusts her to make choices with her body and sexuality has been something quite powerful for her, “God trust’s us so much more than we trust ourselves and

we're taught to not trust ourselves in Christianity in the Evangelical church." At the end of the interview, Holly mentions how even though the church was amazing for her in many ways she wishes she didn't have to put so much energy into deconstructing all of these narratives. She noted that she ultimately desires to make decisions for herself and believes that is what God wants for her, and whether or not she is married or engaging in sex, her body is worth pleasure and worth celebrating.

**Diana.** Diana is in her early thirties, recently married and was raised in the church for the majority of her life. She notes that the Baptist church she predominantly grew up in was very conservative and very Evangelical, which influenced her faith journey tremendously. She attended Bible college, went on mission trips and attended Bible camp. Diana is not involved in an Evangelical church presently and has been in a season of deconstructing and reconstructing her own sense of spirituality and where God fits into this part of her sexuality.

Diana mentions that she has been in the process of uncovering her "erotic self", which she notes has never been allowed to be. She grew up in a more conservative environment where she was taught that her body was to be covered, not shown and to not even try to "act sexy". Diana notes that she was a rule follower growing up and so she took these messages to heart and was very conscious of them. Now that she is married, moving into a space where acting "sexy" is encouraged, she states that it has been really challenging. Diana also mentions that she has a bit of a disability which has also been influential in how she has viewed her body. She notes, "I don't fit into the stereotypical body of a female and so that's been, I mean, it just is." Diana continued in her reflection by noting that for a long time she believed that the spiritual was more important than anything else, she alluded to this belief being unhealthy for her at a certain point.

She goes on to say, "I have to remember to live in the physical world in my body, planting a garden and making food and dancing and all things that are physical because that's good too."

Diana reflects on how she is grateful for the ways the Evangelical church instilled in her that sexuality was in fact a sacred part of being human. She feels that she was in many ways protected from experimenting too much in a way that could have been unhelpful for her. However, she states that there really was just no way to be sexual in the Evangelical church, "There was no way to be sexual, you couldn't be sexual at all until you were married...so I had to kind of do my own exploration very quietly." Though Diana feels she has let go of a lot of the narratives she was taught rationally, she feels that emotionally and bodily that letting go is much more difficult. In the end, Diana stated that she desires to be able to let go of some of the anxiety around these issues and to be able to experience more freedom around her body and sexuality, to be in the moment and to be free.

**Rachel.** Rachel is in her early thirties, engaged to her partner and grew up in the Evangelical church. She has continued to be involved in various church denominations throughout her life. Rachel has been dedicated to finding a spiritual community all through her life and mentions how it has been more difficult to find a church that she feels matches where she is at in her faith and personal journey as it has evolved. Rachel states that she has been a "denomination jumper" and that she was fortunate to have parents who didn't have a problem with that, allowing for her to be more open-minded about things regarding her theology. She currently attends a church that feels like a good fit for where she is at spiritually.

Rachel reflected on how with her wedding approaching, she had been thinking more about sexuality and how her past feelings around such topics were counterproductive to what she believes God's intent is for sexuality, "I would say growing up for sure there was a fair degree of

like I felt shame or secrecy about things about my body...I think that a lot of the things that were taught can be counterproductive compared to what I think God's intent for sexuality and things are." Rachel reflects on the importance of teaching consent and body ownership and how that doesn't stop once you are married, which she became rather shocked about learning that other's in her circles thought rape couldn't happen within a marriage. This for her made her question some of the teachings that were being taught.

For Rachel, exploring appropriate boundaries with her own body and partner in a physically intimate relationship has been very important. Discovering God within her sexuality in this way, while being engaged, had been a journey for her. She notes:

I remember being kind of stunned too that this whole idea of purity culture, modesty culture in terms of physical intimacy could mean that you went from like doing nothing with somebody and there being a whole bunch of shame tied into sexual exploration to then on your wedding night now everything is now fine and fair game. How do you let go of that shame that's associated with that? How does that go away right away? I don't think that it does.

Rachel points to the ways in which her spirituality and relationship with God was wrapped up in sexual purity as well. She notes that a lot of her twenties was about her redefining what her boundaries were around her sexuality and where she feels comfortable within her own convictions and freedom.

**Kristina.** Kristina is in her late twenties, in a same sex dating relationship and also grew up in the church for most of her life. She is currently not involved in an Evangelical church and notes that she is still trying to figure out the God part outside of the Evangelical church. Kristina shared openly and honestly about her experience with being a black, queer woman within the

Evangelical church environment and the difficulties that she faced. Kristina was a leader in her church, serving in almost every area one could serve, including teaching. When she began a relationship with her same sex partner, she was told that she could not lead or serve as someone who was openly in a same-sex relationship. Kristina stated that she didn't leave voluntarily and could still attend, but she was not allowed to lead in any way. She noted that this was a "blessing in disguise; tragic but freeing". She is only able to say this in hindsight.

Kristina spoke about the tensions she experiences when experiencing her body and sexuality as a black, queer woman. She notes that she views her sexuality as fun, and she likes to express herself in ways that feel good. She also notes that she carries a lot of sexual baggage and trauma which affects her sexuality. She states that it has been a journey for her to feel comfortable and accepting of herself and her sexuality:

It's been a journey for me to get to a place where I am comfortable, confident and open with that. There are definitely, conflicting is the word I think, feelings like I feel like my sexuality should be celebrated and not a secret and really just nobody's business but on the other hand who cares if people know.

Kristina touched on the aspects of pleasure and sexual pleasure as something she was taught, whether implicitly or explicitly, would never be about her as a woman, and that pleasure and receiving pleasure in some way or another, was selfish. She spoke about the dualism she felt within the church around her spirit and body and how her body was not to be trusted as it was lesser than her spirit. Kristina mentioned how in the end, she did gain a sense of community from her time at the church which has allowed for her to have these conversations with others resulting in her feeling less alone. However, when it came to her sexuality as a woman, a black queer woman, she felt that she needed to assimilate and leave all of what made her "her" behind

to be a part of the church community. This affirms what other researchers have discovered when exploring sexual identity formation and the intersectionality involved of such identity. Shapiro et al., (2010) states that lesbian sexual identity benefits from adopting an intersectional approach that includes other identities such as cultural, racial, and spiritual. This intersectionality provides a more holistic picture of human development as it pertains to queer, black women which can often feel in conflict with the Christian Evangelical church where being queer and being a Christian are two mutually exclusive identities (Shapiro et al, 2010; Murr, 2013).

In the end, Kristina expressed that she would like to feel confident and free in her sexuality and person, she would like to be more fluid and not be so black and white in her thinking and approach. She desires to feel less shame, more authenticity and ultimately be able to speak and encourage others to feel the same.

**Heather.** Heather is in her mid-twenties, has been married for a year and a half and grew up in the Evangelical church. She attended leadership training and attended an Evangelical summer camp from the time she was about five years old until she was sixteen. Presently she is involved in an Anabaptist church which isn't explicitly Evangelical, but she describes it as being closer to Evangelical than a lot of other traditions.

Heather described her experience with her sexuality as being something she has been trying to figure out with the transition of being married in the last couple of years. She was taught growing up, especially at camp, to hide a lot of her body and that her body was ultimately a temptation for boys, so she needed to cover up, "if you are wearing a two piece [bathing suit] you have to wear a shirt over it". She spoke about how her sexuality and body was something she had to keep to herself because if she were to "show it off" then it would somehow be someone else's downfall. Heather mentions how these feelings of "awkwardness and shame"

have been hard to unlearn for her, and she has been trying to be more comfortable with herself as a woman, as a sexual being, along with getting to know her husband in that way as well.

Heather spoke about how her youth groups and young adult groups in Christian circles often discussed boundaries and saving yourself for marriage. Heather openly shared how she was emotionally impacted while in the dating stage of her relationship in this way:

It was often like something would happen that was a little bit further beyond that line that we had before, and I had a meltdown and had to talk about it. It wasn't easy even though we talked about it. But it was still like, is this too far? We are done for, is this ruining everything?

Heather noted, though it can be wise and a good choice to set some boundaries before you're in a committed relationship, she has recognized that even since being married it has been a process to work through those limits and boundaries her and her husband had for their relationship.

Ever since leaving her more Evangelical church from her younger years, Heather has been questioning, "What is the tradition, or the discourse in the Evangelical church about it [sexuality] versus what does God say about me and my body and about sex...How do I kind of untangle what is the influence of the history of the Evangelical church and what does the Bible itself say?" Heather states that she has been trying to lean into this more in different areas of her life and remind herself that sex is a good thing, a beautiful thing and that God has given it for her to enjoy. At the end of the interview, Heather stated that she would like to be able to be comfortable in and thankful for her body. To be able to fixate less on its size, shape or colour but how it can move and breathe and eat and go places in the world. She noted that she would like to keep letting go of the baggage she still carries regarding her sexuality and to be able to enjoy sex

and enjoy herself as a sexual being, not burdened by the shame that still surfaces from time to time.

**Janet.** Janet is in her early thirties, single and grew up in the Evangelical church. She is presently attending an Anglican church which has its ties to the Evangelical community, and she is also involved in a few different church communities as well. Janet shared openly about her family dynamics growing up and her own experience of abuse within her Christian home. Embodiment for Janet has been difficult. She notes that disembodiment has been, and often is, a coping mechanism for people who have experienced trauma. She mentioned that in the last number of years she has been actively engaging in meditation practices and trying to connect more physically to herself, while also learning from the Indigenous community that she is closely connected to, on how to be more connected to her physicality and grounded in the land around her.

Janet spoke about how virginity is a major teaching for Christian women and how she was taught for so long to not talk about sexuality. She spoke about how silence regarding this topic was more the norm. Janet also noted how whenever sexuality or women's bodies were talked about it was often in a way of how to "police" the female body. She states:

So much of what we learn about our bodies as women, about our sexuality is you know, based in religious rules around what we're allowed to do, not allowed to do, what we're allowed to look like, what we're not allowed to look like. So, as a woman you know as soon as you're a certain age there's like 'make sure you're not seducing the boys, make sure you're dressing in appropriate clothing, make sure you're being modest' you know. For Janet, there was an awareness of all the different voices (i.e., media, Disney princesses, pornography, religion) that impacts the way women view their sexuality and bodies. Within her

particular Evangelical context, she noted how there was just very little talk about sex or pleasure, and if there was it was “awkward” and often led by women who have not had much experience in the area themselves, “our leaders were often single females...so we were kind of like you know, the blind having discussions about things we didn't understand or know anything about.” Nearing the end of the interview, Janet spoke about how church praxis is often focused on how to live an ideal life, but there are not frameworks for how to move through and heal when people have not lived up to the ideal. She states, “We don't give people frameworks for what to do when it's not working, what to do when we mess something up.”

For Janet, her desire is to be happy with herself and her body and caring less about what others think of her. She expressed a desire to be happy no matter her state or relationship status and to find in God her “enough”.

**Andrea.** Andrea is in her mid-twenties, in a dating relationship and spent a number of years attending and serving in an Evangelical church community. She is no longer a part of the Evangelical church but would describe this present season of her life as one of “deconstructing and soul-seeking”. Andrea grew up in a non-Christian home where talk of religion, spirituality or God did not occur. Andrea started attending the Evangelical church because a good friend of hers in high school invited her on multiple occasions. Andrea served in the church for about seven years and recently left due to conflict with some of her core values.

Andrea mentioned that her relationship with her body has hit some “high highs and some really low low's” over the course of her life. She noted that from a young age she learnt how to use her body to manipulate people to get what she wanted and eventually feel shame from those same people. However, when she entered the church years later, she stated that her relationship with her body and sexuality was one of confidence. Andrea spoke about how she embraced her

feminine energy and sexuality as a single person. But, upon entering the church culture, she felt that she again learnt to fit her body into boxes that the people around her reminded her to fit into. She states, “So things like dressing a certain way, speaking a certain way, moving a certain way, sitting a certain way, just physically having my body monitored...losing that free, wild, untamed passion I had felt previously.”

Andrea identifies as bisexual and attributes this to being an area of conflict for her when involved within the Evangelical church. Andrea came out when she was in her teens and thought that everyone who knew her also knew she identified as bisexual. She noted that her mentor in the church pulled her aside for a conversation about her sexual orientation and Andrea left the meeting feeling like she had to just choose that homosexuality was a sin, “I just remember leaving the meeting thinking ‘Okay well I guess homosexuality is a sin, I guess I have to choose to believe that...it never really settled for me, but I just put on this costume of belief.’” It was not until recently that Andrea describes a feeling of “coming up for air” and “waking from a dream” that she realized she had become someone she did not ever think she would become.

Andrea spoke about how the church positively encouraged her in her leadership skills and in her vocation, and how the church helped instill in her that she was fearfully and wonderfully made. She states that the church’s teachings did remind her that she was not an accident and that she was “divinely created for a purpose and with a purpose”. However, since leaving the Evangelical church, Andrea mentions how she has felt more freedom to rekindle her relationship with her body and sexuality, she describes a feeling of surprise because she did not realize how much she had given up and sacrificed during her time there. At the end of the interview, Andrea shared her desire to be unapologetic about her body and sexuality, to feel untamed and free, not needing to fit into anyone else’s boxes. She notes that she wants to live a life that encourages

others to do and live in that same freedom, whether directly or indirectly to give others permission to be their most authentic selves.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth is in her early twenties, in a partnered relationship and grew up in the Evangelical church. Elizabeth identifies as queer and shares how this has played a big role in her personal sense of embodiment. She grew up in a predominantly Christian home and spent her first eight years living overseas doing missions work with her family. Elizabeth is no longer a part of the Evangelical church and describes her spirituality as one that has evolved to not include the term God very often, “if I were to say that there is a God, I would say that it’s in the beautiful experiences and intimacy of connections... understanding the spirituality and holiness of my body is something I am learning a lot”.

Elizabeth notes that embodiment experiences are difficult for her as a result of the stress and trauma she carries in her body. She spoke about how the messages she heard in church and youth group regarding the body and sexuality were either not really talked about or presented as sinful. Similarly, she notes that any kind of pleasure was seen as selfish, “I thought that pleasure was selfish and something that should not be pursued. In any kind of career path conversations or in any kind of personal experience, it was just supposed to be oriented around others and service to God.” Elizabeth continued by mentioning, for her, that the disjointed relationship between her mind and body feels profound. She has begun a practice of referring to her body as “she”, which she describes as being extremely restorative for her in practicing kindness towards her own body. It has been a journey and continues to be a journey for Elizabeth to restore her relationship to her body, sexuality and sexual expression because in the past her purity was very much tied to her relationship with God, “In the past I would have said [spirituality and sexuality] are definitely connected but because my ticket to heaven is dependent on my purity.” At the end of the

interview, Elizabeth expressed a desire to ultimately experience her body and sexuality freely. She used the words “liberated, restored, recovered and uninhibited” to describe the ways she wants to feel about her embodied self, and it was evident that this has been something she is actively pursuing in her life.

**Meghan.** Meghan is in her late twenties, single and grew up in the Evangelical church. She was raised in a predominantly Christian home as well, with many of her uncle's and grandparents as pastors in the Evangelical tradition. Meghan spoke about leaving the church in her early twenties due to a combination of factors, but specifically because her values did not align with the denomination, “specifically around issues related to gender, sexuality, racism and colonialism and etc. etc. etc.” Meghan describes herself not as a theist but not an atheist either. She states:

I really love the idea that everyone is created in God's image and that really sticks with me...but I think for the most part, God and religion and Evangelicalism have been so tightly interwoven that my main frame of reference is related to shame as it comes to my body. And honestly, that my body doesn't belong to me.

Meghan described a lot of the messaging she received about her body and sexuality as a woman in the church as something that was either very vaguely spoken about or that had many restrictions put on it. She alluded to how often women get messages, likely stronger messages within the church, that to be taken seriously as a woman one has to “be pure and be in control.” She referred to conversations that would occur at Christian camps focusing on girls dressing modestly and ultimately to hide oneself. She notes that it was not just about hiding yourself in regard to how you clothe, but also in how one expressed desire. Meghan felt that she should not express any desire and, in the end, to hide herself.

Meghan expresses now, and for the last number of years, that she has very positive associations with her body, sexuality, and self as a woman. She states that there were four main contributing factors that allowed for her to uncover and recover these aspects of herself: “therapy, reading feminist theory, organizing as an advocate and having really good friends who are very sexually empowered people that I can have these conversations with.” Nearing the end of the interview Meghan expressed a desire to be able to really feel more comfortable within herself when around her family and those who still associate with Evangelicalism. She expressed that she still feels it can be difficult to be free to be herself in those environments and that she would ultimately like to not feel as though she needs to hide.

Meghan ended the interview by eloquently talking about a piece of integration for her in the way she has chosen tattoos. She has a Celtic triquetra tattoo which some have understood to represent God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost. However, it is also a Pagan symbol that represents female divinity as seen in the Maiden, the Mother and the Old Wise Woman or Witch. She states, “I got that tattoo really to kind of like put a stake in the ground and say, women are a part of what is divine and are powerful.”

**Christine.** Christine is in her mid-thirties, has been married for 9 years and grew up in the Anglican church, but was introduced to the Evangelical church through summer camps and youth retreats as a teenager. Christine was part of the Evangelical church throughout her late teens and became part of an Evangelical church community for about ten years. She no longer attends an Evangelical church and would consider herself to be deeply spiritual, with a faith still rooted in Christendom.

Christine is of mixed-race heritage and spoke about how her experience growing up in a culturally diverse home and environment, with Christian overtones, influenced the way she

related to her body and sexuality. She states, “So the overtones of what is proper and what is appropriate definitely came from both a religious and cultural standpoint of a ‘young woman must be modest, a young woman must not draw attention to herself...’” Christine spoke about how it has been a journey for her over the last number of years to really learn how to be at home in her own body. She notes that she loves her body and feels more embodied now more than ever, since critiquing and deconstructing the narratives she received about her body and sexuality while in the Evangelical church. She states:

Realizing how much of my internalized shame about my body came from just teaching, patriarchal teachings, culturally religious teaching that are steeped in patriarchy, white supremacy and colonialism, that tells women that their bodies are to be suppressed and demonized because they need to be controlled. And now I experience my body so much differently than I did now that I’ve left the Evangelical church, to be frank.

Christine also mentioned how coming out as queer was a big step for her in accepting her whole self and experiencing this acceptance from God as well. Coming to realize that God embraced her and loved her entirely allowed for her to also “love her own queerness”.

A journey of integration was very evident in Christine’s story. For her, it is not about abandoning those past versions of herself, the self that was involved in the Evangelical tradition, but about integrating all parts of her to become whole. She notes, “To not integrate actually continues the very same things we were taught in the Evangelical church, about being disintegrated, being disembodied”. Christine mentioned how she feels as though she is going through her own sexual revolution, both individually and in her partnership with her husband. She expresses that this revolution is freeing, and not free from responsibility but “just this free, embodied, empowered sense of self and not bowing to the shame narratives anymore.”

**Part 2: Displaying the findings**

The tables below display the final emergent themes based on the categories and subcategories that developed from the units of meaning. Through these tables one is able to understand how the emergent themes were selected, based off the number of times mentioned and the number of participants who mentioned them. This shows the consistencies and patterns across each personal experience.

Table 1: Process of Emergent Themes from Subcategories

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Shame around the female body and sexual experience	Shame around female body	Hiding/Policing of the female body
		Women’s body caused men to sin
		Masturbation & Self-pleasure sinful in EC
		Female body inferior to male
	Negative effects	Abuse/Trauma
		Lack of autonomy/ownership over own body
		Past teachings effect present felt experience (anxiety, shift to marriage, bodily sensation)
Dialogue around female sexuality	Silence around female sexuality	Female sexuality not talked about
		Male centric sexuality/Gendered discussions
		Assumption women have no sexual appetite/negative connotations around female sexuality

	Intergenerational Dialogue	Role of Mothers
		Role of female mentors
Sources of Identity	Sexual identity	Sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ topics
		Emphasis on purity and virginity
	Relational identity	EC as spiritual community/ family
		Connection to self
Disintegration and Disembodiment	Spiritual/physical dichotomy	Faith, sexuality and pleasure felt separate in EC
		Body is sinful/secondary to spiritual
	Demonization of the body	Suppression of sexual desire
		Distrust in the self, emotions or instincts
Evolving views of Spirituality and Sexuality	Deconstruction of old sexual narratives	New/changed views on sexuality and the body
		Integration of Masturbation
		Therapy as a safe space
	Deconstruction of Faith and Spirituality	New/changed views of God and spirituality
		Influence of other spiritual perspectives

Table 2: Subcategories Based off of Units of Meaning

<b>Subcategories based off Units of Meaning</b>	<b>Number of Participants who mentioned subcategory</b>	<b>Total number of times subcategory was mentioned</b>
Female sexuality not talked about	12	106
New/changed views on sexuality and the body	12	90
New/changed views of God and spirituality	12	72
Hiding/policing the female body	12	70
EC as a spiritual community/family	12	68
Emphasis on purity and virginity	12	64
Male centric sexuality/Gendered discussions	12	62
Suppression of Sexual Desire	12	58
Role of Mothers	12	56
Women have no sexual appetite/negative connotations around female sexuality	11	45
Role of female mentors	11	35
Masturbation & Self-pleasure sinful in EC	11	29
Integration of Masturbation	10	54
Connection to self	10	49

Faith, sexuality and pleasure felt separate in EC	10	45
Past teachings effect present felt experience	9	70
Influence of other spiritual perspectives	9	38
Lack of autonomy/ownership over own body	9	34
Body is sinful/secondary to spiritual	9	31
Women's body caused men to sin	8	35
Female body inferior to male	7	31
Abuse/Trauma	6	28
Distrust in the self, emotions or instincts	6	18
Therapy as a safe space	6	16
Sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ topics	5	42

### **Part 3: Explanation of Emergent Themes**

Emergent themes, as noted by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) are based off of the detailed notes of the researcher and overall conceptualization of the transcripts. At this point, the researcher's goal is to articulate, in a concise way, a phrase that encapsulates the patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the following steps, each of the five emergent themes will be explored through brief summarizations and direct quotes from the participants.

**Theme 1 - Shame around the female body and sexual experience**

This theme highlights the overall feelings of most of the women who participated within this study as it pertained to their experiences within the Evangelical church. Many of the participants mentioned a number of times the need to hide or police their bodies, that their female bodies were temptation for men and ultimately men's downfall. Masturbation and self-pleasure were also considered sinful. And finally, that the female body was in some way inferior to the male body. The emergent theme of experience of shame around the female body emerged through the choice of language and interpretation of the participants experiences described throughout each interview.

*Hiding/policing of the female body.* All twelve participants spoke about the need to hide or police their bodies in some way or another while in the Evangelical church. Whether this was about how they dressed or how they expressed themselves as women, the women in this study expressed a number of times that they felt they were encouraged to hide themselves and/or felt that their bodies were being policed. This is congruent with existing literature around women's sexuality within an Evangelical context. In the study conducted by Claney et al., (2020) female participants stated that they were taught women were predominantly responsible for the sexual temptation of men, which in turn impacted the way in which they expressed themselves, particularly in their physical presentation. Lauren shares these sentiments when she states that she felt the Evangelical church hindered her from understanding that her body was good and that it could be seen as a weapon. She notes:

It was always seen as a weapon almost. And it was a weapon that I would use unintentionally kind of a thing. It was a thing that could hurt without me even trying or it could wreck something without me even trying. And it also taught me that I've had to

unlearn, that I need to be just so overly protective of my body, to the point where even the people I love, I don't let experience it. It is something that I have tried to hide, my body and sexuality are both things I've had to keep to myself and even with my sexuality even that I don't get to keep to myself, I've had to hide that from myself.

Rachel also shared about how in her high school years there was a focus on keeping her body covered and a need to police herself on behalf of someone else. She states:

In my high school we used to say, 'shoulders lead to sex' so cover them up, like 'make room for Jesus', like all these ideas of like 'keep it covered'. I remember feeling like in high school how it is my fault if someone else is going to look at me and think things that I can't control...feeling like I need to police myself for someone else was really challenging.

Janet also expressed how within her church experience, policing of the woman's body felt so much more prominent than it did for the men. She notes:

'Make sure that you're dressing in appropriate clothing, make sure that you're being modest, make sure that', you know there is a lot of policing of women's attire and bodies and not a lot of converse policing of anything on the other side, including like how about you get your mind out of the gutter. There's that option too!

For Angela, the influence of her family was a largely important factor when it came to how she related to her body and not feeling like she needed to hide it or be ashamed of it. She was the participant who described some different experiences from the other participants, which is interesting to note, as her family life played an important and positive role in this way. However, she did note that the corporate discussions within the Evangelical church around the female body and sexuality shared similar overtones. She states:

And then as far as like biblical teachings it was always about men's desires and visuals and modesty, I feel like those discussions came up and it was always very male heavy... Yeah as in like women dress so that men don't look at you and then like men work on your like don't look at women, kind of a thing. So corporately those are the discussions that were had.

*Women's body caused men to sin.* Eight of the twelve women mentioned that they were made to feel that their female bodies were the reason men sin or were men's temptation. Irby (2014) notes that among purity discourses men are presented as "biologically weak because of their sexual desires" and women are meant to support them in their struggle by dressing modestly (p. 263). Heather spoke about her experiences at an Evangelical summer camp and growing up in the church with messages about her body being the reason men would sin and that she would need to cover it up to prevent this from happening. She states:

Your body is a temptation for men, for boys, so you need to cover it up. I felt like oh, my sexuality and my body is something to keep to myself because if I show it off it's like it's someone else's downfall. I'm going to cause someone else to stumble, whatever the wording you want to use.

Heather continues the discussion by saying:

I mean something that I thought might come up that didn't, I mean when talking about even that feeling, that messaging of being a stumbling block and having to kind of protect yourself, like cover yourself up so that you're not leading someone in temptation. I think that message extends beyond the church, like rape culture and all that stuff. Where it's like, "well it's the woman's fault because well did you see what she was wearing, of course she's asking for it." And things like that influenced my thoughts on things.

Kristina described similar feelings regarding how she felt she was to engage with her body as it would be a temptation for the boys, "Make sure that you have it covered and don't tempt the boys and it's up to you to not have sex before marriage...like all of this is your responsibility for yourself but also the men around you".

Christine also shared her hurt and anger around this issue within the Evangelical church. She states:

And then moving into my twenties and especially when I became part of the church in the Evangelical community, it was those overtones that I had grown up with just became so loud and also so gendered. Looking back now I'm like "Oh my gosh, like holy shit, rape culture is embedded in the church. It is a woman's fault if a man does not avert his eyes from her." This has been such a point of rage and hurt that I'm like how hurtful it is to be able to tell women that their bodies, that their God given, beautifully created creatures made in the image of God are then told and shamed and cannot be free in being at home in their bodies.

*Masturbation and self-pleasure considered wrong/sinful.* Almost all participants spoke about how any self-pleasure or masturbation was considered to be sinful within the Evangelical church and therefore discouraged. They also mentioned that female masturbation was specifically not talked about either. The women noted that it was often implied messages they received or internalized about self-pleasure and masturbation, or the way that the men spoke about it, that informed their feelings about the topics surrounding sexuality and self-pleasure in general. A popular book among many young Evangelical women, *Every Young Woman's Battle* by Shannon Ethridge, encouraged similar thinking around masturbation. Ethridge (2009) shares

short excerpts from Christian women about their “struggles” with masturbation and states, “Even though none of these women could be tried in a court of law for marital unfaithfulness and convicted of adultery, haven’t they been sowing the seeds of compromise?” (p.10). Not only did Ethridge correlate masturbation with a moral compromise, the pursuit of these “fleshly desires” would ultimately end in “demise” and “reap a harvest of relational destruction” (Ethridge, 2009, p.11). Kristina describes her own experiences with self-pleasure and the shame that would surface afterwards:

I don’t know how God feels about it, I used to feel a lot of shame after masturbating and it used to be a coping mechanism, I think. And something that I almost used to use to punish myself, like it was just this shame cycle... and I think that was all part of the messaging that I was getting at church. I have not reconciled where God is at with that.

Heather also expressed similar feelings around masturbation, she notes:

I discovered masturbation at probably like seven or eight and my parents realized and were like “no no no don’t do that”. And then it was again this shameful thing where I have to hide, I have to make sure no one knows what’s going on. I need to do this in secret and it’s like I want something, I want to feel good and I want to enjoy this but it’s always bad and wrong, so I have to hide it.

Elizabeth spoke about how she felt that masturbation was never really part of the conversation for women in general. She experienced a lot of shame around exploring her sexuality and could feel a sense of shame from her male friends as well. She states:

Yeah, it just ties into the idea of pleasure you know like being curious about my body and my sexuality growing up and then feeling instantly shameful for even thinking about exploring that. It totally built in through my understanding of my sexuality and thinking I

was asexual. I had completely blocked off my sexuality altogether. So, masturbation was completely off the table. And hearing stories about you know my male friends struggling with masturbation and it was hard for me to wrap my head around why that was wrong. Just seeing the shame that they carried and the shame that I carried, and it was just a lot of confusion.

*Female body inferior to male.* Seven of the twelve participants mentioned or alluded to how the female body felt inferior to the male body during their time within the Evangelical church. Whether this was through how they were allowed to lead within the church community, or when it came to their own pleasure and receiving of pleasure. Bartowski & Read (2002) state that among Evangelical authors, women within the Evangelical community can find liberation in a more patriarchal structure because they do not need to concern themselves with taking responsibility for decisions. Similarly, wives within the Evangelical church can expect to have their opinions solicited but not necessarily heeded since it is her husband's final decision (Bartowski & Read, 2002). Christine spoke about similar experiences while in her time within the church:

I experienced teachings that led me to believe that my body was inferior to that of my husband's because as soon as I got married, I wasn't allowed to lead anymore in the same ways that I was leading before, or only in certain things, like in music, sometimes with a male also married.

Lauren also shared how traditional gender roles within the church community influenced these feelings for her. She states:

Especially in the Brethren church it was always the man is always the head of the house and the woman was his partner, but not equal idea. So, it was always kind of that in the back of everything. Was always like “whatever you’re feeling doesn’t matter as much as what men are feeling so just ignore it”, kind of thing.

Kristina also expressed similar sentiments:

Women in the Evangelical church I attended were leaders which was great, but really only in terms of hospitality and with children for a long time. It was rare to see a woman speak on a Sunday that wasn’t Mother’s Day or Valentine’s day, I think that’s really it or with their spouse who was a male pastor...So women were the helper, they were second to their male spouse, they were to submit and raise their kids and to care for the family in that sense.

***Abuse and trauma.*** The stories of abuse and trauma that some of the women described were important to note as these experiences pertain to the feelings of shame and shame around one’s sexuality. Davis (2019) writes on the topic of spiritual abuse within an Evangelical context stating that the women who participated in their study reported leaving abusive churches either unaware that they had been victims of spiritual abuse, or that they were too overwhelmed with a sense of shame and hopelessness to be able to recognize what had occurred (p.21). Davis (2019) continues to say that for many of the women who experienced spiritual trauma, they were unable to return to environments that triggered post-traumatic responses, even if it was not the specific church that the abuse took place in. Elizabeth shared how she has been living with spiritual trauma from her experience in her Evangelical church community which continues to affect her today:

In most conversations I'm really careful to use that phrase because it does mean different things to different people and my experience isn't objectively as painful or like intentionally traumatic as maybe my experience but for me it has been traumatic. And so, I would consider my entire experience as part of our Evangelical church to be quite traumatic and the pressures put on by the pastor to me individually. Just I mean, I guess I don't really talk about it much, so I don't quite have the words. But yeah, memories that I blocked out because they like took away my humanity and my autonomy and I guess that's the blunt side of it, and that's definitely a form of trauma.

Kristina described her experience of sexual abuse and how her church's response reinforced the feelings of shame around her sexuality:

I had my first memories of sexual abuse as a child while being in the Evangelical space and it was while being in that space. So I went to spiritual mentors for help when those things came up... I was told, and I used to struggle with believing, that the reason I was queer was because I was sexually traumatized and sexually broken and that's sin and it's because of that sexual abuse as a child that has brought me to this broken sexuality...that these sexual desires are shameful. I struggled with shame for a very, very long time.

***Lack of autonomy and ownership over own body.*** Nine of the participants spoke about how they felt a lack of autonomy and ownership over their own bodies. McGuire (1996) notes that religion, specifically among the more Protestant sects, has been used to control the body by declaring moral norms around sexuality, eating drinking, modesty, purity etc. Protestantism has historically influenced the ways in which people relate to their bodies due to the religious norms and ideals of asceticism and self-denial (McGuire, 1996). It is important to consider, that when

there is a linkage between religion and the body in terms of how the body is regulated, the themes of power, coercion and even violence must be confronted as well (McGuire, 1996). The women in this study spoke directly to these points, affirming that they felt as if their bodies were not really “their own” and thus they were not allowed to make decisions for themselves. Holly describes her experience of hyper-spiritualization as a catalyst for this lack of autonomy. She states:

I still cling a little bit to charismatic Pentecostalism and I've had experiences in my life where I'm aware and I still believe that another world exists. But I went from like going from a hyper-spiritualization, “everything is a demon, and I must have to go through God for everything, I have no autonomy, God didn't give me a brain to use”. To, “this happens sometimes but not all the time” and it is so anxiety inducing!

Meghan also expressed how she experienced a lack of ownership over her own body by saying, “religion and Evangelicalism have been so tightly interwoven that my main frame of reference is related to shame as it comes to my body. And honestly that like my body doesn't belong to me”.

*Past teaching effecting present felt experience.* Nine participants of the twelve also mentioned how past teachings around one's body and sexuality still impact their felt experience presently. McGuire (1996) articulates the connection between mind and body in that distress is not merely something in the mind but is also a bodily phenomenon. The connection between what is taken in via cognition and absorbed in the body is something worthy to note, especially in this context. Diana articulates her experience in this way:

It's far more complex than the church makes it [sexuality] out to be. I think we take these narratives and stories with us and though you know rationally I've let go of a lot it's just

really hard to emotionally and bodily follow through and so yeah, I'm working through a lot.

Elizabeth also shares how she still experiences shame post intimacy:

I have to be very intentional about remaining embodied and not disconnecting, dissociating at all because of shame and because of that relationship I have with my body and my past. There's been many times when I've broken down during or after sexual experience, just completely overwhelmed with the negative voices in my head, teachings the feeling of being a sinner, of being condemned...it's very thick.

### **Summary of Theme 1**

The shame experienced around the female body is seen here through the statements of participants regarding the sub-themes of hiding and policing the female body, women's bodies as a source of sin for men, masturbation being deemed sinful and wrong, experiences of abuse and trauma, a lack of autonomy over one's own body, and how past teachings continue to impact the present felt experience of women. This theme of shame emerged through the lived experiences of participants, which supports the existing literature around how women, within this religious context, experience shame. Research shows that religiosity is often positively related to sexual guilt which results in more restrictive sexuality and sexual behaviours (Rigo & Saraglou, 2018).

Considering the number of participants noted the ways in which their bodies as women felt inferior to men it was important to seek out what pre-existing literature states on this issue. According to Maddox (2013), though many Evangelical churches allow for female pastors, some still require them to function under male oversight, which in turn flows out into the broader church community and home life for women. The male authority over women that is prevalent

within the Evangelical church context has significant implications for the ways that women relate to their own bodies spiritually, societally and relationally.

## **Theme 2 - Dialogue around the female body**

The second emergent theme came from the way participants expressed their experiences around the way their sexuality was talked about within the Evangelical context. This included: silence around female sexuality within the Evangelical church, a male centric sexuality, an assumption that women did not have much of a sexual appetite, and the influential roles that mothers and female mentors played in the lives of these women.

*Female sexuality not talked about.* All twelve participants expressed how female sexuality was simply not talked about; that there was a silence around the topic as a whole. Of all the subcategories, this one consisted of the highest number of statements by all participants. Research shows that among more religious conservatism there is often less permissive attitudes towards sex and that Evangelical protestants are more likely to hold restrictive attitudes in general towards the topic (Dent & Maloney, 2017). Open dialogue around sexuality and sexual issues within many theological and religious contexts has been noticeably silenced, which as stated by Ott & Stephenson (2017) needs to change as sexuality increasingly becomes a topic within these contexts that cannot be overlooked. Rachel expressed how she experienced the silence in this way, “Not talking about it and having to figure out how it works, like I think by not talking about sex the priority becomes sex because it’s not talked about.”

Elizabeth spoke into this sub-theme as well and how as a woman she did not realize that there was even pleasure for a woman within sex:

All the messages that I would hear in church and youth group with my youth mentor and in any readings about purity culture, it was just very much something that we didn’t talk

about or something that was presented as sinful. And so, I had no idea that there was actually pleasure or even a role for a woman in sex, not to mention the heteronormativity of it all.

Angela spoke about a specific situation regarding the effects of the silence and how she experienced women in her life having felt raped on their wedding night because they had no understanding of how sex was going to be. She states:

I remember that being a pivotal memory for me as like a twelve-year-old being like, “what is it supposed to be then?” Not totally understanding the word rape, “like what does it mean?” So again, that was a side effect of the silence right. So, these women weren't allowed to like kiss or hug their partners and then immediately went to full on the most significant intimacy.

***Male centric sexuality and gendered conversations.*** All twelve participants noted that all talks around sexuality within the Evangelical church were gendered. Men and women, boys and girls would be split off into two groups. Many of the participants spoke about how sex and protecting the men or satisfying men were messages they also inherited. As stated above, the participants in this study expressed how it was their responsibility to protect the men from temptation because they were sexual creatures, and to remain pure so as to gift their husbands with their sexual purity. As stated by Herrmann (2020), “For evangelical women, therefore, ‘keeping oneself pure is a fight that must be won, that it is what God wants and most importantly that her body does not belong to her, but rather to her future husband and a lapse in purity is a betrayal of her future relationship” (p. 422). Rachel, getting ready to be married herself, expressed how the messaging

around being willing to pleasure your husband at any time was an implied narrative she picked up along the way:

Even growing up I felt a lot like my body as a woman is a vessel.... a vessel for man's pleasure or man's lust and it was my job to police that vessel. But so that when I am married that I'm ready and available for my husband whenever he wants to have sex with me. And I think that is a really unhealthy narrative and I don't think it's every explicitly said like that. But it's hinted at and it's the messaging you get growing up...

Andrea also shared about her experience within youth groups and messages from the church culture surrounding these gendered conversations:

And while the men were being taught you know about pornography and masturbation and lust and whatever the girls were taught about marriage and how to be a wife and you know how to well, they would frame it in "honor yourself and honor your body by dressing in such a way that doesn't attract the male gaze". But that just like it doesn't really matter how you frame it it's just shaming women for their bodies...I remember being shocked hearing one of my friends' mothers tell a friend of mine who was getting married that, "you're not always going to want to have sex, but you just have to do your duty to serve your husband". I remember being shocked and angry...

Kristina noted that when having discussions around sexuality within the church, her experience was that it was very much gendered and imbalanced. She notes:

And the messaging like the same thing with like porn versus virginity right, women always got that same messaging and men got different messaging. And I think in the end it was all about like controlling your desires and not submitting to your desires like really in the end of it. Men didn't really have as much responsibility, I think. But from what I

understood it was the women who did the tempting, the men did the leading and the decision-making...that men have the control but not the responsibility and women have the responsibility but not necessarily the control. Which is just dawning on me now.

*Assumption women have no sexual appetite/ negative connotations around female sexuality.* Almost all of the participants spoke about how there were often negative associations or connotations around female sexuality and/or there was an assumption that women had very little to no sexual desire or appetite. Again, these were messages that the participants often felt were implied and underlying other church teachings. Many of the women stated that in the gendered discussions, the split off of men and women, were often where the men or boys would talk about sex, pornography, lust and desire, and the women would talk about modesty, the importance of saving oneself or how to be a good wife. Herrmann (2020) notes that purity culture teaches that men are not responsible simply because they are “weak visual creatures” who cannot control themselves, implying that women are nothing of the sort (p. 422). Women are objectified simply by showing up in their bodies, looking a certain way and blamed for men’s “uncontrollable” behaviour (Herrmann, 2020). Janet spoke about her sexuality as a woman was compared to the male narratives around sex and how that related to her understanding of God within her sexuality:

There is very much this stereotype that men just want sex, women don’t really, and they sort of tolerate that. So, there is definitely an expectation that women don’t have any kind of sexual appetite or don’t want sex other than to have babies or satisfy their husbands kind of thing. So, in terms of how that shapes my impression of how God deals with those things...I don’t know.

Lauren also noted how for her, she experienced a predominantly negative perspective when it came to her sexuality. She expresses that whenever sexuality or women's bodies were talked about it was often negatively, "So if it was talked about it was negative, things not to do, things to ignore about your impulses, but it [Evangelical church] never gave or talked about anything good."

***Role of mothers.*** All twelve participants spoke about the role that mothers played in some way regarding their sexuality and bodies. For almost all of the participants, their mothers influenced the way the women interacted or understood sexuality based on the way their mothers spoke or did not speak about such topics. Almost all of them would say that this was not always a positive or informative experience. Welles (2005) notes that the role of the mother among young women played an influential role when it came to sexual embodiment and empowerment. The silence of mother's was indicative of the way young women were taught to express, or not to express, their sexuality (Welles, 2005). Lauren reflects on this:

My mom is still alive and I'm still in a relationship with her, but she never wanted to discuss that kind of stuff. She was very much like "we will keep that part silent as well, it's obviously a thing that happens, so we will leave it at that sort of thing." Even my mom was just uncomfortable with the subject, I don't even know what her stance would be on any of it, because she has literally never talked about it with me.

Diana also spoke about how for her, her mom played a huge role in the way she was informed about her sexuality. She states:

I mean my mom sat me down when I was, we were reading the Bible when I was 5 or 6 and I asked, "What does it mean when they lay together" or whatever and that's why I found out about sex when we were reading the Bible because I had a question. And then

when I was like, I don't know I was maybe 12 or was I younger she took me to a hotel one night and we had "the talk". And we talked about all things sex but didn't get into those kinds of granular details. And I was traumatized my mom made it this BIG deal. We were going to hotels to talk about this, and I was given a purity necklace.

Meghan spoke openly about an experience she had when her parents found out that she was sexually active and the way that her mother specifically reacted. She notes:

Okay when I was seventeen, my parents found out that I was sexually active and really overreacted, my mom cried for like 2 weeks straight...And told me that God had turned his face away from me. They crafted their own kind of like Bible study for me for 40 days and 40 nights 'cause it's a biblical number, and they did give me the opportunity to create my own biblical argument as to why premarital sex was OK and I did the best I could with you know, like I don't have a master's in divinity or PhD in theology so I had less resources than they did.

***Role of female mentors.*** Another important reference made was the role that female mentors played in the lives of the participants. Eleven of the twelve participants noted the way that other women in their lives influenced how they related to their sexuality and body. Some of these were positive influences and others more negative. However, it is important to note the impact that intergenerational dialogue has on how women understand and relate to their sexuality and bodies. Andrea speaks about her experience here:

I had a couple older ladies on the prayer team who would pray for me, I had a really unfortunate experience once where, I can't remember what they called it, basically I went in on a weekday, I met with two prayer ladies where they, the words coming to mind is

an exorcism, it wasn't an exorcism but for all intents and purposes. Generally, when people pray for you, you close your eyes and you like agree in prayer and I wasn't allowed close my eyes. I had to look at them in the eyes while they called out these spirits of homosexuality and masturbation and all of these things. They like called them out. So that was one experience with older women, and I was so frightened and like "This is not what I signed up for."

Elizabeth also spoke about a more positive experience with one of her youth mentors:

There's very little good that I learned about my body or about sexuality from the church from the Pentecostal church. I had one youth mentor who really embodied like a grace or graciousness in within that community in terms of like we're human we make mistakes She would open up about the mistakes she made, and she would be soft about it if that makes sense. And I think that was maybe the one grain of goodness that I got from that experience.

And for Holly having a positive influence with a friend of hers who was a pastor was very impactful for her. She states:

I remember when I was twenty-six, I was on a road trip with a pastor friend of mine and she had been like the voice of truth for many, many years for me, and I've been able to be really, really truthful with her and honest and I remember like crying on this road trip and just bawling and being like "I feel like I have lost my virginity because I keep struggling with masturbation". And she helped lead me through this, she was just "like a that's not true" like thankfully she said that.

## Summary of Theme 2

This second theme that emerged was a result of these lived experiences of participants regarding how sexuality, particularly female sexuality, was talked about in their lives and contexts. The general silence that participants expressed around how the church spoke about their sexuality, along with how their mother's and female mentors spoke about female sexuality, informed the ways in which they related to their own bodies. This points to the role that intergenerational voices play in shaping young people. Welles (2005) notes that there is often a double standard when it comes to sex education among young men and women; boys are often taught about their sexual desires and sense of power within their sexuality whereas girls are taught about their sexuality in relation to protecting themselves and a sense of "sexual accommodation" (p. 34). When gender stereotypes are assumed in the sexual sphere, Tolman (1991) notes that this situation often leads women to have a lack of clarity about their sexual desire in general.

The mother-daughter relationship was also an important area to explore within this theme. The mother-daughter relationship, according to many female writers, is a bond that articulates incredible intimacy and distance, passion and violence (Hirsch, 1981). Psychoanalysts have explored this relationship between mother and daughter over the decades and discovered that the relationship between mother and son as an infant differed than that of mother and daughter (Hirsch, 1981). This difference can be seen through the way the mother often encourages the son to be autonomous, whereas the daughter is seen more of an extension of the mother, which can be conflicting due to the mother's own "ambivalence about being female in a patriarchal culture" (Hirsch, 1981, p. 206). The results from this current study appears to support the findings within the existing literature around these topics.

### **Theme 3 – Sources of Identity**

This theme focuses on the way that participants spoke directly or indirectly about identity and how their identity was impacted and shaped through their experience within the Evangelical church. Whether it was through positive or negative experiences, participants spoke to how their sexuality identity and sexual orientation were contributing factors to who they are. The external sources of relational identity experienced in the Evangelical church community impacted the way participants understood their identity, as well the more internal sources of identity seen in one's relationship and connection to the self.

*Sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ topics.* Four of the twelve participants identify as queer and/or part of the LGBTQ+ community, and one participant was questioning if she was given the opportunity growing up to consider not only being attracted to men if that would change how she got to know and understand herself sexually. For the four participants who identify as queer, all of them expressed how their sexual orientation and the Evangelical's stance on these issues were major contributing factors in leaving the church community and also in the freedom they experienced once able to live openly and congruently with who they feel themselves to be. Research shows that religious and political factors have contributed to creating significant barriers for those part of the LGBTQ+ community to feel they can be part of or benefit from faith communities (Murr, 2013). Historically, the message of the church has often been negative and condemning towards the queer community, thus making it no surprise as to why many LGBTQ+ individuals leave or abandon any religious affiliation or involvement (Murr, 2013). Christine spoke about her own experience, while also addressing how she has experienced the Evangelical church's posture towards the LGBTQ+ community:

If we are all created in the image of God, men and women equally, and I will add, intersex and trans people who may not necessarily identify, and other queer folks who do not identify as male and female, but queer and female identity has absolutely been lambasted by the EC in terms of disembodied, disintegrated experiences of self.

Lauren expressed how for her, being able to explore her sexuality and sexual orientation is something she wished she would have been able to explore prior to marriage. Though she states she is happily married to her husband, sexual orientation seems to be an area that forms her identity and relation to self:

I do wish before that I had the chance to know this better about myself. To just do more exploring to find out if that is something that I enjoy or not. Because again, I sort of joke about it with my friends, where I'm like, it was never an option. It was never presented as an option that I could like someone that wasn't a man. So, I for whatever reason because I was interested in men was like, yeah okay, so I didn't even think about the idea of exploring this other thing. I do have a feeling that if I explored it there might not be, I might not have the same attraction to men, but I feel like there would be something there and it would just be interesting to be able to explore it, just to know myself better.

Elizabeth also notes how for her, presenting as more masculine and as she states, "more queer evidently", she feels the urge to manipulate her mannerisms to be more feminine due to the messages so ingrained within her. She notes:

But yeah, like my body like you said, my body remembers the shame and even beyond masturbation like walking down the street presenting more masculine or more queer evidently, even yesterday I was walking down dressed a little queer and I had to like stop myself from manipulating my mannerisms to be more straight and more feminine, so that

people wouldn't know. Which I have, like cognitively I have no shame, like yeah, it's just completely old patterns, memories just ingrained.

*Emphasis on purity and virginity.* All twelve participants noted the emphasis put on purity and virginity for them as women while in the Evangelical church. These two topics of purity and virginity were not just encouraged and emphasized but felt as if they tied into the identity and worthiness of the women. Almost all of the participants spoke about how in their gendered conversations, women and girls primarily discussed saving oneself for marriage. Herrmann (2020) explores this further through the ways in which purity culture among Evangelicals has reinforced and emphasized the importance of purity and virginity for women, and that the ultimate moral achievement for Evangelical women is by remaining emotionally and sexually pure before marriage. To be sexually active before marriage runs the risk of threatening a woman's identity (Herrmann, 2020). Heather spoke about this well when she said:

Well yeah, the label of "Virgin", as soon as you cross a line your identity changes you can no longer use that label because you're not pure anymore. And that's I mean that term can be applied to men too but it's not, it's very much associated with women like the Virgin Mary.

Elizabeth expressed how for her, sexuality and spirituality are very much connected presently, and in the past they were as well, but for different reasons. She expressed how her purity was what made her worthy in God's eyes and ultimately her "ticket to heaven". She says, "But in the past, I would have said yeah definitely connected but because my ticket to heaven is dependent on my purity". She goes on to say, "And then having conversations in youth group and it was the conversation about sexuality about things not to do and the importance of saving yourself and again the way that you would be rewarded for that with a happy marriage."

Kristina also reflected on her experience of having gendered discussions and the way that women were continually reminded of keeping their virginity and staying pure. She states:

They separated the men and the women, and the women got some other church wife, pastors' wife to come in and talk about loving our bodies by being modest and keeping all of our flower petals or whatever bullshit. Keeping your virginity and you know all of these things.

Christine expressed how inseparable women's sexuality is from the way she is taught about her body and how that relates to her identity. For her, she felt that identity and how one relates to oneself, her sexuality and embodiment are core to identity formation. She notes:

I am increasingly convinced that the foundation of my experiences was built upon teachings related to the female body, holistically. In my experience, the core relationship between an Evangelical woman's sexuality is inseparable from her understanding of her body, and how it relates to her identity.

*Evangelical church as spiritual community/family.* The role that relationships play in the formation of one's identity is pertinent to note, as this study revealed that all twelve participants joined the Evangelical church because of relational influences. Whether that was through immediate family or friendships, the community of the church played a significant role in the lives of these participants and shaped aspects of their identity. Murr (2013) notes that religious practices and involvement is often deeply personal, meaningful and central to a person's sense of self. Andrea spoke to her experience within the church as one of "belonging" and how that provided her with a wonderfully supportive community and also formed the way she related to other parts of herself i.e., sexuality. She states:

And then I made friends while I was there and the friends kept reaching out and kept talking with me and inviting me back and so I did I got involved in their youth ministry and just end up building myself a really strong community and so speaking of things that like people say in the local church culture, I would say that “I belonged before I believed”, was very much a tagline. But for me it was true, I felt like I had community and I had friends and people who were looking out for me before I even really considered whether the God thing was for me.

She continues to say that by joining the community, her hope was to influence the church to be more inclusive. Yet somewhere along the way, she exchanged her sexuality in order to belong.

She notes:

And I was going to be different I was going to be the queer Christian who like brought everybody together and you know fight for the queer community. And then slowly along the way that just kind of died and again I think I've been talking a lot with some friends of mine who are kind of doing a similar journey of deconstructing and belonging it just it just keeps coming up for us. And so, I think I traded what I stood for belonging...

Yeah, I feel like maybe before I would have said that I was trading sexuality for belonging.

Christine shared her perspective and experience of the attachments she formed with her church family and how those bonds created a safety net for her while also creating fear within her when it came time to leave. She states:

As a young adult, geographically separated from my family when I joined an evangelical church community here in [city name] my church family formed “attachment bonds” to me (reference to Dr. Sue Johnson’s attachment theory). These people became a physical,

emotional, spiritual, and in some cases, economic safety net for me. Despite having an incredibly safe, loving, and supportive family, I learned to primarily rely upon my chosen church family, because they were *co-labourers with me for the Kingdom of God*.

She continues to say how this affected her, and how much more it could affect the women who were in a more vulnerable position than her:

No matter the harms we may have experienced at the hands of our beloved church family, it takes great risk to leave an evangelical church community, most especially for women in precarious social and economic situations. To risk one of her core attachment relationships - the acceptance of her church family, may in fact mean risking her functional family, social safety net - including emotional and financial safety nets.

***Connection to self.*** Ten of the twelve participants described feelings of connection to self while in the Evangelical church and how that was at times discouraged and perpetuated their own struggle to listen to their inner voice. This connection to self and intuition was also expressed as a positive influence in their healing journey regarding sexuality and embodiment. Similar to the sub-theme above regarding autonomy and ownership over one's body, the connection to self often appeared to be an ambivalent relationship. In a study completed by Blum (2015) on the topic of women's sexuality and the internalization of religious messages, Blum notes that the identity of women were very fragmented because of the conflict of who they felt they were and who they felt they were supposed to be. Angela spoke about her experience growing up and feeling as though she was one person at church and could not be that person with her non-Christian friends. She felt a sense of disintegration. Angela expanded on this by

describing how at church if you do and believe what you are taught, then it is comfortable even if it goes against what you personally believe. She states:

Because it's like, you know, if you're doing everything that you're taught to do then it feels great and it's like even when, if, it doesn't resonate with you and your values in your personal morals, it also feels comfortable to do what's expected of you too.

Andrea also describes an experience of feeling a dissonance with what she was hearing or internalizing from the messages at church with what and who she knows God to be. She expressed feelings of listening more to external sources and less to the internal voice of God within her. She states:

Hearing their voice as God's voice and so then you know when I internalize these messages of "because you're not pure your unworthy" or I don't know if you've heard, you probably have if you've been in the EC but the flower analogy where they pass the flower around, so I was hearing things like that and thinking that this does not sound like the God that I'm used to. This sounds like a God who shames me for experiences that I've had in my body, and so that was difficult, and I think the more I struggled the more I turned to people because it was people, I was hearing this from. And so, I would ask well tell me more about that, well what do I do about that, well how do I fix that? I stopped listening to God and started listening to people more.

Holly expresses how she was taught to ultimately not trust herself while in the Evangelical church. She states:

We were taught not to trust ourselves. Like "Trust in Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding", that is a confusing verse! Like don't trust your mind,

don't trust your thoughts, don't trust your emotions and then you show up to therapy and they're "like what the hell have you been taught...?"

### **Summary of Theme 3**

These sources of identity continued to be a prominent theme throughout the participants experiences as seen in their own words above. Blum (2015) notes that a binary identity structure ensues when these type of either/or conflicts develop: virgin/whore, strong/submissive, queer/Christian etc. The nuances of identity within the religious context appear to be less developed or integrated according to Blum (2015) which supports the ways in which the women in this study spoke about their own experiences with identity and relationship to self.

Interestingly, this binary has long existed; we have long needed the "other" in order to worship or justify its opposite. Greer (2016) states this well, "If the binary of the Madonna/Whore was to survive however, just as the Church needed proof of the devil for legitimization, society needed proof of the Whore or deviant 'bad' woman to further exalt the Virgin Mary" (p. 14-15).

The connection to self and the religious community was also an important aspect in shaping the participants' identities. Sharma (2008) states that when it comes to accountability and decision making in church life, the emphasis is primarily not on the self but on the communal bonds within the religious community and the worship of God. Within the Christian Protestant tradition, when people declare a belief in Jesus Christ, believers come together to form a community where they learn to interpret events in light of this newfound worldview and faith and are encouraged to articulate their feelings and actions in a "correct" way (Sharma, 2008). As mentioned by a number of participants, the sense of community found within the church environment was something positive and continued to be an aspect of their involvement in the

church they held highly. However, as Carl Jung would affirm, the collective shadow and collective unconscious can be seen at work here as well (Kremer & Rothberg, 1999).

#### **Theme 4 – Disintegration and disembodiment**

This theme focuses on the disintegration and feelings of disembodiment that the majority of participants expressed while in the Evangelical church and that continual felt sense in their present experiences. The theme of disintegration and disembodiment surfaced through expression of how faith, sexuality, and pleasure felt separate within the Evangelical church. The body was considered sinful or secondary to the spiritual, suppression of sexual desire was encouraged, and a distrust in the self, emotions, and instincts of the individual were fostered.

*Faith, sexuality and pleasure felt separate in the Evangelical church.* Every participant expressed how there was a felt separation between their faith and their sexuality. This was consistent for all twelve women. According to Claney et al., (2020) this dualism between one's self and body has been the predominant message regarding sexuality within the Evangelical Christian culture. Rachel spoke about how this disintegration affected her faith life and how it relates to her as she prepared for marriage. She states:

Yeah so, I think that again the idea in the messaging that like “sex is wrong sex is wrong sex is wrong” and “now sex is right”, I think makes it very difficult to navigate. There is a lot of shame that comes into that and that I think causes a lot of internal conflict when you're starting to say well it's wrong but at the same time it's like, this is a desire and a need and like something that's there. And I think that with that, you start to separate this idea of like just “hide this part from God, and this part is OK for him to see”. Then you become less integrated in that sense. You either have to completely shut off that whole

like need piece and like totally turn it off and ignore it, or you have to remove God from it altogether, which I think aren't really effective or helpful, or productive or as they were intended to be.

Janet also expressed, how for her, God feels very distinct from her sexuality and not a part of it.

She notes:

So, yeah in terms of in terms of how that shapes my impression of how God deals with those things. I don't know it's kind of complicated it sort of feels a lot like God is very distinct from sexuality if that makes sense. Sexuality is usually sort of portrayed as like this very base kind of gross thing and very sort of separate I mean it's always like "Oh yeah God gave us sex and God blah blah blah"

This spilled over into similar feelings around the participant's experiences of their bodies feeling secondary to the spiritual and implied that their bodies were innately sinful.

*The body is sinful and secondary to the spiritual.* Nine of the twelve participants explicitly described experiences around feeling that their bodies were considered sinful and therefore secondary to the spiritual aspects of themselves. This primary/secondary concept has often been informed by the mind/body dualism that has derived from certain biblical interpretations and historical patterns (Claney et al., 2020). Heather describes her felt experience of this by describing how her spiritual life and physical life are quite compartmentalized. She says:

I think I would say my experience, my connection to the Evangelical church that kind of what I was saying before, it has been more fragmented. That my sexuality and my body and my physical appearance and all that is very separate from my the mental and spiritual, like who I am and that part of me and my spirituality and connection to God is

all in my mind and in my spirit in my like singing, in my praying, in my reading, and all in my head. And my body is just a stumbling block to men or the vessel that I am in, but it's not the important part, it's the earthly vessel for the more important part of me, that will go to heaven when I die, so it's just a means to an end, not something to really pay attention to on the whole. So, I think it's more on the side of being disconnected.

Similarly, Kristina describes how her body felt less than her spirit while in the Evangelical church and that she could not trust her feelings. She notes:

But there's definitely this break of spirit and body and even when you think about death to them it's this like "OK you've like finally left your body now, like good riddance" you know. Like here you are in your spirit you're like utmost, most important part of you. That this body is just temporary and of this world and I'm borrowing it. But it's also not really mine, like it's not like yours to do whatever you want with because it's temporary it's given to you by God and so like steward your body well. But know that it's lesser than almost. Yeah, lesser than your spirit. And not to be trusted. I think like I heard a lot of my heart being deceitful but also like your feelings do not reflect reality, is just this constant feeling like that "your feelings do not reflect reality, like forget your feelings, what is God telling you?" I don't know what God's telling me, but I know what I feel. Hello, can we work with that?

Elizabeth also spoke vulnerably about how what she was taught impacted the way she related to her body and physical sense of self. She states:

I guess I guess my whole story kind of talks about the way that it held me back or created that broken relationship with my body yeah because I was taught that my body is wrong or my desires are sinful or that I'm broken and my sexuality is the prime example of that,

because of all of that I just completely disconnected from my body. And like yeah, any self-harm is because my body is undeserving of goodness or like a lack of pleasure is what I deserve because yeah because of what I was taught.

Lauren spoke into the intentions of the Evangelical church around these topics as well by stating, “I think they definitely encouraged me to be disintegrated. I don’t know if that was their actual intention, I don’t know if they realized what they were saying was like making such a huge claim.”

*Suppression of sexual desire.* All twelve participants spoke about their experience with the suppression of sexual desire while they were within the Evangelical church and how that has impacted their felt sense of embodiment and sexual embodiment. Claney et al., (2020) noted in their study that some women felt a disconnect due to their lack of previous sexual behaviour prior to marriage, which highlighted their belief that one’s sexuality was for the future i.e., when married. Similarly, women expressed that they did not identify themselves as a sexual self, and if they did, this sexual self could not be fully “reached” until they were married, where it was “allowed” (Claney et al., 2020). Kristina articulated her experience by expressing how she was made to feel like she needed to “die” to her sexual desires. She notes:

Yeah, sexual desires are shameful and kind of feeling that I was broken and all these sexual desires, thoughts and feelings that should not be expressed but that they should actually be suppressed and repressed. That I should “die to these desires”, or these desires should die inside of me. That they weren't real and that was yeah that was the like inner conflict of is this sin or is this who God created me to be? Even just like physical, almost the surfacy part really the expression of sexuality in like having sex itself was a sin, something that was dirty.... It's OK that you like have these feelings of wanting to have

sex but you can't, again act on it you have to like to suppress, those feelings need to die, and you need to pick the light and the good and what God wants for you. Just this like you're in the process of submitting, and the more you like die to yourself and lose yourself, the more you're becoming who God has created you to be.

Andrea expressed similar feelings about her experience around a sense of disintegration and disembodiment. She spoke about the language around “dying to self” in the Bible and how that was often encouraged regarding one’s sexuality. She states:

I would say that they probably encouraged me to feel more disintegrated. And I think where I saw that the most was in the scripture that says “Die to yourself or die to your flesh” or there was very much your sinful nature and your...your spiritual nature and sinful nature, anyways “there are two natures. You are to die to one and pick up the other”. Very much like there were two parts of you and you had to suppress one, repent about one, pray about one and put on the other. And I believed that, I believed that wholeheartedly.

For Lauren, her experiences of being told to “ignore” her sexual impulses and desires continue to affect the way she sees her body and how she experiences herself as a sexual being to this day.

She says:

I think that when I was younger, I have very specific memories of like wanting things like that, like wanting to be physical and having physical desires like that kind of a thing and just experiencing them and being like I don't know what to do with this. And what I was told was that these feelings are technically wrong in some way, so like I should ignore this. And I got so good at this, that recently one of my struggles is like I just ignore all of those impulses just like automatically now. They have kind of just stopped

coming. And so, I don't even... the thought isn't there that my body is a sexual entity as well, it doesn't correlate with how I actually feel, I guess.

*Distrust in the self, emotions or instincts.* Half of the participants, six out of the twelve, spoke about a distrust in the self that they acquired through their experience with the Evangelical church's teachings. A sense of distrust of their emotions or instincts and a distrust of themselves. Kristina spoke about this and how she, at times, doubts herself being in a same sex relationship. She notes:

So, for a very long time even in this last year in the first few months of dating my partner it was a lot of "I don't know if I can do this" I don't know if like I think like it was like this feels "right" to me, but I can't trust my feeling or my instincts. Which means that I might need to give up heaven and God to be with you, for this "temporary, worldly relationship."

Holly describes how she feels that God trusts people more than they trust themselves and that within the Evangelical church, she was taught not to trust herself. She states:

God trust's us so much more than we trust ourselves and we're taught not to trust ourselves in Christianity in the evangelical church. We were taught not to trust ourselves. Like "Trust in Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding", that is a confusing verse! Like don't trust your mind don't trust your thoughts don't trust your emotions and then you show up to therapy and they're like what the hell have you been taught...

#### **Summary of Theme 4**

The experiences of disembodiment and disintegration that were spoken of by the participants in this study supports the existing literature regarding how the dualism that still

pervades the religious and spiritual spheres impacts the way women engage with their bodies and sexuality. This fragmentation of the body and spirit, as stated by McGuire (1996) continues to be perpetuated within the spheres of religion impacting the way believers, those with religious beliefs in general, recognize their own bodies as something of importance. "Where, in our studies of religious beliefs, believers and organizations, for instance, is there any recognition that people so much as have bodies, or that their bodies are related to others' bodies, or that these bodies matter very much?" (McGuire, 1996, p. 102).

When looking at the ways in which religion is linked with people's emotions, perceptions, senses, and feelings, the primary focus has historically been exclusively on cognitive functions of the mind, reinforcing this split within person's (McGuire 1996). This split of the body and spirit within the religious sphere, though centuries old, continues on in the narratives and lived experiences of those involved in faith communities, and as witnessed to in the stories of these women, continues to impact their sense of embodiment as sexual and spiritual selves.

### **Theme 5 – Evolving views of Spirituality and Sexuality**

This final emergent theme represents the changes and evolving views that many of the participants spoke about regarding spirituality and sexuality. Many participants spoke about the influence of other Christian female voices and other spiritual perspectives that have impacted the way they think about their sexuality and spirituality. Therapy as a safe place also emerged under this theme as a space for participants to dialogue and sort through the questions that arise for them regarding their sexuality and spirituality, as well as the integration of sexual experience and pleasure. All of these played a role in the lives of participants, producing this final emergent theme.

*New/changed views on sexuality and the body.* All twelve participants expressed a change in their views around sexuality and the body as a positive factor in their individual, relational and spiritual lives. For some, it was more about a returning somewhat to original viewpoints around sexuality prior to their involvement in the Evangelical church or acquiring a new and evolving perspective on sexuality apart from the teachings they received from the church. Murr (2013) notes that in her study those part of the LGBTQ+ community and the Christian church stated that it was moving beyond their beliefs, including adjusting their theology, finding other queer people of faith and rejecting the authority of Christian leadership to be influential in developing a more affirming spirituality.

For Angela, the participant we met earlier who came from a rather body positive and sex positive Christian home, the slight changes and evolutions around sexuality appeared to surface more now that she is married and how her perspective around masturbation and body image relate to her and her partner. This was still a positive experience for Angela, and it was evident from her story that her own sexual experiences and perspectives have remained quite consistent regardless of some of the teachings she inherited from the church. The role that her parents played in her life and how they spoke about sexuality and the human body appeared to have a more lasting positive impact on Angela compared to that of the church, which is an important difference to take note of.

For the other participants however, it was a much more evident evolution and change that took place around differing views of their sexuality and body. For Holly, embodiment practices and viewing her sexuality as part of her spirituality has changed quite drastically for her. She notes:

Well because I'm learning that my body is not like a different, not like separate from me, it is me. That in and of itself is connected to spirituality like that's the whole practice of embodiment. And now I'm learning to say like "she" instead of it when I reference my body and how that little change can totally shift how I feel about myself and spirituality is how I feel about myself and feel connected and if I feel more connected. Like sexuality is a way to be connected to myself now instead of shamed or whatever. Like it's just totally changed to more of an inward practice that an outward.

***Integration of masturbation and self-pleasure.*** Ten of the twelve participants spoke about the way that masturbation and self-pleasure has been or has become an embodied practice for them, a way to connect to themselves, their bodies, sexuality and sense of pleasure. For some, this was also an act that allowed them to feel empowered within themselves and confident in their sexuality, and with their partners. They also spoke about the physical and emotional benefits of masturbation as well (i.e., less anxiety, stress reliever, sense of calm, aid in sleep, reveals how one experiences pleasure). Research supports that masturbation has helped to increase comfort with one's own body, decreasing anxiety and improving sexual satisfaction between partners (Coleman, 2003). Meghan spoke about how for her masturbation has been a way to feel connected to her body and sense of self, similar to the ways exercise helps her to get into her body. She states:

So also through masturbation which is for me...there are many reasons that I masturbate, and you know from like stress release, from trying to fall asleep, but a lot of I think it's also exploratory and also helps me get into my body because I find like you know if I haven't exercised if I haven't done yoga, if I haven't etc. etc. then I can become very

disconnected from my body and it really helps me be present in my body and like it feels like I am taking care of myself...and it's fun.

For Lauren, she expresses how her view of masturbation has evolved over the years and how it has more recently fit into her view of who God is as well. She notes:

I feel really good about masturbation. I'm like that's an amazing thing you can do...But I know that it's kind of like, fifteen years in the making view, so if it was me fifteen years ago in the church I would have been like "no masturbation is wrong", that's like, for whatever reason, I can't even remember the reason they gave, "masturbation is bad and God doesn't want you to do it". And then, it's been a slow thing where I'm like "maybe masturbation is okay, it's definitely not this like terrible sin that everyone is like making it out to be". And now I'm at the place where there is nothing wrong with masturbation, it's a totally human thing to do, and there shouldn't be some associated sin with it. And I would say that my view of God has sort of changed in the same way. I used to think God would be completely against it, and now I would say my view of God has sort of changed in the same way...

For Elizabeth, masturbation has also become an act of self-exploration and getting in touch with her own sexuality to begin with. However, she states that there is still quite a bit of shame attached to it for her:

It's (masturbation) such a, such a gift to humanity honestly. It just ties into the idea of pleasure you know like being curious about my body and my sexuality growing up and then feeling instantly shameful for even thinking about exploring that. It totally built in through my understanding of my sexuality and thinking I was asexual I had completely blocked off my sexuality altogether, so masturbation was completely off the table.... And

then when I started to become sexually active, I had no idea about my own pleasure because I didn't have that opportunity to explore myself and know what I wanted. I didn't know what I was comfortable with and so in the last few years that's totally transformed because of mostly masturbation and the opportunity to really get to know myself. And like every time I have to unpack my shame and guilt and I have a feeling that's going to go on for a long time.

Elizabeth's experience is certainly not uncommon and as Coleman (2003) states, most of the harmful effects of masturbation come from the guilt so often associated with the behaviour not the behaviour itself; the religious condemnation towards masturbation continues to be a contributing factor here.

*Therapy as a safe space.* Six of the twelve participants spoke about the role that therapy has played in each of their journey's. Going to therapy provided them with a safe place to dialogue and work through issues around sexuality and embodiment, while also providing them with tools to work through the shame that some of them carry. Harris (2005) articulates this well by stating, "Finding safe and free spaces to speak together about sexuality, beyond the gaze of adults, the state and commercial interests, has become a priority amongst many young women" (p. 42). Lauren states that therapy has allowed for her to talk about these issues in a way that allowed for her to share more freely during the interview. She notes, "I think if it had been my first time sharing some of these things it would have been very, very daunting, and like hard to do, but I've literally been unpacking a lot of this stuff in therapy these days."

Holly also expressed how working with a trauma informed therapist has been incredibly formative for her in her own journey. She states:

I started therapy and it was funny because like for a time, I had a terrible counselor who just threw like mindfulness and gratitude at me, and then through a family friend got the name of a trauma therapist who identified as a Christian but like didn't shout it from the rooftops. And it was such a good fit and so nonjudgmental and like for two or three years now I've been with her and its sort of like since that started, I've become more of who I am and it's like exceedingly different from who I used to be. And it It's just like crazy.

Christine spoke about how she began therapy due to the grief she was experiencing in her life, which then led to an unpacking of other topics. She notes:

Therapy started as a as a need to heal from grief. I lost both of my matriarchs, well I would say two and then a third, my great aunt was our third and lost all three of them in two- and a-bit years. We lost all three of them in 18 months. So, it was a very heavy period of grief. And then our church, the church that we were part of, split and that was really painful and so there's just it's been like years of grief to therapy and then I was like I know once I start there there's going to be all kinds of other things. And it's been an incredibly healing journey for me in terms of coming home to my whole self, and my body.

She continues regarding her work in therapy, "And I feel like that's kind of been the journey self-acceptance and like undoing the shaming narratives and rewriting the scripts of self-love and self-acceptance it has been work".

*New/changed views of God and spirituality.* For all twelve of the participants, differing views and perspectives about God and spirituality were mentioned. These views were influenced by other voices, perspectives and their own lived experience. Aune (2008) notes that as women's lives have changed through secularization, feminism and gender equality over the decades,

women's approach to traditional Christianity has also shifted. Aune (2008) writes, "This has occurred parallel to women's flight from the churches; as women's lives become more 'subjectivized', they find that traditional Christianity no longer works for them so turn to more holistic forms of spirituality" (p. 280). Davis (2019) also states that one of the main reasons that people leave church and disaffiliate with the Christian faith is that they stop believing in one or more of the major tenets of the Christian faith, and though they maintain a belief in a higher power and may engage in spiritual practices and rituals, they may no longer embrace the core beliefs of the Christian tradition. The twelve women in this study noted that their evolving views of God and spirituality impacted the way they related to their sexuality as well. Holly describes her experience of the intersectionality of the two in this way:

Well, I think where I'm at now it's not so much me like discounting God to move forward to healthy sexuality it's me actually changing my view of God to include healthy sexuality because that's like his/her intent, their intent. Because I think it's so much better than what I was taught, and I think that for me like there's way more I feel like...I mean I could totally walk up to the pulpit and be like God blesses the fact that I got a vibrator. Like I truly believe that. I TRULY believe that.

Diana also describes how some of her lifestyle choices also changed with her evolving views of her faith. She notes:

And then you know going through a lot of the faith changes that I did, my husband and I ended up living together before we got married. And in my you know deconstruction that fit well, and it made a lot of sense and it was really healthy move for the two of us.

For Elizabeth she notes that the unity, harmony, and cohesion she experiences within herself today is due to the change in her own spiritual life, which has been very separate from the Evangelical church. She states:

I would say that any unity within me or any integration is completely separate from my experiences in the Pentecostal church. I mean, for as long as I can remember there have been doubts and questions and discomforts with my understanding of the Evangelical church and Christianity and so those compartments and distinct separations have been going on for a long time. Whether that be the identity or the re-learning, unlearning that I've been doing since changing my spirituality has been very yeah, that's where the cohesion comes from.

A number of participants also mentioned the role that language plays in forming the way one experiences or views God. The use of female pronouns for God was mentioned in the way their spirituality and view of God has evolved and been challenged. Meghan spoke about this directly by saying:

And then also I think the reason that the pronouns are so important to me is because it ties back to the idea that we have to hide and that women are so hidden even in the language that's used. And language is a part of how you create reality and if women don't exist in the language and even if a woman is speaking from a pulpit but then only using male pronouns than like I don't know, does she even exist!

*Influence of other spiritual perspectives.* Nine of the twelve participants expressed how engaging and adopting other spiritual perspectives positively influenced the way that they relate to God, their spirituality, and their sexuality. A number of participants noted the influence that

therapist, writer, and researcher Dr. Hillary McBride has played in their lives, specifically around integrating one's sexuality and embodiment within their spirituality. Christine spoke directly to the way that Hillary McBride's voice has influenced her:

And Hillary McBride is a psychologist. I love Hillary. She has been instrumental; I feel like she has been my therapist before I had a therapist. And just understanding the healing from both and realizing how much of my internalized shame about my body came from just teachings, patriarchal teachings culturally religious teachings that are steeped in patriarchy, white supremacy and colonialism that tells women that their bodies are to be suppressed and to be demonized...

Holly also spoke of how McBride's influence also opened her up to other Christian perspectives on these issues, which proved to be formative for her as well. She states:

I follow Hillary McBride but like yes, she's amazing and embodiment... And so I was listening to podcasts and she like prescribes masturbation to some of her clients as a way for them to learn to love themselves and I was like that that is amazing can we please can we somehow do this to the church or... So, her and like some other people who are really just like they sort of in a shocking way are just like "Have you considered this?!" like have you considered this, or have you ever considered the ways that the Bible was used, why you just implicitly believe that's how it should use or how it came to be.

Meghan also expressed how for her, all of the positive associations she has had with religion or spirituality has come from outside of the church and how that has influenced the way she sees the world and her role as a woman in it. She notes:

And then also like back to the note about pronouns, is like I didn't hear that first in the church, I first heard God referred to a woman in Black Feminist Literature. The fact that

you know all of my evolution as it comes to religion and my spirituality has come from, any positive association, has come from outside of the church.

Engaging with other spiritual perspectives and theological views, opened up participants to a more expansive and embodied spirituality and faith. Murr (2013) supports this in her own study stating that to find a more affirming spirituality, deconstructing and reconstructing one's belief systems was necessary. It was through this deconstruction and reconstruction that individuals reported that their faith had felt stronger and their spirituality was more integrated into their daily lives (Murr, 2013).

### **Summary of Theme 5**

This final emergent theme describes the way participants' views of spirituality and faith changed and evolved to include a healthier sexuality and more embodied sexual identity. Through their evolving and changed views of sexuality, the integration of masturbation, utilizing therapy as a safe space to explore and discuss the topics of sexuality, and engaging with different spiritual perspectives and practices, many women in this study expressed a more "freeing" and healthy spirituality and sexuality. Claney et al., (2020) suggests, along with previous research, that a healthy sexuality comes from an internal sense of congruence within the self and thus the conflict experienced among many Evangelical women is that this integration has not always been presented as a possibility or even acceptable.

### **Summary: A final look at the five emergent themes**

The five emergent themes that surfaced from the data collection and analysis process all pointed to significant experiences that each participant had. As can be noted through the direct quotations and examples above, each woman describes the way in which she related and currently relates to her sexuality and body. Each participant took us on a journey through the

ways the Evangelical church has impacted the way they relate to themselves in this particular way. Each theme looked at how the participants experienced the phenomenon of the Evangelical church and the role that other voices and spiritual influences played in their journey towards wholeness and integration. These themes have also been supported by the existing literature surrounding the topics of religion, sexuality, and embodiment and the ways these intersect and inform women's lives and identities.

Through the felt shame around the female body and sexual experience, the dialogue around female sexuality, sources of identity, disintegration and disembodiment, and the evolving views of spirituality and sexuality, each participant provided honest and authentic descriptions of their unique story within each theme. It is important to turn to the existing literature around these themes to explore the ways in which there are consistencies, variances and newfound insights this study contributed to the field of psychotherapy. The next section will also outline a proposed modality and framework that may help psychotherapists and women at large to integrate, heal, and reframe learnt messaging surrounding their sexuality and bodies as women.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### **Review and Interpretation of the Findings**

This study sought out to gain insight and knowledge around the way women experience their sexuality and bodies within a Canadian Evangelical context. By interviewing twelve women, who currently are or who had in the past participated in an Evangelical church setting, noteworthy findings were discovered by the intimate telling of these women's experiences. The influence that community life and faith communities have on young women are noteworthy especially in identity formation. As Sharma (2008) notes, "Close-knit church communities are

relational systems that give women structure and support for confronting the various life and identity issues that may arise..." (p. 349). Through the insight of feminist theorists however, light can be shed on how the gendered construction of sexuality within these church communities can shape one's identity and limit behaviours and experiences (Sharma, 2008).

The silence around female sexuality is not a new concept, but rather it is affirmed by researchers in the field. Welles (2005) notes that for boys they often learn about masturbation from peers or siblings, while females learn about masturbation by accident, if at all. And girls typically are taught about their own genitalia much later than boys, which is often accompanied by embarrassment and negativity (Ussher, 1989 as cited in Welles, 2005). This being the case for young women in general, outside of the religious sphere, the silence around sexuality and the female body continues to be even more silenced and shamed through the Eve/Virgin Mary dichotomy and mind/body dualism adopted in Judeo-Christian culture and beliefs (Greer, 2016). Similarly, in their study, Claney et al. (2020) note that the majority of their participants felt as though they had a lack of support regarding sex education from parents and churches, thus limiting their exposure to sex while also lacking an openness in talking about sexuality and sexual issues in general.

Though there has been significant literature regarding women, sexuality, and religion, there is very little research regarding women's sexuality and embodiment within an Evangelical, and specifically Canadian Evangelical, context. That being said, the results of this research felt so expansive that the discussion portion of this paper will only be able to touch on the more major themes as it pertains to the study.

**Shame, Identity, Purity, and Virginit**y. Some of the main findings of this research included the shame experienced around the female body and sexual experience and how that

related to one's spirituality and identity. This is supported by existing literature as well, specifically through the study conducted by Claney et al., (2020) where sex for women impacted their sense of worth and identity. Many of the participants in this current study spoke about the ways in which shame pervaded their experience of sexuality and sense of embodiment, while also influencing their spiritual lives and sense of identity. Shadbolt (2009) affirms these findings by stating that sexuality and shame have been closely linked throughout the history of civilization. As cited in Shadbolt (2009), Tomkins (1987) notes how within Christianity specifically, sexuality has been hijacked into the religious and moral spheres of life and existence. He notes:

Not only has sexuality turned from shame and guilt, but a massive burden of terror has been added to the sexual act...it is now above all else a sign of disobedience to the will of God, demanding that the individual risk a variety of punishments, including an eternity in hell. Shame and terror are now tightly fused (p. 167).

Relatedly, women in the religious sphere often receive messages around their sexuality in a way that highlights sex as a gift that ought to be revered and treasured highly, somehow impacting the worth of women (Claney et al., 2020). This was evident in Kristina's story when she shared that she "might need to give up heaven... for this temporary, worldly relationship." Along with Elizabeth who expressed how her "ticket to heaven is dependent on my purity." Notably though, identity and worth surrounding sex, for women in particular, is not just a message received within the religious sphere, but also in the social context's women find themselves in. "Women were taught that there was a particular way of being a sexual woman that was preferred by culture and not reaching these standards had implications for a woman's worth" (Claney et al., 2002, p. 194). The issue presented here, is that whether it be within the religious sphere or social

contexts, women's sexuality continues to be tied to worth and identity in a way that feels like a "double standard" as expressed by participants in this current study, as well as mentioned by Claney et al., (2020) and Blum (2015).

Shadbolt (2009) discusses the way in which shame has historically been understood to have its roots in relationship and how one experiences shame through the shaming behaviour of the "other". However, when considering how women have oppressed themselves internally, and even in the examples of internalised homophobia, it can be seen how the "shamer" is no longer just external but internal as well (Shadbolt, 2009). This internalization can and often does result in hiding, disembodiment, and fear, as seen within this study; this is also supportive of findings by Blum (2015). Many women throughout this study described the internalized nature of shame that lives within their bodies and emotions even after being able to rationally let go of certain beliefs. Participants described how they were and are able to let go of and challenge the beliefs around the "temptation" of their bodies or that perhaps they have "gone too far" sexually and therefore "ruined" their chances at a happy marriage. However, the internal shaming voice that appeared to surface in their emotions and physiological or somatic responses still continued.

Yeah, of course shame after any kind of sexual experience, I have to be very intentional about remaining embodied and not disconnecting, dissociating at all because of shame and because of because of that relationship I have with my body and my past. There have been many times when I've broken down during or after sexual experience, just completely overwhelmed with the negative voices in my head, teachings and the feeling of being a sinner, of being condemned...it's very thick. (Elizabeth)

It is interesting to note how the concepts of purity and virginity are linked to identity and sense of worth for many of the women of this study, which appeared to be gender specific. The

“Virgin” and “Whore” archetypes have been part of the collective consciousness since Eve and the Virgin Mary, as seen in the Christian biblical context (Greer, 2016). Unfortunately, for many Christian women, these two archetypes have become the models of what one should strive to be and to steer away from. Among the Evangelical community, as mentioned above, purity and virginity are held in such high esteem that for a woman, when it comes to virginity, she can quite simply only be a *virgin* or a *whore* (Herrmann, 2020). A binary dichotomy between these two has emerged and run rampant within society at large, and more specifically within the Christian context, leaving very little room for nuance and other important contributions to one's identity.

Greer (2016) writes, “The Madonna/Whore binary is a product of mind/body dualism, specifically the Judeo-Christian version of mind/body dualism” (p. 2). Greer (2016) continues by outlining the development of the original Whore by oversexualizing Eve:

As the first woman in Christian theology, Eve is viewed not only as the ‘mother of mankind’ (a status that will later be reassigned to the Virgin Mary) but also as revealing the true, original nature of women. It was this consideration of Eve as the representative of women in their most natural form that made the sexualization and demonization of Eve such a powerful tool for female subjugation in Christian society. As Shelly Colette remarks, “Eve is an archetype of femininity, and as such, representations of Eve are powerful voices in the cultural construction of what constitutes “woman””. However, within the text of the Bible little is actually said about Eve specifically. Thus, the conceptualization of Eve as a hypersexual temptress that developed through early Christianity, the Middle Ages, and modern society was purely a development of theologians building upon the vague biblical text to craft a narrative that aligned with their misogynistic and patriarchal society and worldview. (p. 6)

The experiences of these twelve women within their Evangelical context spoke into the ways in which their purity and virginity determined aspects of their identity and worthiness. The enormous emphasis put on women saving themselves for marriage and remaining pure were, according to them, a discussion that focused almost solely on the women and was ultimately her responsibility. Similar to the findings of Claney et al., (2020), women felt that they were predominantly responsible for the sexual temptation of men and ultimately the basis for sexual purity. Their study made this conclusion: "Although the basis of this message may be a negative perception about men's sexual self-control, the women highlighted how this affected women's expression of sexuality, particularly in terms of physical presentation (i.e., modesty)" (Claney et al., 2020, p. 194).

**Disembodiment, disintegration and demonization of the body.** The mind/body dualism has also been reflected in the findings of this study in the way women experienced their bodies as secondary to the spiritual and innately sinful in nature. Christianity has largely maintained a dualistic approach to the body and spirit, which has had many effects including on one's relationship to sexuality (Horn et al., 2005). Sexuality has often been summed up to being an "earthly, carnal and, therefore, sinful experience" and has been limited to genital sex (Horn et al., 2005, p. 81). According to Blum (2015), which supports the findings of this research, emotions were not to be trusted within Evangelical teachings, as they were seen to be antagonistic towards that of the spirit. Women have learnt to dissociate from their own bodies simply because their "internal compass" was deemed as flawed and untrustworthy (Blum, 2015, p. 242). The experiences of disembodiment among the participants were evident in the way they spoke about their need for embodiment practices to heal, along with the disintegration they felt between their physical and spiritual lives. The women expressed a lack of trust within

themselves and many shared a deep desire to have a sense of control and trust within their own bodies and selves.

The effects of this dichotomy on the women in this study often showed up in the way they engaged with their sexuality but also in the pursuits of any physical pleasure or enjoyment and how that contributed to feelings of disembodiment and a disembodied spirituality. A number of the participants spoke about “dying to one’s sinful nature”, a verse found in the Bible and often taught within their Evangelical church setting. As stated in Clane et al, (2020) any sexual feelings experienced by women were considered bad and should not be experienced until married. This notion of “flesh” provided a vague explanation of what the flesh actually entails. As noted above, the flesh has often been reduced to the physical and sexual nature of a person and so it was the case for many of the participants in this study. The issue with this reductionism, is that it really only portrays one interpretation of the biblical text and therefore is often universally prescribed within a church context. And second, it reduces sexuality strictly to involving genitals. Horn et al., (2005) writes:

Within this dualistic perspective, sexuality has often been equated with the activity of genital sex. However, the literature of sexual theology or embodiment theology has challenged this traditional perception and has suggested that sexuality is much more of an integral and holistic part of the human experience than the activity of genital sex. It is the source of our capacity for relationship, for emotional and erotic connection, for intimacy, for passion and for transcendence. It is a holistic expression of our human experience as *body-selves*. (p. 82)

In a more holistic view of the sexual and spiritual person, one’s sensuality, sexuality, and physicality are not separate from the spiritual dimension but are in fact the way in which one is

able to experience connection, even erotic connection, with God (Horn et al., 2005). One only needs to look at the writings of Teresa of Avila and her experiences of such an intimate and erotic connection to the Divine to witness this sense of embodiment and integration (Kluge, 2014).

I would also suggest that this is the very meaning of incarnational living. Within the Christian tradition, even the Evangelical Christian tradition, Christ, the God-Man, is the very representation of the Divine in flesh. In this physical form he is God incarnate. To encourage disembodiment, to demonize the physical nature of women (and men for that matter), whether intentionally or unintentionally, is to actually violate the very orthodoxy Christianity sets out to proclaim. God became embodied, the spiritual became physical, and it was through the body of a woman.

**Intergenerational dialogue and the role of mothers.** The intergenerational dialogue and silence regarding sexuality and the female body was starkly evident among the participants' stories in this study. For many of the participants, it was through the influence and voices of other, older females in their lives that informed their views on female sexuality. One of the most common themes that emerged from this study was the *silence* among older generations of women surrounding these topics informing the way the current generation of women engage in these topics within the Evangelical community. For the participants in this study, it was rare to hear or see older women within their religious context talk openly or embody their sexuality in a personal way. Welles (2005) notes that in a study conducted by Thompson (1990), the girls who reflected with pleasure upon their sexual experiences and who were tuned into their bodily pleasure at the time of intercourse also reported that they spoke honestly and openly with their own mothers about sexuality.

The role of parents, and mothers specifically, were significant contributors to the way the participants received messages regarding their sexuality. It is important to note that they were also parents who identified as Evangelical Christians as well. In the case of Angela, both of her parents were positive influences around sexuality and body positivity. As Angela shared her story, it was evident that there was open dialogue and, though sex was encouraged for marriage, sexuality appeared not to be a taboo topic within her home life growing up. Angela's experience was more of the anomaly in this study compared to the other eleven participants. As cited by Welles (2005), Resneck-Sannes (1991) links women's earliest experiences of shame to the interactions she has with her parents. This highlights the influential role parents within the Evangelical context can have, even alongside the voices of the church community regarding sexuality and embodiment, for better or for worse.

The role of the mother regarding the women's education and internalized messaging around sexuality was also a significant finding within this study. This is consistent with existing literature which indicates that the mother plays a significant role in introducing her daughters to religion and the religious messages surrounding these topics (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Noted by a number of participants, there was either very little to no discussion about sexuality from their mothers or there was a very strong emphasis on the importance of purity and virginity. Welles (2005) wrote, "Women often described their mothers as poor role models in terms of sexual empowerment for women" (p. 34). And "Mothers were perceived as withholding information; being unable to accept and acknowledge their daughters' sexuality and failing to value their own sexuality" (Daniluk, 1997, p. 110 as cited in Welles, 2005, p. 34). Welles (2005) indicates that the role of the mother is quite powerful when it comes to a young woman's relationship with her sexuality, stating "These mothers are breaking the culture's silence by

talking about and therefore validating their daughters' sexual feelings. Adolescent girls are open to learning from and relying upon their mothers for support...but there needs to be a nonjudgmental understanding of reality of their experience" (p. 34).

**Lateral suppression of sexuality: From women towards women.** Through the findings of this research, it was particularly interesting to reflect on the role of women towards other women regarding sexuality and embodiment in the Evangelical context. Though it is evident through the existing literature and historical references that the patriarchal structures within the Evangelical church and Christianity at large have very much influenced the suppression of women and do continue to do so, it appears that the perpetuation of that suppression has often been at the hands of *women towards women* within this religious and spiritual context. This lateral suppression of sexuality from women towards women can be described through the Female Control Theory (FCT) as mentioned in Baumeister & Twenge (2002).

According to Baumeister & Twenge (2002), they define the suppression of female sexuality as "a pattern of cultural influence by which girls and women are induced to avoid feeling sexual desire and to refrain from sexual behaviour" (p.167). As mentioned earlier, historically and politically the patriarchal systems women find themselves in have undoubtedly played a role in the overall oppression of women, which relates to the Male Control Theory (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). The reasons to consider the role of FCT in the suppression of female sexuality is important. While both theories share a view that suppressing female sexuality may reduce the chances of infidelity, the focus of MCT and FCT differ. Male control theory views the female partner as the source of danger, whereas in female control theory, women see *other* women as the source of danger and ultimately as a threat (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

In the case of Angela, though she expressed that she never felt guilt or shame about being sexually active, it was something she felt she could not share with her Christian friends due to the sexual nature of the story. This supports what Sharma (2008) notes when she states, “Because of the ‘force’ of the community, some young women did not share anything about sexual events with church peers but kept them hidden” (p. 352). Also stated by Sharma (2008), Christian women were found to police each other according to the way their faith communities constructed gender and sexuality. This sense of “accountability” within the church context means that women not only think of themselves when contemplating sexual behaviour and attitudes but are watchful of the words and actions of their Christian peers (Sharma, 2008). Meghan spoke of a situation in her own church reflecting on the ways she felt a lateral suppression between women towards women by the choice of language used when talking about God:

I volunteered for a time to help write curriculum for Canadian Baptist women and so a part of this curriculum was writing Bible study text prompts...okay this is like a wild situation, but so I wrote one that was like very tepid, like tepid for me, about pronouns and it was just like “hey wouldn’t it be a fun activity to read these Bible verses using female pronouns” and I brought it to like the working group of women and they just were like “no like we can't do this”....And so, it was just like there was so much cognitive dissonance happening that I couldn't do it anymore! That's why I left really, like that was so disheartening and honestly a devastating day for me where I was like I tried this tiny little step to bring people on this journey and they can't, they weren't willing to go on this journey with me...

The reasons for this lateral suppression of women towards women is an area for future research, especially how the suppression expresses itself within a religious community and why. However,

I propose that this too is an effect of the intergenerational shame and a lack of sexual/spiritual integration within the lives of older generations of women. It may be possible that they too are afraid, not willing, or are not capable of providing space for the freedom and integration of the women coming after them. Perhaps then, the very lateral movement of women towards women perpetuating the suppression of female sexuality and embodiment is the same movement needed to break that perpetuating cycle. From the findings of this study and the ways in which participants learnt from the different perspectives of other female voices, it can be assumed this may be an important starting point.

### **Clinical Implications for Psychotherapists & A Proposed Therapeutic Framework**

The findings from this study provide helpful insights moving forward for women, psychotherapists, mental health professionals, and spiritual leaders seeking to work with women who look to integrate and move toward greater wholeness in their psychological, physical, and spiritual lives. In reflecting on the participant's stories and experiences, some of the important elements needed going forward were evident through the participants own contributions.

Through the fifth emergent theme, *Evolving Views of Spirituality and Sexuality*, the importance of allowing for the participants to share their own narratives and to integrate new narratives around their bodies, sexuality, and spirituality was paramount to feelings of freedom and health. I propose that through Narrative therapy, recognizing the stages of deconstruction and reconstruction, the implementation of embodiment practices, and the importance of including sexuality and sexual issues as part of our intake assessments as psychotherapists can provide further healing in a therapeutic context.

*Narrative therapy for sexual/spiritual integration.* Through the words and experiences of the participants in this study, the majority of the women spoke about the role that alternative

narratives and different perspectives played in their own integration journey. Participants expressed the ways in which the Evangelical church culture and the influence of their own parental figures who were also part of the Evangelical culture informed the way they related to their bodies, sexuality, and spiritual lives.

Narrative therapy is focused on the belief that the problems in people's lives are often a result from the social, cultural, and political contexts they are situated in (Payne, 2006 as cited in Ricks et al., 2014). The ways in which stories manifest in people's lives are usually a result of the influences from an individual's family, peers, relationships, and sociocultural or religious voices (Payne, 2006 as cited in Ricks et al., 2014). Narrative therapists work to help clients externalize the problem, by separating the problem from the client's themselves and to help client's work on their relationship with the problem (White & Epston, 1990 as cited in Ricks et al., 2014). Cobb & Negash (2010) write that, "In narrative therapy, clients' existing problems are related to their personal narrative, and changing a client's personal narrative will also change the problem" (p. 100, as cited in Ricks et al., 2014). For the participants in this current study, and for those who will seek therapy coming from similar backgrounds and experiences, it will first be through allowing space for these women to share their narratives (the inherited and ingrained ones and also allowing for their own, perhaps more silenced ones) that will provide a level of healing.

Through sharing one's story openly and honestly, without the fear of judgement, clients are able to allow themselves to be truly seen and begin again to trust themselves and heal in the process. Research shows that it is often the client's perception of the therapist as an empathic individual, rather than the therapist's behaviour, that creates greater success in the therapeutic process (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). The safe space that therapists provide, especially as non-

judgmental and empathic, will be of utmost importance working with clients who come from these types of experiences. Working with clients here may look like helping them to reauthor and reframe their stories regarding their sexuality and female bodies in a way that feels authentic to *who they are* and not who they have been taught or told to be (Phipps & Vorster, 2011). This may also be done through writing out how they would like to live and feel within their bodies and through their sexuality, allowing them to see and experience how congruent that is with their current felt experience. Though it will be important to hold space for women and the past influences that have informed their narratives, it will be essential to aid them in integrating the old with new, allowing for a sense of wholeness and cohesion within them.

*Understanding deconstruction and reconstruction in therapy.* Those coming into the therapeutic space who have undergone similar experiences to those of the participants in this study may find themselves using the term “deconstruction”. The participants who noted that they were currently deconstructing their beliefs, or had in the past, refer to this as a time of pulling apart the beliefs they were taught regarding the Christian faith and how that relates to issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Spickard (2015) notes that deconstruction often looks like challenging the way things are typically done within the traditional Christian tradition and breaking down hierarchies. This stage of deconstruction can also be described by periods of questioning, inner turmoil, and often great suffering due to the isolation one may feel while in or once having left their faith community (Davis, 2019).

Providing clients with other possible narratives and allowing them to hear and consider other voices in the realms of spirituality and sexuality may be beneficial while they seek to reconstruct their own narratives around what it means to be a sexual and spiritual individual. The period of reconstruction, if so desired by the client, may be nurtured and fostered in and through

the space of therapy, and talk therapy specifically. Often reconstruction of one's beliefs and values look like a lessening of the either/or complex and adopting a more both/and mentality and allowing for more paradox in one's life (Davis, 2019). As Davis states, (2019) "Persons in this stage begin to foster a deep appreciation for dialogue and conversational exploration, even if no conclusions are drawn or no particular 'destination' is reached" (p. 81).

*Embodiment practices.* From the findings of this study, it was also evident that the integration of embodiment practices is essential in helping women to connect to themselves in body and spirit. This included masturbation and self-pleasure for the majority of them. I am suggesting here that encouraging women to get into their bodies, however that may look or feel most comfortable to them, is crucial to connecting themselves to their person - their sexual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual person. According to Blum (2015), "embodiment entails congruence of body, mind, and spirit, an internal harmony stemming from an open and honest position in which one's own disparate feelings, desires, and inclinations are brought into awareness and owned, as opposed and disowned" (p. 249). Experiencing pleasure, in whatever capacity, is one of the most beautiful parts of being human. Sexual pleasure and any form of physical pleasure, exercise, or comfort can be a way for women to experience their bodies in a positive, strengthening, and empowering way.

Teaching embodiment often comes from modelling embodiment within a safe and trusting relational dynamic (i.e., therapeutic alliance) where the individual is encouraged to listen for their own internal reactions and responses to phenomena (Blum, 2015). Not only is embodiment taught or discovered through words, but through movement (i.e., yoga, running), mindfulness, breath work, and self-soothing (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2017). Though this is not a prescriptive mandate, nor is any form of therapy meant to be prescriptive or universal, getting

to know each client and how they will experience pleasure, stress relief, and positive feelings in their body will take curiosity, active listening, and perhaps even trial and error when it comes to encouraging embodiment practices.

***Implementing sexuality/sexual issues and spirituality within intake assessments.***

Finally, I propose that as psychotherapists, we must be able to engage with issues surrounding sexuality and spirituality. Though not every client we see will be bringing with them issues or goals specifically involving sexuality and spirituality, I am suggesting here that we will encounter these topics and perhaps ought to be looking through the lens of a psychospiritual-sexual approach if we want to tend to the whole person. A holistic approach to therapy involves seeing the person in front of us as a sexual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual being (Latorre, 2000). There are topics that remain taboo or somewhat uncomfortable to dialogue about, even within our therapeutic contexts and often those topics include: death, sexuality, and spirituality (Shadbolt 2009). There are a number of possible reasons that sexuality remains a difficult topic to discuss, including but not limited to lack of training, therapists' issues around sexuality in their own personal life, and levels of comfort within the therapist (Timm, 2009). However, human sexuality is a universal aspect to life and positive sexual relationships and sexual function are signs of well-being and positive quality of life (Lee et al., 2016).

Existential therapist Irvin Yalom said this, "If you are not talking about death with your patients at some point during their psychotherapy, you are not doing psychotherapy." (Shadbolt, 2009 p. 163). Shadbolt (2009) goes on to say that she has come to think of sexuality in the same way, "If I am not speaking at some point about sexuality with my client, I am not doing depth psychotherapy" (p. 163). I deeply resonate with this and would add a third element: If I am not

talking about spirituality at some point during psychotherapy, I am not doing depth psychotherapy.

Sexuality, spirituality, and death are topics we do not always like to address, and as Shadbolt (2009) suggests, the avoidance of these topics is likely not intentional but reveal the “traumatic,” or as I would say, the vast and mysterious nature that they carry. They are all topics that we do not get to fully understand, thus we likely feel incompetent to address them with our clients. They point to the universal experiences both client and therapist encounter. However, this is what can nudge us toward such topics. By our own continuing education as therapists on such topics, and hopefully our own personal therapeutic processes, we may be able to sit with our client's in the mystery and complexity of such issues with more empathy, grace, and ease.

### **Limitations**

Through the use of IPA in this study, the limitations of IPA are to be considered here. While IPA prides itself on being able to look at the subjective experiences of individuals in an incredibly rich way, there are also some limitations due to that strength that are worth mentioning (Tuffour, 2017). Critics of IPA have questioned whether or not this approach is able to accurately capture the experiences and the meaning of those experiences, rather than just the opinions of it (Tuffour, 2017). It is questioned whether or not the researcher and the participants are able to have the proper communication skills to be able to capture the nuances of such experiences, thus impacting the way these experiences are interpreted (Tuffour, 2017). Similarly, as noted in Clarke (2009) it is debated whether or not IPA is able to provide explanations of phenomena. This point was taken seriously, throughout the data collection and analysis process, as the researcher was conscious of the complexity of this research and the questions being explored.

The issue of language here is also something to consider. Words chosen to describe phenomena may have various meanings and connotations for different people, however this is something I would argue for all methods of research as an area of limitation. Is it fully possible to capture the meaning and nuances of the human experience through language that is so often limited? I am not sure that we can; my research particularly sought to capture, as best as one could, the lived experiences and stories of women through their own words.

Another limitation includes the researcher's bias. I, as the researcher, have lived my own experience within the Evangelical tradition and have experienced how that has impacted my own sexuality and sense of embodiment. Though this is what fuelled my passion and curiosity for this research, it is important to consider that the researcher's bias, though bracketed out as much as possible, was a lens looked through during the stages of this research project. It was important for me to be continually aware of my own biases and check with my participants about their experiences and my interpretations of them in order to be as accurate as possible.

Personality factors were also not considered when conducting this research. Part of the criteria for participants were that they were to consider themselves as individuals who take spirituality seriously. However, one's personality and how that could have contributed to the data was not taken into account. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, Evangelicalism is a very broad Christian tradition including many denominations. It was important that every participant had experience within a Canadian Evangelical church specifically, however due to the broad nature of this Christian tradition, inconsistencies around how participants experienced the Evangelical church may have surfaced.

**Strengths**

This study included a larger sample size than what is typical for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Due to the overwhelming response of women showing interest in the study, the researcher chose twelve participants as a way to gather as much data as possible, to honour the high number of women showing interest in the topic, and to be able to immerse themselves in a variety of experiences so as to complete a robust study on this topic. The large number of participants produced a large amount of data which made it necessary for the researcher to be patient and committed to immersing oneself in the stories of these women, allowing for greater detail and description within the data analysis process.

This study also considers the holism of the person. Looking at the sexual, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of each participant, this research includes how the interconnectedness of these spheres of one's life impact the whole person. It was important for me as the researcher to keep this in mind throughout the study and to show this interconnectedness through the results in order to provide greater insight and applications for the field of psychotherapy. The lived experiences of participants are what make qualitative research profound and an important contribution to research as a whole.

IPA is particularly a valuable approach to research when considering complex, more ambiguous, or emotionally substantial issues (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Through the use of IPA and the interview process, participants are able to recount their own experiences of the phenomenon being studied and their own meaning making processes as much as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Small sample sizes compared to quantitative research allows for a full immersion into the data and the participant's experiences. This is an incredible strength of qualitative research, especially within the field of psychotherapy, as we are working with the

experiences and stories of people. Through this approach to the study, a proposed framework was discussed when considering the clinical implications and how to move forward with these issues and experiences of women.

Mentioned above are practical steps that could be considered within the therapeutic context and field of psychology moving forward. The use of Narrative therapy, understanding the stages of deconstruction and reconstruction, the integration of embodiment practices, and the importance of including sexuality and sexual issues as part of the intake process in therapy. Each of these contributions came directly from the experiences of the participants in this study. Through their sharing of what has contributed to their own healing and sense of wholeness, a framework for implementing change and greater understanding around these issues were brought forth.

### **Implications for future research**

With all research, there is always room for further work to be done in the future. When considering this study in particular, two areas for future research could be explored. First, the lateral movement of women to women regarding the suppression of sexuality ought to be explored more in depth. It became quite clear through this study that although historically and presently the patriarchal systems within the Evangelical church context are potentially the root causes of such suppression, the perpetuation of suppression is often continued through women towards women. This is an interesting finding and something that could and should be explored further.

Secondly, it was very evident that the ways in which the participants spoke about the differing narratives that women received around their bodies and sexuality compared to the men within the Evangelical church. It is my opinion that male sexuality and female sexuality are often

defined and observed in relation to one another. Though this may be changing in our society, historically this has been the case. This was seen within this research through the gendered discussions around sexuality within the church context. The ways in which men were seemingly taught that their sexuality was at the forefront of their identity and therefore needed to be suppressed and controlled has implications for the ways in which men in the Canadian Evangelical context experience their own sexuality and bodies. Where the emphasis for women was on purity, virginity, and becoming a wife, through the participants stories it appeared that the male narratives emphasized the uncontrollable sexual nature of men and that their pleasure was of utmost importance within the heterosexual relationship. How this impacts men and the way that they have learnt to relate to their own sexuality, body, and spirituality are worth considering when doing future research.

### **Conclusions**

This study took an in depth look at the ways in which women within the Canadian Evangelical church have experienced their sexuality and bodies through the teachings, messages, and interpersonal relationships in their lives. This study demonstrated the interconnection between one's spirituality and sexuality and the ways in which the narratives around female sexuality and the female body have informed one's identity. The twelve women in this study took us on a narrative journey, sharing their stories and intimate experiences while in their Evangelical church context and family life. In this way, they informed us of the ways in which they have interpreted and internalized particularly shaming and suppressing narratives.

At the end of every interview, the participants were asked, "*As a woman, how would you like to experience your body and sexuality?*" This question allowed for the women to speak freely about their deepest desires regarding their sexuality and bodies. It displayed the underlying

longings of their human person and desire for wholeness and integration. The answers to this question varied in responses. Some of these responses were as follows: “freely”, “unapologetically”, “with less anxiety”, “with less shame”, “untamed”, “to have control over my own body”, “confidently no matter its shape or size”, “to feel at home in my body”, “with more fluidity and less black and white”. The responses here reflect the participants’ hopes and it is my hope that through this research, further change can be made to help cultivate these felt experiences for women in our clinical work, for ourselves as women and for the women beside us.

This study was not only a passion project for me as the researcher but has become one of the greatest gifts received and journeys to embark on. This study belongs just as much to the participants as it does to me as the researcher. I am indebted to each of them, for their courage and vulnerability in sharing such personal stories of pain, healing, and trauma. Hearing each of them left me both troubled and deeply inspired. The ways in which they have experienced their sexuality and bodies in this particular context panged me, while also leaving me amazed at their resilience and determination in their own healing process.

Through this study, one is able to hear and witness the real stories of twelve women, who likely represent a larger number, deconstructing and reconstructing their sexuality and spirituality: two essential domains of the human experience. The researcher received emails and messages from these participants expressing their gratitude and appreciation for the study and to be able to be a participant in research surrounding this topic. Each one of them expressed how important they felt this topic was to be researched and talked about, leaving the researcher humbled and resolute in the various stages of this study. Thank you to the women who made this

study what it is, for showing up as the remarkable women that you are, and for allowing your story to live in and through your fleshy body and resilient spirit.

“Re-examine all you have been told in a school or church or in any book and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.”

– Walt Whitman

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## Appendix I - REB Ethics Certificate of Approval



UNIVERSITÉ  
SAINT-PAUL  
UNIVERSITY

31-07-2020  
dd-mm-yyyy

Bureau de la recherche et de la déontologie (BRD)  
Office of Research and Ethics (ORE)

### Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) | Certificat d'éthique Research Ethics Board (REB) | Ethics Certificate

**REB File Number** 1360.5/20

<b><u>Last name</u></b>	<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Affiliation</u></b>	<b><u>Role</u></b>
Payne	Melissa	Faculty of Human Sciences	Student-Principal Investigator
Maisha	Buuma	Faculty of Human Sciences	Thesis Supervisor

**Type of project** MA Thesis Project

**Title** The Experiences of Women Regarding Sexuality and Embodiment Within A Canadian Evangelical Context.

<b><u>Approval date</u></b>	<b><u>Expiry Date</u></b>	<b><u>Decision</u></b>
31-07-2020 (dd-mm-yyyy)	30-07-2021 (dd-mm-yyyy)	1 (Approved)

### **Committee comments**

The Research Ethics Board (REB) approved the project.  
The researcher is invited to use the reference number 1360.5/20 when recruiting participants.

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

- 2.** 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.
- 3.** 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.
- 4.** Modifications to the project, information, consent and recruitment documentation must be submitted to the Office of Research and Ethics for approval by the REB.
- 5.** 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.
- 6.** 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.

Louis Perron  
Chair  
Research Ethics Board

1/2

## Appendix II - Recruitment Poster



### A QUALITATIVE STUDY

## EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN REGARDING SEXUALITY & EMBODIMENT WITHIN A CANADIAN EVANGELICAL CONTEXT

Researcher Melissa Payne (M.A. Counselling Candidate) of Saint Paul University needs your participation to gain more understanding and knowledge on how women in the Canadian Evangelical Christian tradition experience their sexuality and bodies.

#### **THIS STUDY LOOKS TO:**

GIVE A VOICE TO WOMEN WITHIN THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION REGARDING THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR SEXUALITY, BODIES AND SPIRITUALITY.  
PROVIDE CLINICIANS, CLERGY AND WOMEN AT LARGE WITH GREATER UNDERSTANDING ON THIS TOPIC.

#### **WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?**

WOMEN AGED 18-35 WHO CURRENTLY PARTICIPATE OR HAVE PREVIOUSLY PARTICIPATED IN THE CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH & WHO CONSIDER SPIRITUALITY IMPORTANT TO THEM.

#### **WHAT IS INVOLVED?**

A ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW (APPROX. 90MINS) WHERE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WILL BE ASKED.  
A FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW WILL TAKE PLACE TO ENSURE RESULTS ARE ACCURATE TO PARTICIPANT'S EXPERIENCE.  
PARTICIPATION IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY, CONFIDENTIAL AND YOU MAY WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY AT ANY TIME.



### **Appendix III– Invitation to Participate**

## **Invitation to Participate**

### **Faculty of Human Sciences**

#### **The Experiences of Women Regarding Sexuality and Embodiment Within a Canadian Evangelical Context**

**Researcher:** Melissa Payne

**Supervisor:** Dr. Buuma Maisha

#### **What is this study about?**

You are being invited to participate in a study looking to explore your experiences regarding sexuality and embodiment within the Canadian Evangelical context. This study is looking to explore the ways in which women have been affected both positively and negatively by the narratives surrounding sexuality, sense of embodiment and spirituality within this specific context.

#### **What will be Expected of Me and How Much Time Will It Take?**

Participants will be expected to discuss their experiences surrounding sexuality and relationship to their bodies within the evangelical church context they currently or previously participated in. Participants will be asked to engage in a face-to-face and one-on-one interview with the researcher, where open ended questions will be asked to reflect on these experiences. These first interviews will take approximately 60-90 minutes, followed by a 30-minute interview to go over the data collected to ensure validity and authenticity.

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

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data collected will be protected by the use of pseudonyms in interviews and by changing any identifying information when reporting the data. Due to the nature of face-to-face interviews, anonymity is not possible in the data gathering phase, however interviewees will remain anonymous in the reporting of findings. Data will be stored on a password protected computer and all data will be destroyed five years after the study's completion.

#### **What Happens If I Want to Withdraw?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no consequences or explanation. Your data will not be used and will be destroyed immediately if

you wish to withdraw from the study. You may also choose to not answer any questions you wish, without withdrawing from the study as well.

### **What Are the Potential Risks and Benefits If I Choose to Participate?**

There are minimal risks to you by participating in this study, including possible emotional or psychological distress when reflecting on and discussing your personal experiences surrounding sexuality, one's relationship to their body, and spirituality. The potential benefits to participating in this study include contributing to the ongoing and needed discourse surrounding women's sexuality, especially within a religious and spiritual context, while also having access to the findings after study completion.

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

If you have any questions regarding this research or are interested in participating in this study please contact Melissa Payne to arrange an interview. You may also contact Ms. Payne's supervisor Dr. Buuma Maisha if you have any questions regarding the study.

## Appendix IV

# Participant Consent Form

**Study title:** The Experiences of Women Regarding Sexuality and Embodiment within a Canadian Evangelical Context

### **Researchers:**

#### **Melissa Payne**

Lead Researcher, M.A candidate  
Counselling, Psychotherapy & Spirituality  
Saint Paul University  
223 Main Street Ottawa, K1S 1C4

#### **Dr. Buuma Maisha**

Thesis Supervisor, Faculty of Human Sciences  
Counselling, Psychotherapy & Spirituality  
Saint Paul University  
223 Main Street Ottawa, K1S 1C4

**Invitation to Participate:** I am being invited to participate in the current study titled, *The Experiences of Women Regarding their Sexuality and Bodies within a Canadian Evangelical Context* conducted by M.A candidate Melissa Payne and supervised by Dr. Buuma Maisha as part of Ms. Payne's master's thesis.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of women in a Canadian Evangelical church context regarding their sexuality and view of their bodies. This study hopes to give a voice to women within this context surrounding these topics and allow for greater discourse among psychotherapists, clergy and women at large.

**Participation:** If you choose to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute one-on-one interview, where the lead researcher Melissa Payne will ask open-ended questions regarding my experience within the Evangelical church, my experience with sexuality and relationship to my body, and my spiritual life presently. A second interview will take place that is less structured to go over the transcript from the first interview to ensure what was recorded was an authentic and honest representation of my responses.

**Risks:** It is important to recognize that through the interview process and reflecting on topics of sexuality and spirituality may cause some emotional distress. If this is the case, I may:

1. Stop the interview at any point
2. Refuse to answer a question and skip to the next
3. Ask the researcher any clarifying questions to make you feel more at ease
4. Be referred to Saint Paul University's Counselling Centre or to the Ottawa Distress Centre if the interview process has caused any emotional or psychological distress to you as the participant. If I am outside of the Ottawa area, I will be referred to the appropriate resources to ensure care and support for me as an individual.

**Benefits:** By participating in this study, I will help continue to give a voice to women in this specific demographic and to women in general, regarding their relationship to their sexuality, bodies and overall spiritual and psychological well-being. I will help to enable further discourse

and research surrounding the ways in which women experience their sexuality within a faith context, and how that affects them as whole persons.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** By participating in this study, I can be assured that all identifying information that I will share, will remain strictly confidential. All data will be kept on a password protected computer, and it is encouraged that I use standard safety measures when corresponding via email by signing out of my account and closing my browser after use. It is important to understand that all information shared throughout this process will be used specifically for Ms. Payne's master's thesis only, and that the results may be shared in other forms of literature or within a conference setting. However, again, all identifying information will remain anonymous.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected from this study such as transcripts, audio recordings and summaries from the interviews will be kept on a secure, password protected computer and in a locked file on the Saint Paul University Campus. The information will be stored at SPU for the duration of the study and for five years following completion. After this point, the data from this study will be disposed of by erasing electronic data which includes audio recordings, and all paper copies will be shredded.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate in this study 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 do decide to withdraw from the study at any point, I can be assured that my data will not be used and will be destroyed immediately.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Melissa Payne of the Department of Social Sciences, Counselling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality, at Saint Paul University which research is under the supervision of Dr. Buuma Maisha. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

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

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 V

# Interview Guide

This interview is part of an exploratory study looking at the experiences of women regarding their sexuality and view of their bodies within a Canadian Evangelical context. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes but will leave room for more time if needed for participants to respond in a way that best reflects their experience. If for any particular reason, participants do not feel comfortable answering a specific question, they may choose to skip the question. This is a completely voluntary process in which I want each participant to feel comfortable and safe to respond in whatever way feels best for them.

Participants will have a chance to go over the transcript from the interview to ensure that it reflects honestly and authentically the answers and responses given during the interview.

Before we begin with some more specific questions surrounding the topic, could you tell me a little bit more about yourself? How old are you? Are you currently involved in an Evangelical church? Can you tell me a bit about your spiritual background – did you grow up in the Evangelical church, or what led you to your involvement there?

By participating in this study, you identified as either having been involved in the Evangelical church tradition or are currently involved in it. How would you describe your relationship to God and your spirituality presently?

How do you experience your body as a woman?

How do you experience yourself as a sexual being?

How does your understanding of God impact the way you view your body and sexuality?

How do you feel God views pleasure? How do you view pleasure?

How does, or did, the Evangelical church talk about your sexuality as a woman?

How do you feel about masturbation or self-pleasure? How do you think God feels about it?

What are some of the feelings you experience after a sexual encounter, with either yourself or with another person?

Do you feel like your faith/spirituality and sexuality are connected? If yes, how? If not, why not?

How do you feel the Evangelical church has influenced you to be more integrated and/or disintegrated as a person?

What was or has been your experience of corporate discussion around sexuality with women older than you, and who shared your belief system?

In your experience, how did those discussions differ from men and their corporate discussions around sexuality?

Are there any particular ways that you feel the Evangelical tradition has helped you better understand your sexuality and your body as a woman? Any ways in which it hindered you from better understanding it?

As a woman, how would you like to experience your body and sexuality?

Is there anything you would like to add today that we have not touched on or discussed?

This concludes the interview today. I want sincerely to thank you for participating in this study and sharing your experience so openly. I know it is not an easy thing to be so vulnerable and transparent. Do you have any final questions for me?

I will be in touch regarding the transcript from this interview for you to go over before the study is complete.