EPIPHANIES OF FAITH WITHIN THE ACADEMY:
A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH
WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS INVOLVED IN
INTERVARSITY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By
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The Ohio State University
2003

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This narrative study describes the faith dynamics of undergraduate students involved in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at a secular university. Nine students were interviewed using the Faith Development Interview—interview protocol developed by Moseley, Jarvis, and Fowler in 1993—and a Faith Experience Interview designed by the researcher of the current study. Analysis within the overlapping experiences of the IVCF and the university identified nine phenomena that influence epiphanies of faith. Three are evident within the IVCF context—affiliations of faith, mentors of faith, and choosing into faith. Inductive study, retreats, peer relationships, and staff advisers challenge and support students toward authenticity, commitment, and transformation of faith. Three of the nine phenomena are primarily evident within the university context—transition, encountering difference, and being set apart. The IVCF students were singled out both appropriately and inappropriately within classes, the peer culture of the university, and in interpersonal relationships. Lastly, three phenomena were evident in both contexts—studying faith, addressing questions related to faith, and making connections. Narratives of faith constructed for each participant highlight key findings of the research within the context of the individual stories and experiences. The findings are presented across the collective experiences and narratives of all participants.
An emergent model of faith epiphanies within the IVCF on a secular university campus is presented. The findings indicate that the intersection of the two contexts within the lives of students influences faith. Characteristics of secular higher education offer valuable experiences for the formation of faith. The academy’s potential for influencing faith formation may be enriched rather than stifled by its secular orientation. The IVCF ethos and processes were found to construct a “holding environment” that influences faith formation and transformation. Authentic relationships within a mentoring community founded upon faith enable individuals to address personal struggles and faith questions in a manner that potentiates faith formation. Finally, this research suggests that embracing a narrative orientation may enrich faith inquiry.
To Flavius, for being good company on the journey,
and to Gabriel, who inspired me to the finish line.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks go to my husband, Flav, who listened patiently to countless insights throughout this study, and attended to the details of life for both of us when this study commanded my full attention. I am also deeply thankful for the love and joy of our son, Gabe, who by his mere presence, gave the precious gift of perspective into what truly matters most. I will always appreciate my mom and dad for consistently encouraging my education, and my brother, Mark, for inspiring me through his humor and care.

I am grateful to Bob Rodgers of Ohio State for supporting me through this journey. From the day of my first university interview, he encouraged me to pursue faith as scholarship and a worthy academic question. I am deeply thankful for the constructive review and feedback provided by Dr. Leonard Baird and Dr. Susan Jones as members of my committee.

My colleagues at Messiah College provided helpful review and critique of sections of this draft. This document has been enriched by their feedback. As a member of this community of learners and teachers, my vision for the scholarship of faith has been vastly enlarged.

My life and faith have been shaped in countless ways by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, its communities, and its people. So much of my vocation was shaped during
my experience with the Fellowship at Occidental. I count it a great joy and privilege to have been part of such a transformational community. Alison and Dan have walked alongside me throughout this endeavor, and continue to do so now, in ways that make God’s presence real.

Warm thanks go to James W. Fowler and Sharon Daloz Parks who, through their scholarship and hospitality, have created space in the academy for bringing meaning to faith. I am also indebted to each of the nine students who participated in this study. Their enthusiasm for this inquiry was an inspiration, and their willingness to share your rich stories a true gift. My life has been greatly enriched by each one of them!
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PUBLICATIONS

Research Publication


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education
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PREFACE

As the researcher into this inquiry, I experienced a transformation to Christian faith in May of my senior year in high school. The context for that transformation was within a Bible study group to which I was introduced by a close friend, Yvette. I recall the members of the study group expressing significant concern that I had enrolled at a “secular college” for classes beginning the following fall. While the definition of the term *secular* was unknown to me, it certainly sounded ominous. Nonetheless, it was too late in the year to make modifications to my college plans.

During my first week on the campus of a small, selective liberal-arts college, I came across a recruitment table for the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). Throughout my undergraduate years, I was actively involved in this Fellowship. I attended IVCF summer camps and retreats during the academic year, and participated in inductive Bible study while regularly attending worship and fellowship activities. I was also active in creative ministries including drama and music.

Intuitively, thanks to the gift of retrospection, my college experience and faith formation were deeply influenced by the relationships, events, and circumstances provided by the intersection of IVCF involvement and secular undergraduate education. However, my selective memory also suggests that my faith was compartmentalized.
during the college years. I worked through questions of faith largely outside the academic arena, and only minimally within cocurricular activities outside the IVCF.

A specific experience comes to mind that marginalized my integration of faith with academic pursuits. I submitted a paper examining the Book of Job for a first-year European-civilization course in which the Old Testament had been explored. The paper was returned to me with a C+ grade and a note from the faculty member that stated simply, “Next time you might consider a more intellectual topic.” From that point on, no academic papers on faith-related topics were submitted by me unless I was aware of the professor’s receptivity to such topics. Upon recently reviewing that paper, I returned anew to the question of faith experience in the context of secular higher education.

I experienced vast personal growth and challenge as a result of my involvement in the IVCF. I also experienced tension as it related to campus involvement outside the IVCF. I was committed to the Fellowship and its purposes; however, I was also committed to broader involvement experiences on campus. Today, I credit the intersection of these experiences with shaping my vocation. Underneath my professional practice lie deep and provocative questions related to what it means to be a person of faith in a pluralistic world. Throughout a decade of practice in both public and private institutions, both “secular” and faith-based, the living faith of students has provided a crucial lens through which I view my work. This is the autobiographical context that shaped this current inquiry.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background

Faith and the Higher Education Academy

Religious traditions supported and influenced the founding of American higher education. Religious denominations and interests shaped early American colleges. Institutional charter and public opinion also fostered a strong religious orientation. Colonial colleges developed “agencies of religious life, relationships, and organizations and customs” that nurtured this orientation (Rudolph, 1990, p. 74). Compulsory religious exercises, including chapel and prayer, were routine aspects of the college experience. Moreover, the prevailing societal ethos did not sharply distinguish between secular learning and theological education. The “lines” between church and learning grew more distinct as American higher education matured (Schmidt, 1957).

Many of America’s colleges disengaged from religious identity and church affiliation around the turn of the 19th century (Burtchaell, 1998; Reuben, 1996). Several scholars argued that this disengagement resulted in an unwelcome presence to religious perspectives within the academy (Green, 1996; Marsden, 1994, Mitchell, 1996). Marsden argued that most U.S. universities ultimately rejected religious influence in intellectual life, as well as in their worldview. Krammick and Moore (1996) went so far to say that
religious faith came to be viewed as antithetical to intellect. This conviction that “religion had no place on campus was shared by many religious believers” who regarded faith as private, personal, and irrelevant to academic study (Hoekema, 1996, p. 35). Laurence (1999) gave voice to a central question underlying these sentiments—whether there is a place for spirituality in higher education.

The historical shifts in American academic life have been referred to as the making of the modern university (Reuben, 1996). Modernization shifted how religious orientation was experienced at colleges and universities within the lives of students. As compulsory forms of religious life declined, several new forms developed on campuses across the nation. Local churches targeted ministries to college students. Religious denominations formed houses on or adjacent to campuses to serve students within their religious tradition. Campus missionary societies began to develop from student interest in foreign missions. These developments shaped the origin of campus-based ministry at secular colleges and universities.

To summarize, early American society and college students experienced religious orientation as central to education. However, students of the modern university confront religious questions only at the borders of the academy. Religious faith shifted from center to margin, from public to private (Marty, 1996). The process of disengagement from religious faith impacted the dominant milieu of higher education. This separation from religious influence or connection has been described as secularization (Cox, 1965/1966; Marsden, 1994). In the context of higher education, the separation of many colleges from religious tradition created a new distinction within American higher education between
faith-based and secular higher education. Secular higher education simply denotes a category of institutions without a pervasive religious association; hence, questions of religious faith are not distinctly included within the educational mission nor curriculum. Inclusive of not only many private institutions, but also state universities, secular higher education comprises the majority of American institutions of contemporary higher education.

The impact of secular higher education on the religious identity of students has received the attention of several scholars. Krammick and Moore (1996) contended that one outcome of the secularization of higher education has been to “unconsciously and without deliberate intention . . . convert students to a scientific worldview or a naturalistic perspective” (p. 23). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cited a fairly consistent decline in “religious attitudes, values, and behaviors during the college years” (p. 280). In short, explicit religious connection has dramatically declined among students within institutions of higher education.

Faith: A Neglected Inheritance

Martin Marty (1996) speculated that “because religion in North America is a private affair . . . students may suppress their religious identities as they question their faith or non-faith, or to go along to get along in the web of campus subcultures” (p. 17). Similar to religion in North America, questions of religious faith transitioned to the personal sphere and were distanced from the public sphere for those in higher education. During the trajectory of separation of faith and intellect within postsecondary education, the student affairs profession was created. The development of the field parallels the
separation of morality and intellect within the modern academy (Reuben, 1996). Student affairs personnel became primarily responsible for out-of-class education in the academy. The structural division separates the personal and academic experiences of students into distinct domains. Student affairs personnel oversee many of the arenas where faith conversation and debate exist within the academy such as faith-related student organizations.

Student affairs educators inherited responsibility for addressing the personal development of students including their religious identity. From this inheritance, the profession shaped its commitments and philosophy (American Council on Education, 1983). Serving the “whole student” was identified as a foundational commitment of the field. Evans and Reason (2001) identified this holistic orientation as “the most prevalent and foundational concept” in their analysis of 13 major statements of philosophy of the student affairs profession (p. 370). Despite this inheritance, the field has generally eschewed the topics of scholarship or practice as they relate to faith. In fact, the development of faith and spirituality is conspicuously absent in student affairs research (Love, 2001; Love & Talbot, 1999). Faith or other spiritual aspects of student development clearly lack substantive attention within this realm (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Moore & Upcraft, 1990).

On the other hand, theories related to student development provide frameworks for observing, interpreting, and understanding the college experience from the student perspective (Miller, Winston, & Barr, 1991). Person-environment theories relate to the environment of the institution and its impact upon student learning and development.
Psychosocial theories focus on identity development in the college years, which includes religious identity. Cognitive-development theories focus on moral development and how students make meaning of their experiences including their faith. Fowler (1981) formulated a theory of faith development that has its principal orientation in cognitive development theory. However, minimal research has focused on these issues. As such, there is a void in the understanding of the distinctions of human growth and development during the university years. The void extends from personal development through environmental perspectives.

College: Critical Years for Faith Formation

The intersection of religious faith and the higher education academy offers a dynamic environment for scholarship. Martin Marty (1996) advocated the study of religion within the secular academy, referencing the widespread experience and growth of religion and the practical experience of students. Collins et al. (1987) believe that student affairs scholars and practitioners have a responsibility to address the spiritual and faith development of college students. The young adult years represent a critical period for faith development. Higher education, as a result, is entrusted with students who are in the midst of a critical developmental period. College students are questioning issues of faith and meaning (Parks, 1986a). Chickering and Reisser (1993) affirmed that this is a period when cultural values and faith heritage are typically tested and alternatives are explored. During the undergraduate years, young adults compose and recompose frameworks for understanding the world (Parks, 1982, 1986a, 2000). Young adulthood is a period in which belief and behavior interweave (Garber, 1996).
Students consider their faith a pervasive and mediating aspect of their lives (Manese & Sedlacek, 1985). Understanding the dynamics of faith within the college environment is a vehicle for contributing to the scholarship of faith. “Dynamics of faith” refers to the transition of faith itself and the contribution of self, community, and environment to the process of transformation. Faith-based institutions are one arena for the faith development of college students and related research. These institutions educate a statistical minority of college students nationwide. Whether these institutions offer the most fitting growth environment for each of their students is also a critical question. Van Wicklin, Burwell, and Butman (1994) questioned whether students who graduate from Christian, liberal-arts institutions avoid valuable growth in ways fostered by liberal education. They questioned whether some students may be “better off if forced to face the greater diversity of lifestyle and belief . . . found within a secular college setting” (p. 88). The question has not been studied; hence, whether their hypothesis holds validity is unknown. For students who assert a faith-based perspective, the influence of a secular higher education setting on their faith formation has not been adequately explored.

Gaining clearer understanding of the development and experiences of a particular population of students who assert a faith-based worldview may offer a rich perspective regarding the contemporary academy and a significant contribution to the existing knowledge base. Examining the dynamics of faith for students within the secular university may provide a valuable preliminary perspective on this question. Understanding the faith-related experiences of students within secular colleges and universities may provide insight into the circumstances that lead students to question,
reaffirm, and/or transform their faith. The interpretation of faith-related experiences by college students may contribute to our overall understanding of faith during the college years. Student affairs educators and college ministry personnel may also benefit from greater understanding of the experiences of students on secular campuses. The study of faith-related experiences may also enrich our understanding of the transitions of faith in the undergraduate years, which have been described as an area for further research (Hoffman, 1994).

Community as a Holding Environment for Faith

Faith does not occur in a vacuum; social context plays a role. The primary community or group is critical to individual faith development (Fowler, 1981). Fowler asserted the influence of community throughout his six-stage framework. A model developed by Westerhoff (1976) includes group identification as a characteristic of the adolescent and early-adulthood stages of faith. Kohlberg (1984) described moral development as a transition from group norms to internally held ideology during the college years. Parks (1986a, 2000) highlighted community as an element of faith development. Encouragement by a religious community of spiritual questioning and the drawing and application of meaning is a critical element of faith development (Religious Education Association, 1987). Community social support is also a critical aspect of faith development.

Kegan (1982) suggested that holding environments are important to facilitating cognitive development. Parks (1986a) suggested that creating holding environments is crucial for creating environments of higher education that support faith. She defined a
holding environment as an ideological community supportive of individual development
and one that calls individuals from externally held group norms to self-authorship of their
values. Parks drew from theorists Kegan (1982, 1994) and Winnicott (1965) in her
description of the notion of the holding environment. Winnicott identified the critical
relationship of self to other from the earliest stages of development, paralleling the
relationship of the fetus to the womb. She applied the term to the relationship of self to
other, as well as to the environment, in the ongoing process of human development.
Kegan (1994) referred to holding environments as communities that “call upon their
members to construct a theory of their own . . . and an internalized system for subjecting
their values to analysis” (p. 342). Such environments both support and challenge with the
ultimate goal of growth and development for all members. Parks (1986a) asserted that

it is the combination of the emerging truth of the young adult, with the example
and encouragement of a mentor, grounded in the experience of an ideologically
compatible social group, that generates the transformative power of the young
adult era. (p. 89)

Butler (1989) theorized that campus-based ministry organizations may provide settings
where faith compositions take shape. However, the aspects of campus-based ministry
settings that become holding environments for faith has not been examined.

Campus-based ministry organizations grounded in diverse religious traditions
exist on most college and university campuses. Within the Christian tradition, the Young
Men’s and Women’s Christian Associations were established on college campuses in the
mid 19th century to develop Christian leadership and to serve the university community
(Shedd, 1934). Independent, interdenominational, Christian campus-based organizations,
such as Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), emerged on college campuses during the 20th Century.

The IVCF is an evangelical, interdenominational, Christian campus-based ministry that originated in 1941. The group has predominantly focused its purpose on students enrolled in institutions of higher education that are not religiously affiliated and commonly referred to as secular (Hunt & Hunt, 1991; Woods, 1978). Since its founding, the conviction of the IVCF has been that Christian students can indeed prosper within secular colleges and universities (Hunt & Hunt, 1991). The Fellowship may provide a holding environment for its members as they develop in faith.

Statement of Purpose and Inquiry Questions

IVCF involvement within the secular university creates the nexus for this current study. The Bramadat (2000) ethnographic study in Canada argued that the IVCF provides a “socialization context in which students can learn to negotiate their own personal contracts with the dominant secular environment” (p. 21). However, the IVCF may provide challenging experiences for its members in addition to supportive socialization experiences. This nexus of the faith-based community within the secular university essentially creates an “alternative institution within an institution” (p. 21). Therefore, the faith community within the secular university offers an intriguing context for examination of the dynamics of faith. This study focused on understanding and
describing the dynamics of faith for students involved in the IVCF at a private secular university within the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Extending from this central inquiry question, the following questions guided this research:

1. How do IVCF students compose the dynamics of faith at a private secular university?

2. What experiences, such as academic experiences, interpersonal relationships, cocurricular involvement, vocational decisions, and IVCF experiences, reinforce faith, encourage questioning within the context of faith, promote analysis of faith, and transform faith for IVCF students?

The research explores the dynamics of faith as they are associated with undergraduate involvement in the IVCF at a private secular university. A narrative study devoted to understanding and describing faith best contributed to the purpose of this study.
CHAPTER 2
Literature Review

This inquiry sought to understand and describe the dynamics of faith for students involved in the IVCF at a private secular university within the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The inquiry questions previously outlined will guide the procedures of this study and dictate the parameters for review of related theoretical discourses. This review surveys the literature to consider the notion of faith and to examine the distinct context of faith within the undergraduate years. The review incorporates several academic disciplines, intersecting higher education, developmental psychology, and theology. Research on the specific context of the study, which is the IVCF, is also addressed.

Orienting Images of Faith

2000) elucidated a framework of faith specific to the young adult years. The research of both Fowler and Parks provided the theoretical foundations for the scholarship of faith.

Fowler (1981) comprehensively described the theological foundation, social-scientific influences, methodology, and model of faith development. He articulated the influence of theologians Tillich and Niebuhr on his formulation of faith. Fowler’s theory of faith development is also heavily influenced by developmental psychology, specifically the constructivist work of Piaget and Kohlberg and the psychosocial work of Erikson. Fowler (1991) noted that faith development theory bases its “principal theoretical grounding in the constructivist tradition” (p. 24). However, he noted that psychosocial theory—that of Erikson in particular—was also a critical influence.

While *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Fowler, 1981) remains the most comprehensive discussion of the origins and intentions of faith development theory, a revised articulation of the theory is presented in a later publication entitled *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Fowler, 1987). This text advanced the concept of faith development theory in two ways. First, the theological dimensions of faith development were made more explicit. Second, the account of the faith stages incorporated the theory of evolving selfhood introduced by Kegan (1982). Advances continue in *Faithful Change: the Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Fowler, 1996) where Fowler elaborated on his theory of faith development by focusing on related processes of change, exploring the role of emotion and examining the implications of living by faith in light of a postmodern societal context.
Fowler articulated multiple concepts of faith throughout his various publications. It is therefore difficult to narrow his theory to a solitary definition that fully encapsulates his complete faith (as cited in Thomas, 1990). The following definitions extracted from Fowler’s work serve as indicators of his notion. Fowler (1986b) summarized faith as the process of constitutive knowing, underlying a person’s composition and maintenance of a comprehensive frame of meaning, generated from the person’s attachments or commitments to centers of supraordinate value which have power to unify his or her experiences of the world; thereby endowing the relationships, contexts, and patterns of everyday life, past and future, with significance. (pp. 25–26)

In 1981, Fowler articulated that “faith forms a way of seeing our everyday life in relation to holistic images of what we may call the ultimate environment” (p. 24). He summarized faith “in the most formal and comprehensive terms” as people’s evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and world (as they construct them) as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them) and of shaping their lives’ [sic] purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value, and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images—conscious and unconscious—of them). (pp. 92–93)

Finally, in reflecting upon 10 years of dialogue regarding faith development theory, Fowler (1991) provided a consistent, but more succinct, definition of faith in the following text: “Faith is a composing, a dynamic and holistic construction of relations that include self to others, self to world, and self to self, construed as all related to an ultimate environment” (p. 21). Embedded in these definitions are four central elements of faith that provide a foundation for this current study. First, faith is grounded in the ultimate meaning as constructed by persons. Second, in light of this ultimate concern,
faith involves construction of meaning through connections between self, community, and world. Third, faith is a holistic notion, bridging affective and cognitive domains. Finally, faith is a developmental concept.

**Ultimate Meaning**

The notion of faith as ultimate meaning distinguishes the deep influence of theologians Tillich (1957) and Niebuhr (1960). Tillich conceptualized faith as “ultimate concern” by stating,

> Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man’s ultimate concern. Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence, such as food and shelter. But man, in contrast, to other living beings, has spiritual concerns-cognitive, aesthetic, social, political. Some of them are urgent, often extremely urgent, and each of them as well as the vital concerns can claim ultimacy for a human life or the life of a social group. If it claims ultimacy it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim, and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name. (p. 1)

Niebuhr similarly described faith as one’s “ultimate environment.” Fowler’s dissertation focused on the theology of Niebuhr, whose notions are deeply embedded in the faith development theory (as cited in McLean, 1986). There is a predominant understanding in the theology presented by Niebuhr that phases of human becoming correlate with responsiveness to that ultimate environment. Further, Niebuhr contended that enduring interpersonal relationships depend upon shared loyalty to ultimate centers of value and power. Fowler (1991) posited that Niebuhr and Tillich balanced the tension between faith as a human universal and the particular dynamics of Christian faith. This is a critical dimension of Fowler’s theory.
Essentially, in Fowler’s (1981, 1987, 1991, 1996) framework, faith composes an image of an ultimate environment. This composition provides a unifying dimension to the whole of life and, thus, provides the lens for interpretation of existence in light of individual convictions surrounding reality. Faith provides a “window” or view of the world and the existence of the respective individual within it. The centrality of this composition is not contained solely in its construction, but also in the manner in which this image shapes the actions of individuals within the world. The composition of the ultimate environment shapes not only passive being, but also active doing. This comprehensive image of faith shapes the entirety of life by dictating both responses and actions (Fowler, 1981; Fowler & Keen, 1978). Faith is defined somewhat circuitously; faith is both composing and being composed by ultimate meaning (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986a, 2000; Rutledge, 1989). Faith involves both the formation and transformation of human meaning (Fowler, 1986b). It has an ordering influence on our lives because individuals focus their lives on people, causes, and convictions of great worth to them because they hold the promise of bestowing purpose and meaning to life (Fowler, 1991). A metaphor that Fowler used to articulate the idea that faith is trust in something larger than self is the notion of a “shared master story” or “core story,” which describes a faith perspective that orients life and relationships. According to Fowler,

[A master story] shapes our consciousness regarding the character of the ultimate power and reality with which we have to do, and how we should shape our lives with our neighbors in light of that relation. (p. 23)

The shared consciousness constructs relationship to self, other, and the ultimate environment.
A critical dimension in examining the Fowler (1981) notion of faith as ultimate meaning is its universal contention. Because all humans construct meaning, Fowler asserted that all individuals have faith. Fowler (1981, 1992a) articulated the influence of Wilfred Cantwell Smith in framing faith as distinct from religious tradition, content, or belief. Smith (1962/1963) articulated faith as a personal quality with multiple forms of expression. Different from, but related to, faith, religion is a “cumulative tradition . . . made up of the expressions of the faith of people in the past. . . . [Religion] gives forms and patterns for the shaping of the faith of present and future persons” (Fowler, 1991, p. 21). Similarly, belief is different from, but related to, faith. Belief is content; it is an “important way of expressing and communicating faith”. (p. 22). Faith constructs belief and makes meaning of religion and involves unconscious as well as conscious motivations in the form of both belief and action. In spite of these definitions, there is a “fine line” between religion, faith, and belief in those who have closely examined the theory outlined by Fowler.

The distinction between faith and religion, and between content and structure, in the theory developed by Fowler (1976, 1981), has proven to be a contested concept. In early writings, Fowler (1976) strongly asserted that his work was consistent with Piagetian tradition in conforming to an epistemological perspective that deems structures of understanding to be distinct from content. Moseley (1991) articulated the distinction between structure and content, in terms of faith development, using the following constructivist paradigm: “Contradictions in beliefs or values are treated as matters of content that are secondary to the principle of equilibrium” (p. 144). Theoretically, faith
development is based upon an understanding of faith as structures for making meaning that are distinct from religion and belief. Methodologically, however, the majority of the original participants in research conducted by Fowler (1981) indicated a Christian perspective. Contributing to the confusion are the construct descriptions that often contain examples grounded specifically in Judeo-Christian tradition. Nelson and Aleshire (1986) argued that the method violated the precepts of structuralist tradition by moving beyond structure of a phenomenon to content. Referencing this content assumption, Moseley (1991) noted this tension in the work of Fowler between a theological perspective with a predetermined end point and the paradigm of empirical research. The theological dimension of faith development theory requires an end point, which is found in Fowler’s definition of mature faith articulated in the final faith stage. Fowler (1991) acknowledged this tension in faith development theory between its purpose as a social-scientific general theory of human development and as a contribution to practical theology. In fact, he credits faith development theory to not only a decade of “research and analysis,” but also a decade of “theological reflection” (p. 19).

Fowler (1981, 1991) seemed to disconnect the Tillich (1957) distinction of faith as ultimate concern in articulating this distinction between faith as a process and faith as a content. Tillich noted that “the term ‘ultimate concern’ unites the subjective and the objective side of the act of faith-the fides qua creditur [the faith through which one believes] and the fides quae creditur [the faith which is believed]” (p. 10). A clear separation of content and structure in the domain of faith is delicate at best. Parks (1986b) offered the notion of imagination to illuminate the dynamics of composing faith and to
serve as a bridge between the domains of structure and content in faith development theory. Composing an image of the ultimate environment is but one aspect of faith; establishing a relational stance to that image is also a critical dimension (Fowler, 1991). The notion of the shared core story not only constructs an image of the ultimate, but also serves to “shape our lives with our neighbors in light of that relation” (p. 23). Faith as ultimate meaning intersects intimately with the relational dimension of faith.

Relationship Triad

In this theoretical framework, faith exhibits a “covenantal pattern of relationship” (Fowler, 1981, p. 16). By covenantal, Fowler (1991) meant “trust and loyalty, commitment between persons and within groups, that is ratified and deepened by our shared trust in and loyalty to something or someone, reality, God, or some set of values that transcends us” (p. 23). The particularities of the relational dimension of faith again depict the pervasive influence of Niebuhr (1960) and Tillich (1957) on the thinking presented by Fowler. Fowler (1981) credited his understanding of faith to “Tillich’s notion that faith is the relationship that concerns us ultimately” (p. 18). Fowler further attributed the relational dimension of his work related to faith to Niebuhr as he stated, “Building on the insights of H. Richard Niebuhr, we called attention to the fact that faith is everywhere a relational matter. The patterns of faith that make selfhood possible and sustain our identities are covenantal (triadic) in form” (p. 33). This relational dimension portrays the importance of human commitments “to other persons and to the causes, institutions, and transcending centers of value and power that constitute their lives’ [sic] meanings” (p. 16). Faith connects self to community through shared convictions of
ultimate meaning. Because faith stems from the triad of self, community, and ultimate concern, it constructs identity. Identity, then, determines and is determined by communities of association (p. 18). Faith is the implicit and explicit assumptions about the ultimate environment that provide the “framework of meaning in which we make and sustain our interpersonal, institutional, and vocational commitments” (Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 21).

Fowler (1981) contended that human communities are dynamic; affiliations change as do individual and corporate convictions. Consequently, the understanding of faith as relational not only contends the dimensions of faith to be relational, but also describes faith as sustained in relationship. Faith is formed between the construction of self and other and within the utmost context in which these constructs “live.” Faith is sustained in and through human association, whether family, religious community, or educational organization. These associations are all critical elements of faith. This triadic notion of faith indicates the importance of human community in the development of faith. This is a critical “common thread” throughout the work of Fowler, although not made fully explicit. That is, communities can serve to assist and/or hinder a more complex construction of faith. Concurrently, the triadic dimensions of faith influence convictions, commitments, and identity. That is, unity and purpose in life is nurtured by faith. This is also critical. Faith is the self rather than an element of the self that can be neatly separated from other components.
Faith integrates cognitive, affective, and action components. Faith is a way of knowing, being, and doing (Fowler, 1981, 1987, 1996). Consequently, faith integrates cognitive understanding, talents, and skills with purpose and ultimate concern. Demonstrating a comprehensive conception of faith, the following seven distinct aspects define each stage: (a) form of logic, (b) social perspective taking, (c) form of moral judgment, (d) bounds of social awareness, (e) locus of authority, (f) form of world coherence, and (g) symbolic functioning (Moseley, Jarvis, & Fowler, 1986/1993). These domains reflect the influences of cognitive-development theory. The Piagetian notion of form of logic is a crucial “cornerstone” to faith development. Basing his stages on “Piagetian constructivism, Fowler adopts the position that faith follows a logical progress of development” (as cited in Moseley, 1991, p. 143). Essentially, form of logic describes the mental operations individuals are capable of employing within each stage and, specifically, the logic utilized for constructing explanations (Hoffman, 1994). Social perspective taking, grounded in the work of Selman, depicts the capacity of individuals to construct the perspectives of others in a sequence of increasing complexity (as cited in Hoffman, 1994). Form of moral judgment represents the Kohlberg moral-development structures moving from preconventional through conventional to postconventional via principled reasoning (as cited in Fowler, 1981, p. 52). Bounds of social awareness focus on the reference groups of the respective individuals and the extent of inclusiveness to which they respond to their social world (Moseley et al., 1986/1993). Bounds of social
awareness are increasingly complex capacities of awareness regarding which social content “counts” in resolving issues of identity and moral responsibility.

Locus of authority centers on the source an individual uses to ground their convictions and patterns of constitutive knowing (Fowler, 1981). Locus of authority articulates not only the location of validation, but also the process by which an individual relates to that authority to validate personal convictions (Hoffman, 1994; Moseley et al., 1986/1993). This is similar to the role authority plays in the theory of intellectual development introduced by Perry (1968/1970). Form of world coherence represents a particular manner of viewing the world including portrayal of the ultimate environment (Hoffman, 1994). World coherence essentially articulates the degree of comprehensive understanding and sense of meaning integrating various aspects into a unified whole (Fowler, 1986b; Moseley et al., 1986/1993). Finally, symbolic functioning addresses thought and imagination processes. This aspect is concerned with the capability of individuals to understand and appropriate language and symbols as they engage in meaning making and construct personal convictions.

The Fowler (1981, 1991) notion of faith has been critiqued in various ways. Despite his articulation of faith as a holistic integration of cognitive and affective dimensions of meaning making, his theory of faith has been criticized for being overly cognitive (Ford-Grabowsky, 1987; Parks, 1991). Ford-Grabowsky asserted that the Fowler theory neglects noncognitive aspects of the self, and that his interview protocol generates “fragmented profiles” (p. 81). Conn (1981) went so far as to say that Fowler “actually eliminates affectivity from the analysis of faith” (p. 34). While faith
development theory articulates both cognitive and affective elements, in Fowler’s (1991) own estimation the theory is overwhelmingly influenced by cognitive structuralist tradition. The emphasis on cognition reflects the significant influence of Piaget (as cited in Parks, 1991). Fowler seems to violate a principle to which Tillich strictly adheres. Tillich (1957) argued that, if “one of the functions which constitute the totality of the personality is partly or completely identified with faith, the meaning of faith is distorted” (p. 30). While later work of Fowler (1996) renewed an emphasis on emotion, there remains opportunity to intensify and/or articulate the affective domains of faith and to incorporate these more explicitly in models of faith development.

Whether the use of the term faith by Fowler (1981, 1991) is compatible with the particular faith of Christianity has also been an issue of debate. The notion of faith posited by this theorist has been critiqued as incompatible with Christian faith because it focuses on ego development and spiritual growth while neglecting Christian formation (as cited in Ford-Grabowsky, 1986). By “ego development,” Ford-Grabowsky means simply the development of self. By “spiritual growth,” she means a focus on experiencing God. When Ford-Grabowsky uses the term “Christian formation,” she speaks to the particulars of the Christian faith using the language of “Trinitarian consciousness”—the divine constructed in the three dimensions of God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus. She argued that Fowler overemphasizes ego development, particularly in Stages 1 through 4, as evidenced by the heavy influence of theorists of developmental psychology. Ford-Grabowsky argued that God consciousness is emphasized in Stages 5 and 6. From her standpoint, faith development, as presented by Fowler, is not and cannot be equated with
Christian faith. Wuthnow (1982) also argued that the Fowler faith development cannot parallel Judeo-Christian faith. He compared the Smith definition of faith and noted that this definition is distinctly Christian and counter to the Fowler concept. Fowler, of course, articulated the deep influence of Smith on his theory and credits Smith as both his teacher and colleague regarding his understanding of faith. It seems that divergent interpretations of the Smith definitions complicate the dialogue.

Counter to the premise of these critics, Hanford (1993) argued that “the substance of Christian faith is embedded within [Fowler’s] construct of faith” (p. 104). He argued that faith development is both inclusive of, and compatible with, Christian faith. In making his argument, Hanford turns to Fowler’s interpretation of vocation. By Christian vocation, Fowler speaks to the response of the Christian to God’s initiative in Jesus Christ (as cited in Hanford, 1993). Therefore, faith development describes the response of the individual to the divine. Fowler (2000) addressed Christian formation by noting the developmental and process implications of the dynamics associated with a growing Christian faith. Of course, the wide diversity of theological perspectives within the Christian tradition make it impossible to respond directly to each and every criticism. However, Fowler did respond to the criticism of his use of the term faith and its applicability in a Christian context. He responded with both the intentions of his faith theory as a generic term applicable in a religiously pluralistic environment, as well as with the particularity of Christian faith. He also responded from both developmental and
theological vantage points. He posited that faith development theory is applicable within the specific context of Christian faith. In fact, two texts speak directly to Christian applications of faith development (Fowler, 1987, 2000).

Critique has also been generated from non-Christian religious traditions. Such critique has centered on the originally universal contentions of faith development theory. Furushima (1985) examined this claim of universality by assessing the faith development interview protocol in a study of adult Buddhists. He found that universality of the protocol was challenged by its use of terms such as “sin” and “God,” which are exclusive of Buddhist tradition (p. 420). On the other hand, queries included in the interview protocol that inquired into meaning and past experience without the use of explicitly Christian terms were applicable. As a result, Furushima concluded that his study “partially substantiated” the claim of universality (p. 420). He also recommended additional research within cross-cultural contexts. Fowler (1996) asserted that he makes no claim for universality of stages of faith beyond a Western context. This reflects a shift from his original stance. The need for faith research within this context remains clearly evident.

Developmental Transitions

(1981) constructed a stage model of faith development. However, he emphasized that cognitive development accounts merely create one facet of the overall faith development concept. Assumptions related to psychosocial development also contribute to the foundation of faith development. The notion that faith is generated from attachments beyond the self and affects relationships between the individual and others represent contributions to the work of Fowler that are sourced in the psychosocial theory of Erikson (1963). Faith development theory addresses how individuals understand and reinterpret the content of their particular traditions as they mature in interpersonal relationships and interaction with the environment (Fowler, 1981). Faith adds unity and purpose to life, values upon which to pattern life, and a capacity for closeness with others. This element of self-other relationships, and its perpetually evolving capacity, is made more explicit in later articulations of the Fowler (1991, 1996) model.

Fowler (1991) credits the transformational theology of Niebuhr for shaping his understanding of faith formation. Specifically, Fowler points to Niebuhr’s conception of the life of Christian faith as a “process of ongoing conversion” (p. 20). He views this concept as “bridging” the general theory of human faith with the notion of conversion and development in Christian faith, which specifically creates inherent tension in his theory. Ford-Grabowsky (1987) argued, for example, that Fowler ignored conversion and confessional experiences. She reinterprets the Fowler (1981) case study of Mary as supportive of her argument and references his analysis as “changing” and “temporal” and juxtaposed to her own perspective that a more distinctly Christian analysis would note the “unchanging” and “transtemporal” (p. 93). Ford-Grabowsky views confessional
experiences as a sudden change of faith and argued that Fowler leaves no room for such experiences. However, cognitive structural premises do indeed accommodate immediate faith conversions. The underlying question for these critics seems to be whether faith development, which argues for a commitment to the particular without a claim for absolutes, can be consistent with Christian faith. This is exemplified in theological language viewed as absent by the critics. For example, terms such as *confession*, *Trinity*, and *Jesus* are not typically found within the Fowler model. Fowler (1992b) responded by stating that he hopes “evangelical Christians” will join him in affirming that mature faith, “understood this way, is congruent with—and in our pluralistic, systemic, and globally endangered world, indispensable to—Christian faithfulness” (p. 22).

Further critique has been articulated from a theological perspective regarding the underlying tenets of developmentalism. Steckel (1987) investigated whether a sequential, hierarchical model leaves room for human freedom and nonlinear faith formation. He focused on the Christian idea of *metanoia*, which he defined as “radical transformation of, in, and toward faith” (p. 159). He believes that this radical transformation is, by nature, discontinuous and thus inconsistent with the faith development sequence of understanding. Ford-Grabowsky (1986, 1987) also investigated the sequential, hierarchical aspects of faith development and whether they accommodate the theological dimensions of grace. Again, these critics argued from a particularistic standpoint of the Christian faith. They posited that, from within their interpretations of Christian tradition, faith is not always evidenced in orderly steps with ever-increasing complexity, and because of this, faith development is not applicable with Christian faith. Fowler (1991)
essentially responded by espousing that the stages of faith are descriptions of how individuals interpret their experiences of God. Consequently, some critique seems to parallel the intentions of Fowler to balance the theological dimensions in his understanding of faith itself and the human dimensions in his understanding of the process of faith development.

A central critique of faith development theory involves the use of a stage model as its foundation. Anderson (1995) and Dykstra (1986) argued that the stage approach to faith research is inappropriate for researching the phenomenon of faith. This critique seems to demonstrate that the shared foundations of cognitive developmental theory and strong theological influences provide multiple avenues and perspectives toward the critique of faith development research and theory.

While Fowler (1996) described factors associated with transition, his research has been criticized for lacking an adequate description of the process of transition. The void has been articulated as a weakness of faith development theory by Parks (1986a). Fowler (1996) partially responded to this criticism by describing various types of faith change. He referred to developmental change as that which is “universal among humans” (p. 9). He distinguished this from healing or reconstructive change, which are periods of emotional breakthrough when we must “rework some of the underlying patterns of our emotional or relational lives” (p. 10). Finally, he referenced a third type of change that results from “disruptions and modifications of the systems that shape our lives” (p. 11).
Stages of Faith

The faith development theory introduced by Fowler (1981) describe a generic pilgrimage. Fowler outlined the following six basic stages of faith development: (a) intuitive-projective, (b) mythic-literal, (c) synthetic-conventional, (d) individuative-reflexive, (e) conjunctive, and (f) universalizing. Fowler (1996) noted, “[In] continuity with the constructive developmental tradition, faith stages are held to be invariant, sequential, and hierarchical. I do not claim for these stages universality” (p. 57).

Prestage: Primal. Primal faith is considered a prestage and exists within the phase of life that precedes the acquisition of language. It is the groundwork for faith where the predisposition for relating to self, others, and the ultimate environment is created (Fowler 1987). This disposition emerges in the relational context with immediate caregivers. According to Fowler (1996),

Elements of care-giving [sic] activate pre-potentiated capacities for finding coherence and reliability in self and primal others, for forming bonds of attachment with them, and for shaping a predisposition to trust the larger value and meaning [of] commitments conveyed in parental care. (p. 58)

The infant experiences relationships with primary caregivers and, from these relationships, unconsciously forms a disposition toward the world (Fowler, 1987, 1991, 1996). Consistent responsiveness and care in the infant-caregiver relationship offsets anxieties that result from natural separation and differentiation of self from other and a disposition of trust in relationship is established (Fowler, 1987, 1996). Significant deficits in the relational environment, however, create “foundational mistrust” of self, others, and the world (Fowler, 1996, p. 58). During this period, qualities of mutuality, trust, and autonomy are shaped or misshaped, laying the groundwork for faith development
throughout the life span. The rudimentary trust or mistrust is the foundation for preliminary images of the ultimate environment (Fowler, 1987). Primal faith consists of a time of confirming or disconfirming a sense of comfort within the world (Fowler, 1996). The transition to Stage 1 begins with the “convergence of thought and language” (Fowler, 1981, p. 68).

*Stage 1: Intuitive-projective.* Tremendous importance on the significant others in the life of a child is characteristic of intuitive-projective faith—the first stage in the theory developed by Fowler (1981). During these early childhood years—ages 3 through 7—children fully rely upon immediate family for their faith understanding. Coinciding with the onset of language, the composition of meaning is based upon both “perceptual and emotional ordering of experience” (Fowler, 1987, p. 59). Children typically experience difficulty in separating fact from fantasy, as well as cause from effect (Fowler, 1987, 1996). The logic of Stage 1 thought is preoperational thinking. Children construct and reconstruct events in “episodic fashion” (Fowler, 1987, p. 59). While deeply appreciative of stories, children are rarely able to reconstruct the narrative pattern of the stories shared with them.

Intuitive-projective faith reflects a severely limited capacity for basic empathy. While children are generally able to articulate basic right from wrong, the distinction is marked by impact upon themselves. Characterized by a “naïve cognitive egocentrism,” children are typically unable to differentiate their own thoughts or feelings from those of others (Fowler, 1996, p. 58). Radical dependence on caregivers constructs social awareness and assigns caregivers central authority in the constitution of meaning.
Children understand the world through action, experience, and observation. Stories, symbols, dreams, and experiences fuel their imagination (Fowler, 1987, 1996). Finally, symbols generally function as a facet of the item they represent, if not a total representation. In the intuitive-projective stage of faith development, the possibility exists for aligning powerful religious symbols and images with terror and shame, as well as with love and companionship. Essentially, this is the phase in which children undertake “the construction of their first representations of God” (Fowler, 1996, p. 59). As concrete operational thought emerges, the foundation for transition to Stage 2 is provided. Children demonstrate a growing ability to accurately portray images and to clarify the distinction between reality and fiction (Fowler, 1981). Transition to Stage 2 is prompted by the emergence of “concrete operational thought” (p. 69). The conflict that marks this transition is the emerging need to distinguish between reality and perception.

*Stage 2: Mythic-literal.* With the mythic-literal faith of Stage 2, children begin to “appropriate the stories, beliefs, and practices of the faith community” (Lownsdale, 1997, p. 58). Typically, between the ages of 7 and 11, they begin to make reliable distinctions between fact and fiction (Fowler, 1987) and demonstrate the ability to comprehend cause and effect. Stories are assigned structured order in the mind of the child to discern personal meaning. Incapable of significant reflection, children generally submit to trusted adults for guidance. Concrete operational thinking characterizes the logic of the mythic-literal faith of this stage; sight and senses serve as vehicles for logic. Children are able to assume the perspectives of others; however, they are not able to perceive themselves as others perceive them. Moral judgments are generally made through concrete reciprocity.
Identity and faith continue to be derived from relational authorities. Authorities, however, are broadened beyond the immediate caretakers to include teachers, media, books, religious leaders, and peers. The world is understood primarily through the convictions and commitments of those with whom the child identifies. Symbols provide vehicles for affiliation with the faith community with whom respected authorities belong. The child experiences symbols as unidimensional and literal.

A striking feature of mythic-literal faith is its “orientation to narrative and story as the principal means of constructing, observing, and sharing meaning” (Fowler, 1987, p. 61). Children are mentally positioned with the ability to “narratize one’s own experience” (Fowler, 1981, p. 136). The narrative structure of experience serves as a means to shape identity while learning the stories of community and developing a sense of belonging. Stories are not abstract nor generalizable; their meaning is confined to the particular story. The child, however, does not have an integrative “story of one’s stories” (Fowler, 1987, p. 61). Signs of transition to Stage 3 include the “breakdown of literalism” and “recognition of conflict between authoritative accounts” (Lowsdale, 1997, p. 58). The emergence of formal operational thought makes reflection possible and allows conflict between authorities to be recognized. Social perspective-taking now permits an interpersonal perspective. The needs of the self can be relativized to group standards. The “development of interpersonal perspective-taking leads to a greater need for relational knowledge of the ultimate environment” (p. 58). Consequently, transition to Stage 3 is precipitated by conflict between authoritative stories.
Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional. Synthetic-conventional faith consists of personal experience extended beyond the family and primary community. Typical of the adolescent years, this stage emerges with the formation of “capacities for abstract thinking and for the manipulation of concepts” (Fowler, 1987, p. 63). The adolescent is capable of reflection and of synthesizing their sense of meaning (Fowler, 1996). The task of synthetic-conventional faith is to form a unified sense of identity; a coherent synthesis of beliefs and convictions must also develop to affirm this identity (Fowler, 1987). The self is viewed through interpersonal relations (i.e., the individual is the sum total of his or her relationships). Inclusion is a key yearning at this stage. The desire for “inclusion makes conflict with significant others or community difficult and threatening” (p. 66). Adolescents may act in various and seemingly conflicting manners based upon the group in which they are involved at the time. Early operational thinking characterizes their form of logic and enables adolescent thinking and reasoning to emerge (Fowler, 1996). Synthetic-conventional faith displays the capacity for “mutual interpersonal perspective taking” (Fowler, 1987, p. 64). An individual is now able to “construct an image of the self one sees other’s seeing” (p. 64).

Moral judgments reflect a desire to live up to the expectations of significant others. Social awareness is constructed upon the basis of interpersonal expectations. Authority is fully external to the self, and the individual conforms to the expectations of others. A community that nurtures attitudes, beliefs, and values characterizes world coherence. Beliefs and values are deeply rooted, firmly defended, and consistent with actions; however, they are largely exempt from critical reflection. Symbols are derived
from the respective faith community and understood with several levels of meaning simultaneously. The individual is enabled to “assemble the composite meanings of one’s stories; [that is, to] form a story of one’s stories” (Fowler, 1987, p. 65). However, the adolescent is “unable to critically self-examine one’s story” (Lownsdale, 1997, p. 59).

Limitations to synthetic-conventional faith include its dependence upon significant others for confirmation regarding identity and meaning; the self has yet to assume a transcendental perspective from which to see and evaluate self-other relationships. Transition to Stage 4 varies widely with chronological age. It may begin as early as 17 years of age, but may also describe individuals in mid or late adulthood. Transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is marked by the following three types of experiences (Fowler, 1981): (a) contradictions among valued significant others or groups, (b) discovery that personal beliefs change, and (c) experiences forcing reflection on personal beliefs and their formation.

Stage 4: Individuative-reflexive. The individuative-reflexive faith of Stage 4 typically has young adults viewing their faith as their own and beginning to internalize authority and responsibility for beliefs and commitments. Individuals grow in self-awareness and critically examine their own composite faith story. The central task of individuative-reflexive faith is asserting responsibility for personal commitments and convictions. This can be a very difficult and disruptive life phase because young adults critically question their convictions. Commitments are made recognizing the inherent exclusion of alternatives. The individual yearns for deeper reflection, but simultaneously desires to remain open to future experience. Individuative-reflexive faith often emerges
under the mentoring of influential leaders or dynamic and active communities (Fowler, 1976). The bounds of social awareness extend primarily to ideologically compatible groups in the abstract. The locus of authority is typically located in internally held ideologically established perspectives and consistent outlooks. Symbols and stories are critically analyzed and reformed into practical conceptual formulations. Symbols that were previously of central importance are reformulated and reappropriated with renewed meaning.

The construction of the third-person perspective is a critical element of the individuative-reflexive stage (Fowler, 1987, 1996). This perspective allows individuals to claim personal authority in discerning beliefs, values, and commitments (Fowler, 1987). This is a tenuous time as self-authority and that of others may be in tension. Young adults seek answers to questions of identity, which include how identity will be defined in relation to family, church, or other influential entities. Claiming an identity involves internally held commitments rather than drawing a composite of roles and meanings. Restlessness with the self-images and ideologies maintained by individuative-reflexive faith encourages transition to Stage 5. Sharing one’s faith with other individuals with a divergent perspective, coming to terms with personal limitations and mortality, and establishing both career and family precipitate this particular transition.

Stage 5: Conjunctive. Conjunctive faith is identified in research conducted by Fowler (1981) as evident only beyond midlife and involving the reintegration of elements of the self that were excluded in the rational certainty of the preceding stage. A central characteristic of conjunctive faith is “dialogical knowing” (p. 185). Individuals within
this faith stage are capable of dialogue involving other perspectives, and they desire to relate beyond boundaries of race, class, nation, gender, ideology, or religion (Fowler, 1976, 1987, 1996). Individuals who embody conjunctive faith are prepared to live out their commitments and convictions regardless of the consequences. They are able to embrace paradox, to affirm the commitments of others without denying the truth of their own commitments, and able to experience “both/and resolutions” to the identity of the ultimate. These individuals tend to engage the world with conviction, openness to revision, and a “transforming vision” (Fowler, 1987). Conjunctive faith emerges from deepening life experience including suffering, loss, and injustice (Fowler, 1981). Personal identity is coupled with openness to others; the individual is able to grasp the perspectives of other people and groups and incorporate them into their own identity. Those within the conjunctive stage simultaneously understand the commitment to their own faith as they also demonstrate an openness and willingness to engage in dialogue with those whose perspectives differ (Fowler, 1987). Truth is understood as multidimensional and interdependent (Fowler, 1981, 1987). The depth of personal convictions allows these individuals to seriously engage the perspectives of others.

Conjunctive faith embodies an “epistemological humility” (Fowler, 1987, p. 72). Formal operations and dialectical reasoning characterize the form of logic. The form of moral judgment displays principled moral reasoning. Social awareness is characterized by an active search to include the thinking of divergent groups for personal comparison. The locus of authority requires coming to terms with limitations inherent to the social system adopted by virtue of upbringing and internally held convictions. The dialectic
between critically, self-chosen beliefs and the reflective claims of others serves as authority. World coherence represents a truth-blending religious tradition with critical self-awareness. An understanding of the world allows life with ambiguity and the ability to embrace paradox. Symbolic functioning is characterized by the unity of nuance and content, allowing individuals to grasp reality with a fresh lens. Referencing the notion of Paul Ricouer known as “willed naiveté,” Fowler (1996) stated,

Persons of the Conjunctive stage manifest a readiness to enter into the rich dwellings of meaning that true symbols, ritual, and myth offer. . . . [Individuals within the conjunctive-faith stage] continue to live in the tension between their rootedness in and loyalties to their segment of the existing order, on the one hand, and the inclusiveness and transformation of their visions toward a new ultimate order, on the other. The Conjunctive self is a tensional self. (pp. 65–67)

Conjunctive faith points to the final stage of “radical actualization and communal inclusiveness” (Thomas, 1990, p. 78). The transition to this final stage involves an overcoming of the paradoxes of conjunctive faith, the conflicting loyalties of self, and the transcendent. The faith transition to Stage 6 is rare; few individuals attain this highest of the Fowler faith stages. The divided vision of conjunctive faith precipitates transition to a more universal faith.

Stage 6: Universalizing. Universalizing faith, the final stage, refers to the individual who is in the world as a transforming presence, but is not of the world (Fowler, 1976; Fowler & Keen, 1978). Fowler (1976, 1996) described this stage as “rare.” The self as the “centering reference point is replaced by the ultimate” (Rutledge, 1989, p. 21). The structure of this stage “derives from the radical completion of a process of self-decentration that proceeds through the sequence of stages” (Fowler, 1996, p. 66). The individual demonstrates passionate commitment to service. Regarding the development
of a social perspective, deepest identity is found in union with the transcendent.

Individuals within the universalizing stage of faith demonstrate extensive ability to understand the social perspective of others. With regard to moral judgment, these individuals apply universal principles as they seek to extend equal regard to all involved. Social awareness is characterized by loyalty to the transcendent, which receives concrete expression in human community. Those of universalizing faith are as “concerned with the transformation of those they oppose as with the bringing about of justice and reform” (Fowler, 1996, p. 67). Locus of authority is fully internalized. The strivings of the ego no longer dictate attention. World coherence is paradoxical; the world is pluralistic yet interconnected. Multiple viewpoints are reconciled without negating the unique gifts of each individual. Universalizing faith embodies a radically “authentic spirituality” (p. 67).

Only one individual in the original research conducted by Fowler (1981) demonstrated a progression to universalizing faith. The concepts within the stage are largely derived from biographies of such individuals as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ghandi. As a result, Keen criticizes universalizing faith as overly intellectual (as cited in Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 103). The methodology for developing Stage 6 is incongruent with the first five stages (Parks, 1991). According to Hoehs, universalizing faith is elegant and attractive, but “condescending and anti-pluralistic” (as cited in Parks, 1991, p. 107). Fowler’s notion of universalizing faith is heavily influenced by his Judeo-Christian perspective (as cited in Thomas, 1990). This is evident in his exemplars, as well as his descriptors, in illustrating universalizing faith as
living out the “Kingdom of God” on earth (Fowler, 1981, p. 205). Whether adequate ability to conceptualize and define the theory is beyond the maturation of the theorist has also been raised (Parks, 1991).

**Summary**

The research conducted by Fowler (1981, 1987, 1991) provides many gifts; the theory is both ultimate and universal in nature. His work facilitates a connection between self and others and is comprehensive, holistic, and developmental. Concurrently, there are several limitations to the framework incorporated by Fowler. The cluster of critiques presented have centered around, in the words of Parks (1991), “five primary foci of resistance and concern” (p. 105). Specifically, these five foci are (a) definition of faith; (b) the notion of mature faith as articulated in that universalizing; (c) theoretical adequacy with regard to particular religious traditions; (d) adequacy of the account of affect, process, and imagination; and (e) adequacy with regard to critical sociopolitical analysis. Fowler (1981) interviewed 359 people over a 9-year period ranging from 3.5 to 84 years of age. Women and men were equally represented in the population sample; however, 97.8% of the participants were of European descent. Interviews were analyzed and assigned a stage. The methodology incorporated by Fowler has been criticized on several levels. Power (1991) criticized his scoring criteria for being overly affective. Fowler and colleagues have responded to such criticism with the publication and revision of the highly structured *Manual for Faith Development Research* (Moseley et al., 1986/1993). This manual again responds with a reemphasis on the social-scientific dimension.
The concept of faith as providing meaning to life has shaped the research extending from Fowler (1981, 1996). Parks (1986a), a former student of Fowler, described faith as the “activity of composing meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our awareness” (p. 16). The Religious Education Association (1987) presented an articulation of faith as “making meaning of life’s significant questions and issues, adhering to this meaning, and acting it out” (p. 6). The study was a comprehensive examination of the relationships between faith and life-cycle dynamics using the faith development interview (FDI) protocol. Major findings of interest to this inquiry include the importance of resolving psychosocial tensions, the suggestion that faith stages are unrelated to age, and the importance of parental relationships in the early years of life. A key finding of particular interest to this inquiry is that “involvement and participation in a religious community per se is not a determining factor in one’s growth in faith unless that community helps to ‘sponsor’ or encourage one’s spiritual quest” (p. 25). The Religious Education Association project also identified divergent gender patterns regarding the importance of meaning, finding that women assign greater importance to meaning.

The tension Fowler (1991) does not seem to articulate is that between faith development theory as a practical Christian theology and a pluralistic perspective. Even in reflection on his work over the preceding 10 years, Fowler argued that his use of the term faith is an intentional expression within “the generic and universal religious (and human) category” (p. 21). Again, he turns to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and the critical distinction between faith, religion, and belief that lie at the heart of his faith development theory. However, the theology espoused by Fowler is distinctly monotheistic and clearly
Christian. He stated, “[in] speaking of faith as a generic feature of human lives—as a universal quality of human meaning making—I make the claim that God has prepotentiated us for faith” (p. 22). This statement exemplifies how, while explicitly universal, Fowler leaves his research open for the criticism that it presupposes a particular religious worldview. Finally, faith development “takes seriously the narrative structure” of personal history (Moseley et al., 1986/1993, p. 3). Research conducted by Fowler often addresses the narrative structure of faith development (Fowler, 2000, 1991, 1996), which has also been affirmed (Anderson, 1995; Streib, 1991).

Faith and the Young Adult Years

Parks (1986a, 2000) has also contributed significantly to the scholarship of faith development. She was a student of Fowler and focused her dissertation research on faith development within higher education. Her orientation to faith itself displays the influence of Fowler. Parks (1990) reserves the term faith “for the composing of meaning in the most comprehensive—most ultimate and intimate—dimensions of consciousness” (p. 354). She described her primary lens as “constructive developmental psychology in dialogue with a broad understanding of the human quest for meaning” (p. 354). Parks (1991) articulated several gifts of faith development theory, including its focus on the potential and affirmation of the human desire for meaning. Faith development is depicted as a “practical and direct response . . . to the pain, yearnings, and possibilities of the cultural-historical currents of a time and a people” (p. 102). That is, faith development possesses a unique strength for addressing key tensions in North America. Parks (1992) noted,
Faith development theory offers a dynamic language for an understanding of faith and religion which provides one way of addressing the reality of change and pluralism in a secularized world, yet its concern for the quality of mature faith counters the conventional dogma of relativism to which an ideology of pluralism is all too vulnerable. (p. 95)

The key tensions to which Parks refers include shifts to greater globalization and increased ecumenism.

Faith development theory enables discussion of ultimate values within a pluralistic world (Parks, 1991). Parks (1992) noted that faith development theory “responds to the phenomenon of globalization and its unprecedented implications in three primary ways” (p. 94). It affirms traditional religious elements without “foreclosing the conversation about ultimate values and commitments within a pluralistic world” (p. 95). Second, faith development theory confirms that faith can undergo “transition and transformation” and “yet retain its integrity” (p. 95). Third, faith undergoes transformation in a way that “illumines the relationship between the individual and his or her context” including his or her community (p. 95). Finally, Parks noted the most significant contribution to be the “enhanced consciousness of motion, change, and transition” embedded in these phenomena (p. 95). Parks (1992) also noted that these dynamics correspond “with the growing emphasis upon metaphor and faith language within religious-theological discourse which increasingly finds its voice in the language of ‘meaning’ and story (narrative)” (p. 105).

Faith development theory, in Parks’ (1992) estimation, provides opportunity for renewal of our common life and encourages dialogue related to faith within pluralistic contexts. She points to the relevance of faith as a human universal, as an underlying key
theme and value of faith development theory. She also speaks to the underlying notion of meaning-making as connecting faith development theory solidly within contemporary theological discourse. Parks (1992) argued that faith development theory creates a way to move beyond “established psychological practice” in five key areas (p. 95). The Piagetian paradigm, which centrally informs this perspective, is an interactive model, focusing upon the relationship of individuals to their environment amidst transition. Second, faith development theory transforms the focus from the past to the future. Third, the theory affirms intervention, which maintains the capacity to compose prepotentiated meaning. Fourth, it draws attention to the reality that growth occurs within a particular context, and specifically, that the context can provide sources of challenge and support. Finally, faith development theory creates a new perspective from which to mediate discourse of religion and psychology within the academic disciplines and the lives of people.

Parks (1992) asks some central questions that are pivotal to this current study. She questions whether the term development is the best terminology for faith. She suggests that transformation may introduce greater benefit in the description of the dynamics of faith. However, in making this case, she presents a lengthy critique of the term development with little explanation as to why she views transformation as more helpful. Her critique centers on its association with economics, psychological discourse, and issues of ecology. She describes the “pitfalls” of the metaphor of development as a notably delicate matter among critical social theorists due to its economic connotations and related notions of class.
In 1982, just 1 year following the publication of the 1981 pivotal research conducted by Fowler entitled *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Parks theorized “an identifiable developmental stage or era between adolescence and adulthood” (p. 660). Her theory was based upon a small sample of 20 college seniors and informed by the scholarship of William Perry, Kenneth Keniston, and Carol Gilligan (as cited in Parks, 1982). Using the terminology of Keniston, Parks referred to this era as “young adulthood” and described the corresponding age-range as between 18 and 30. Parks (1986a) articulated her case by stating that the Fowler stage model “glosses over” these young adult years. She then articulated a modified pattern situated between the third and fourth stages of the Fowler faith development theory. Essentially, she argued that Fowler missed a stage—that of young adult faith. She asserted that the transition between the Fowler synthetic-conventional faith and individuative-reflexive faith is a particularly significant progression of faith development—one “critical” for young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 years. Young adult faith, based upon the age implications, is of particular importance to higher education. Droege (1987) supported this notion as he asserted that college is the ideal environment for facilitating this particular transition.

Parks (2000) later authored *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Faith, Meaning, and Purpose*. In this text, she enriched her initial ideas by articulating her faith framework as well as her vision for the role higher education could play in nurturing faith. The case Parks made for the identifiable young
adult era, her description of faith formation during that era, and the qualities of environments that facilitate faith formation are her primary contributions to the scholarship of faith.

**Forms of Faith**

The framework developed by Parks (1986a, 2000) focuses on three major dimensions of faith: cognition, dependence, and community. She examined the transformations of faith in light of a fourth concept of imagination and focused attention on how these four major elements present themselves in the transition from synthetic-conventional faith to individuative-reflexive faith.

*Cognition.* The concept of cognition refers to the manner in which young adults know themselves, the world, and God. Parks (1986a, 2000) considers these forms of knowing to be a condensed version of the Perry (1968/1970) model depicting nine shifts of intellectual development. Consistent with the constructive developmental paradigm, the *content* of knowing is widely variant while the *structure* of knowing can be similar between individuals. The first cognitive position is *authority bound/dualistic.* When individuals are authority bound and dualistic, they tend to look to and trust external authorities for knowledge (Butler, 1989). Such external authorities may be in the form of family, church, or teachers, but also may be media, artists, entertainers, or societal conventions (Parks, 2000). Authorities are confirmed through stories and symbols that “hold the meanings of a people and their institutions” (Parks, 1986a, p. 45). This form of knowing is dualistic in that it makes clear “divisions between what is true and untrue, right and wrong” and demonstrates “no tolerance for ambiguity” (Parks, 2000, p. 55). In

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fact, for the young adult in this phase, ambiguity points to the existence of error. When
the error is corrected, the ambiguity will be eliminated in the mind of the respective
young adult. The inner self is an outcome of primarily external influences. Authority-
bound/dualistic knowing is largely an “unexamined, uncritical form of certainty” (p. 56).
When inevitable conflicts arise between trusted authoritative accounts, the young adult
transitions to seeing the “relative character of all knowledge” (p. 57).

The second position of knowing is unqualified relativism wherein young adults
acknowledge that the human mind contributes to their composition of the world (Parks,
1986a, 2000). Knowledge is “conditioned by the particularity of the relation or context in
which it is composed” (p. 47). Young adults begin to comprehend that individuals
“compose reality in a pluralistic and relativized world” (Rutledge, 1989, p. 23). They
experience every perception as leading to a different truth, and extrapolate that every
opinion may be equally worthy (Parks, 1986a, 2000). Unqualified relativism as a form of
knowing is shaped in experiences wherein conventional assumptions conflict with reality
(Parks, 2000). Previous assumptions surrounding the world as a whole become “possible
points of view among others as objects of reflection” (Parks, 2000, p. 58). Betraying the
strong influence of Kegan (1982), Parks (2000) noted that “both subject and object are
recomposed” in this moment (p. 58). As an individual matures to recognize qualitative
differences among competing arguments, a shift occurs to a new form of knowing.

The third position of cognition is probing commitment. Young adults transition to
probing commitment when they discover obvious differences between opinions that
matter to them and the greater value some opinions have over others. Probing
commitment is essentially a tentative commitment within a larger framework of relativism. The young adult discovers that choices of great consequence must be made, which involve searching for a means to adequately compose truth (Butler, 1989). The young adult takes responsibility for their knowing and explores possible forms of truth and their appropriateness to their own experience of self and world. Form of knowing is essentially an exploration of personal faith, meaning, convictions, and commitments.

The fourth position of knowing is tested commitment. Parks (2000) distinguished between the tentative commitment of young adults with the less-divided commitment of older adults. In the period of tested commitment, the individual has a deepened sense of “centeredness,” in contrast to the divided self of probing commitment. The form of knowing takes on a sense of fit. Positions three and four articulate two qualitatively different phases of the larger notion of commitment in relativism delineated in Perry’s (1968/1970) work. The notions of probing and tested commitment are critical periods. Commitment in relativism is a key “threshold into the life of the mind” (Parks, 2000, p. 59). A major shift in critical thought occurs as the young adult moves from an implicit to and explicit system of meaning and faith. This shift renders intellectual reflection possible.

The final transition within cognition is convictional commitment. Convictional commitment embodies a “deep conviction of truth, a quality of knowing that we recognize as wisdom” (Parks, 2000, p. 60). The individual is able to engage complexity and ambiguity. Convictional commitment typically emerges in midlife, well after the young adult years. This form of cognition engages complexity. Parks noted that this form
of knowing “represents a deepened capacity to hear the truth of another” while maintaining the “authority of the self and a disciplined fidelity to truth” (p. 60).

*Dependence.* The following four aspects similarly construct dependence: dependence/counterdependence, fragile innerdependence, confident innerdependence, and interdependence. Examining dependence provides access to the “ebb and flow of feelings of trust, constraint, threat, fear, confidence, and communion” (Parks, 2000, p. 87). These are, in fact, forms of dependence reflective of the interactionist paradigm. These forms of dependence coincide with forms of knowing. Parks explicitly described how shifts in thinking impact a**ffect** and interpersonal connections.

*Dependence/counterdependence* articulates a profound dependence on authority for the development of faith and composition of meaning. This position is initially created by absolute agreement with an “uncritically assumed authority” (Parks, 2000, p. 74). The sense of what is fitting is “dependent upon a felt relationship to a shared ethos of assumed authority” and remains unaware of the foundational ideology (p. 74). As individuals begin to develop personal truths, there is a transition in the form of dependence. The young adult is able to disagree with previously maintained truths, but unable to create new realities, thereby remaining dependent upon the authority with which contention now exists.

The position of *fragile inner-dependence* emerges as individuals begin to “self-consciously include the self within the arena of authority” (Parks, 2000, p. 77). Young adults exhibit a sense of self that, while dependent on external sources of authority, displays an emerging appreciation for their own voice. Fragile inner-dependence displays
a tentative sense of self-agency. Concurrently, the young adult is vulnerable to feeling lost. Fragile inner-dependence is dependent upon a caring environment for fulfillment (Parks, 1986a, 2000).

**Confident inner-dependence** is characterized by an individual’s “deepened capacity to order his or her own sense of value,” becoming strong enough to allow the mentor to be “other” (Parks, 2000, p. 84). There is a different quality to dependence on others for the composing of meaning and convictions. The mentor becomes a partner who walks alongside rather than an authority followed. Essentially, mentors transition to peers (Parks, 1986a, 2000).

**Inter-dependence** is characteristic of the mature adult. This movement “expands the arena of authority” (Parks, 2000, p. 86). Having grown to appreciate personal limitations and strengths, individuals at this level also gain understanding of the strengths and limitations of others (Rutledge, 1989, p. 24). Trust is centered in the “meeting of self and other, recognizing the strength and finitude of each and the promise of truth that emerges in relationship” (Parks, 1986a, p. 25). This trust takes the form of a “profound, self-aware conviction of inter-dependence” (Parks, 2000, p. 86). What is new is the individual’s “awareness of the depth and pervasiveness of all of life and the important yet limited strength of one’s own perceptions” (p. 87).

**Community.** The notion of community recognizes the critical role of others in shaping faith. The community may equate to a particular context, such as a church group, but can also refer to the general context of life. According to Parks (2000), “Location, social context, and general surroundings play a central role in the formation of meaning.
and faith” (p. 88). She described an underrecognized gift of the Piagetian paradigm, that
growth depends upon the “quality of interaction between the person and his or her social
world” (p. 89). Parks (1986a, 2000) asserted that, while individuals never outgrow their
need for others, there is a qualitative transformation in what others mean to individuals.
Faith formation involves an ongoing dialectic between individuals and the community.

Conventional community is the first form. It represents loyalty to any one or a
combination of classes of membership including family, religion, and peers—seemingly,
a “well-defined set of assumed associations” (Parks, 2000, p. 92). Conventional
community is distinguished by “conformity to cultural norms and interests” (p. 92).
Individuals are socially aware of only those similar to themselves (Parks, 1986a, 2000).
This form of community “corresponds to the Authority-bound and dualistic form of
cognition, in which Authority defines us and them” (Parks, 2000, p. 92).

Diffuse community emerges as forms of knowing become more relative. The
individual seeks a “wider horizon of belonging,” which includes more “exploratory,
experimental, and tentative qualities” (Parks, 2000, p. 92). There is a longing for
connection amidst the search for more adequate forms of knowing.

Mentoring community is a powerful relationship for young adults. As individuals
assume greater responsibility for, and authorship of, their own faith, they reach for a
viable sense of belonging compatible with this new form of faith. Parks (2000) described
this as a “transformation in one’s sense of home” (p. 94). Mentoring community displays
a sense of ideological compatibility with emerging tentative convictions. Parks was
careful to describe the meaning of the term ideology, which she interprets as “structured
and largely rational attempts to understand self and world and to prescribe directions and corrections” (p. 95). Young adults are dependent upon the mentoring community for authorizing their faith commitment. That is to say, a sense of legitimacy for personal convictions is bestowed in the corporate context.

_Self-selected class/group_ indicates that tested commitments of knowing value a community that shares the respective commitments. The self-selected “community” shares the “meanings that the adult authorizes within. . . . [The] self-selected class or group that serves as the network of belonging for the tested adult confirms the adult’s world, composed in a critical systemic mode, but confirms also the particular content” (Parks, 2000, p. 100). In other words, one’s network of belonging is essentially a community of like-minded individuals—a shift from a faith that belongs to external authorities to a faith that is owned by the self and grounded in community (Westerhoff, 1976).

_Community open to others_ generally occurs beyond the young adult years. This position depicts a widening of the network of belonging to include those whose views differ. This form of community is characterized by a “longing for communion with those who are profoundly other than the self” (Parks, 2000, p. 102).

**Imagination: Transformation of the Composition of Faith**

Parks (1986a, 2000) used the notion of imagination to describe the process of transformation of faith in her work. She described her inclusion of the notion of imagination as a shift from structure to the “complementary issue of [faith] content” (Parks, 2000, p. 103). Parks referred to imagination as the “highest power of the knowing
mind” (p. 354). Referencing the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, she articulated imagination to be the “power by which faith is composed” (p. 107). Through imagination, Parks essentially described her notion of how change occurs and the process of developmental transition as it relates to content. Moreover, she asserted that imagination is critical for faith in young adults (Parks, 1986a, 2000). Parks considers the process of imagination to be universally applicable to all individuals undergoing faith transition and documents five “moments” derived from Loder (1981) and Kegan (1982).

The first moment of imagination is a period of conscious conflict that describes an individual aware of conflicting tensions (Loder, 1981; Parks, 2000). This moment involves a sense of discomfort with the present situation. Parks’ use of the term conscious conflict also evidences her cognitive structural allegiances. She asserted the “moment of conscious conflict occurs when something doesn’t seem to fit and we are at odds with our usual perception of things” (p. 108). The individual may experience doubt. In terms of the cognitive developmental paradigm, this is a period of disequilibrium. Questions emerge from the context of conscious conflict. In order to move through this moment, individuals must wrestle directly with the conflict. Parks (2000) described the tensions of conscious conflict in terms of faith by stating,

The moment of conscious conflict that serves to recompose meaning in more adequate forms invites enlarging clarification, encourages enlivening restlessness, and suggests new possibility. At the same time, it is also the location of much of the suffering dimension of faith. (p. 111)

In an effort to avoid suffering, individuals are vulnerable to overdistancing and overwhelming anxiety (p. 110). There is potential either to disengage oneself from conflict or to be consumed by it.
The second moment is a *period of pause* when individuals are aware of inner stress, but unable to resolve it. The conflict is “out of consciousness but not out of mind” (Parks, 2000, p. 113). The intellectual work of this period is to scan for new means of integration. Pause is a period of contemplation that is integral to faith formation. The *gift of the pause* is the third moment—a period of achieving new *insight* that resolves existing conflict. It is a moment of epiphany. The new insight establishes a unique, new perspective. The insight may take the form of a symbol or revelation. It provides a form within which to engage reality. The fourth moment involves a *repatterning*, which essentially articulates the period in which the individual applies the new insight. It is insufficient merely to experience the epiphany; it is also necessary to live in a manner worthy of the new insight.

The fifth and final moment is a period during which individuals share their interpretations or *testimony*. New understandings of faith are celebrated by sharing personal experiences. Parks (2000) asserted that “transformation of our knowing and trusting is not complete until the new insight comes to voice and finds a place of confirmation within a wider public life” (p. 121). As social beings, individuals “seek assurance of . . . coherence and connection between the original conflict, the new image, and a concerned or interested public before the new insight can take up full residence within us” (p. 121). The focus on young adulthood in the research of Parks (1986a, 2000) transitions smoothly to questions of higher education and its possibilities and potential as
a critical environment for nurturing faith. Such questions must first be examined within
the reality of the social context of the academy and the knowledge base surrounding its
role in nurturing questions regarding faith.

Faith in the Context of the Academy

The Promise of Higher Education

Parks (1986a) has high aspirations for the university as a community that nurtures
faith, as indicated in the following excerpt: “Higher education—self-consciously or
unself-consciously—serves the young adult as his or her primary community of
imagination, within which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every
syllabus a confession of faith” (pp. 133–134). By “community of imagination,” Parks
was referring to a place where one’s purposes in the world could be considered,
specifically where the young adult can construct an understanding of their own potential
contribution in the world. Boyer (1987) argued persuasively that higher education should
help college students develop a sense of purpose and meaning. Parks (1982) noted that
higher education provides a “time set apart for vocation formation” (p. 669). She
continued by positing that “[to] be formed in vocation in its fullest sense is inevitably to
be engaged in spiritual or faith formation” (p. 669). If we understand faith as facilitating
the composition of meaning, then Boyer and Parks persuasively argued that the purposes
of higher education should address the potential for faith formation during the young
adult years. The purpose to life is shaped by our faith; consequently, there is a direct
connection between the purpose of higher education and faith formation.
Education facilitates transformation of faith during the pivotal college years. Raper (2001) noted that universal questions of meaning come to the forefront during this period of life. Centered on issues of identity, purpose, the existence of God, and the reality of suffering, these universal questions encompass faith, and engaging such queries creates an environment conducive to faith formation. Parks (1986a) asserted that “higher education is the primary context of the young adult dream—the faith that shapes, or misshapes, both the adult who is to be and the world for which the young adult will soon be responsible” (p. 139). College provides a compelling setting for the examination of faith. During college, the student is often removed from authorities of previous dependency. Academic life provides a unique environment within which to assist individuals amidst their searching. Parks (1986a, 2000) challenged colleges to be “communities of imagination,” places where students can dream and consider issues of purpose and meaning in life. Specifically, higher education potentially meets the aspirations expressed by Parks for ideal community during this life phase. Describing the ideal as a mentoring community, she noted that this association provides a “community of one’s peers, older adults to point the way, a faith to live by, a cause to live for and a future as an adult who is needed in the world” (Parks, 1993, p. 223).

The experience of enrolling in higher education also holds compelling promise for faith formation. Parks (1986a, 2000) noted that the process of leaving home—either figuratively or literally—prompts transition. She argued that being placed in a new setting with pluralistic viewpoints challenges students to articulate their own beliefs. The challenge of explaining beliefs related to faith to others also prompts faith transition.
Within the university environment, the diversity of beliefs and experiences offer opportunity for dialogue across cultures and faith traditions. New ideas and ideologies may encourage dissonance; however, dissonance may contribute to development.

The young adult years—those years between adolescence and adulthood—are critical for lifelong foundations of faith. Garber (1996) noted that three critical tasks were performed by individuals who displayed adequate long-term meaning in their lives. First, they “formed a worldview that could account for truth amidst the challenge or relativism in a culture increasingly marked by secularization and pluralization” (p. 160). By worldview, Garber is referring to a set of presuppositions that articulate the views individuals have of the world and their actions within it. Second, they “found a mentor whose life ‘pictured’ the possibility of living with and in that worldview”(p. 160). Third, these individuals formed personal connections with other individuals “whose common life offered a context for those convictions to be embodied”(p. 160). The Garber tasks include a faith perspective, mentor, and community as critical elements of faith formation. Higher education is an environment with inherent potential to provide these three elements. Higher education shapes the views students hold of the world and can introduce them to individual and community portrayals with diverse alternative viewpoints.

The promise of the higher education academy to facilitate faith is evident. The developmental phase of young adults, and its inherent potential for change, are at the core of this promise. The inherent time set apart to reflect on self and the world, in anticipation of finding purpose and vocation, also undergirds this potential. The purposes of higher
education include high aspirations for faith during the college years. In critically examining the potential of the academy, as it relates to faith, the reality of the cultural milieu of the academy itself is the next logical analysis.

*Ethos Realities*

If Palmer (1987) is correct, and we “shape souls by the shape of our knowledge” (p. 22), the academy carries tremendous responsibility. Examining perspectives of faith and the college years would be incomplete without examining the ethos of the academy itself. The term *ethos* refers to the overall culture including the values, customs, and character of the environment. It is well documented that the higher education environment impacts student learning and personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Strange & Banning, 2000). Several elements of the academy suggest a potential impact on the faith of students in particular. The place of religious or faith perspectives within the academy has shifted since the early days of American higher education. In its earliest forms, the religious ethos of the college was pervasive and implicit (Wilson, 2000). Rapid growth and change in higher education during the late 19th and early 20th centuries enacted a “changed relationship to the scholarly and teaching missions of college and university faculties” (p. ix). As a result of these changes in higher education, colleges now demonstrate greater pluralism of religious faith on the part of both faculty and students, and faith-centered content is no longer a curricular objective of most institutions.

Contested conceptions regarding the legitimate place of religion within the academy are clearly evident. Some have described the division as creating a climate of
hostility toward religion (Marsden, 1994). For others, the process has been simply a matter of differentiation (Roberts & Turner, 2000). How individuals describe the scenario reveals the meaning they have attached to the developments. While perspectives differ widely on the gifts or adversity drawn from this division, there is some agreement on the effects of the separation. Disciplinary specialization fragmented the previous unity of learning, as well as challenged the connections between knowledge and God. A bifurcation of the sacred and the secular within the academy has been an outcome of these historical developments within higher education, specifically of the response to the ideals of enlightenment. Burrows (2001) noted that this shift placed religious issues at the “periphery of the academy” (p. 138). These shifts coincided with larger shifts separating cognitive and affective domains, as well as intersections between personal and public in the educational objectives of higher education.

Palmer (1987) described the ethos of the contemporary higher education academy as distinctively separating faith and education at ontological and epistemological levels. The “mode of knowing” separates value from fact and is a powerful notion in academic life. This perspective of knowing also dictates that intellect is distinct from morality and that learning is separate from personal development. The predominant epistemology of the academy separates the self from knowledge. Essentially, within the contemporary academy, there is radical separation between knowledge and personal life (Palmer, 1983, 1987; Schwehn, 1992). Schwehn argued that “ways of knowing are not morally neutral” (p. 25). Willimon (1997) also bemoaned this notion of separating personal from public in higher education with specific reference to faith commitments when he stated, “Colleges
and universities have attempted to create neutral, value-free, secular space, where the claims of religious faith could be kept neutral and private and the life of the mind could be pursued free from prior religious commitments” (p. 76). Willimon referenced the basic premise of the academy, that intellect and faith are distinct, and also contended that this separation is false. Raper (2001) contended that the silence of the academy on matters of faith and religion has been harmful to students by chilling their ability to give voice to these central questions in their lives. The manner in which reality is known precludes knowing issues of value or “ultimate commitments,” which have been relegated outside the faculty role and the classroom.

Palmer (1983) articulated a central ethical question for the realm of education, which asked whether education forms or deforms lives within the world (p. xiii). Education is not only shaped within the classroom, but also within the broader college environment. The college environment is partially shaped by a network of differentiated subcultures that operate with distinct perspectives. The interrelationship of these subcultures is a critical variable in the collective impact of the college environment on the student experience as it relates to faith. The faculty is a central subculture within higher education and the role of faculty is critically important in examining influences on student faith. The normative context of the academic career affirms that faculty place greater emphasis on the classroom and the intellectual life of students than matters of faith (Schwehn, 1992). Reuben (1996) argued that the predominant identity of faculty is that of a knowledge specialist, far removed from the personal and affective lives of students. Faculty cannot “address questions of meaning of the whole or the purpose of
human life” (Schwehn, 1992, p. 7). Wolterstorff (2002) argued that it is not possible or preferable to ignore particularities of religion in the process of learning; however, this is exactly what the contemporary academy seems to ask of students. The trajectory minimally suggests that the personal lives of students are distinct from academic pursuits. Morality within the contemporary academy is predominantly considered to be a concern of the “extracurriculum” (Schwehn, 1992, p. 45). The shift of morality outside the curriculum brought about the identification of morality with behavior rather than with beliefs (Reuben, 1996).

While faculty are responsible for teaching and learning within the classroom, student affairs personnel are responsible for aspects of educational life external to the classroom. This structural division places the personal growth of students at the margins of the academic enterprise (Reuben, 1996). Their personal lives remain distinct when academic instruction does not invite them to “intersect their autobiographies with the life story of the world” (Palmer 1987, p. 22). The differentiation of fact and value is reinforced by the structure of higher education in which the “distinction between morality and knowledge seem a ‘natural’ part of intellectual life” (Reuben, 1996, p. 268). Reuben asserted that “student life replaced the classroom and the chapel as the locus of the moral mission of the university” (p. 255). The responsibilities of faculty draw them away from the personal lives of students. Conversely, the personal lives of students are extracted from classroom work as faith and meaning shift outside intellectual life within the university.
**Shifts in Perspective**

Several developments within the field of student affairs specifically, and within higher education generally, have “gained ground” in reuniting the cognitive and affect—learning and development. While of critical espoused value since 1937 for the student affairs profession, the Student Learning Imperative helped to refocus this value (American College Personnel Association, 1994). It sought to reengage student affairs educators in enhancing student learning and redirected attention to both cognitive and affective domains. More recently, and more specific to faith, the two major professional associations for student affairs educators have emphasized faith and spirituality in their recent professional development agendas. The American College Personnel Association hosted an institute on faith development in Long Beach, California in the fall of 2000. Parks facilitated the institute. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators has partnered with other associations to host two national conferences on spirituality in 2001 and 2002. Within the broader realm of scholarship, new agendas are being questioned and imagined for the place of faith. These new agendas question the idea that scholars, specifically of the Christian faith, must always look historically for the best models to bridge faith and learning. New avenues of understanding with regard to incorporating faith orientation, as well as engaging those with differing faith perspectives, are being considered (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2002).

The emergent presence of postmodern perspectives also contributes to the shifting ethos of the academy. Wolterstorff (2002) asked that questions of religion within the academy be asked again in light of the current conversions in ethos. Turner (2002), while
acknowledging a strong historical basis for tension between religion and academic inquiry, encouraged engagement of the question of religion and education in ways that may be mutually beneficial. Marsden (1994) advocated postmodernist perspectives as a means to claim a “space at the table” for those of Christian faith. Hollinger (2002), on the other hand, voiced skepticism regarding contemporary dialogue seeking to bridge higher education and religion. Three central points emerge from this dialogue. First, the connection between faith and the academy manifests both tension regarding their intersection and also a yearning for union. Second, education that nurtures critical reflection on identity, purpose, and the essential manifestation of ultimate commitments is necessary within the realm of the academy, but structurally, only occurs at the periphery. Finally, there is no predominant understanding as to the most beneficial place or places for faith education to function within higher education.

Students discover what is critical in their lives by the content and process of the educational experience. The structure of the academy perpetuates the division between affect and intellect in the educational experience and complicates integration of intellect and meaning. Can faith formation that calls for integrating cognition and affect be realized in this environment? What is the impact of the privatization of religious perspectives within the academy? Some initial responses to these questions were raised by Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) in their comprehensive, qualitative study of the meaning of religion to undergraduates at the turn of the 21st century. Their study sought to “test the secularization perspective,” but also to address the overwhelming absence of “first hand, on-site examinations of religion on college campuses” (p. 6).
Cherry and colleagues (2001) focused their comprehensive, qualitative study on four diverse educational institutions: Roman Catholic, state, Lutheran, and historically African-American—the east, west, north, and south regions of the United States, respectively. In examining the experience of religion within these four different institutions of higher education, these authors identified critical dimensions to the place of faith within this arena. College ministry groups were identified as a particular subenvironment for religious experience. Cherry et al. noted a shift in viewing campus ministry as a “dangerous space of higher education,” articulated by the secularization motif, to a university subculture with marked potential and promise. They also identified integration of course content conducive to reflection as critical for faith formation. They observed that peer leadership was a crucial element within campus ministry groups. Peer leadership enabled growth and reflection pivotal to the formation of faith. Finally, Cherry and colleagues found that campus-ministry activities are generally more appealing to young women than to young men. A primary conclusion of this research is that pluralism and diversity are more accurate metaphors than secularization in describing the place of religion on the university campus.

Gaps in the understanding of religion within higher education also extend to specific contexts. The context for this study, the IVCF, is a campus ministry group with student chapters throughout North America. Few studies exist that examine this very specific community or its relationship to faith formation. Cherry and colleagues (2001) encountered the IVCF at both the state university and the Lutheran liberal-arts college in their study. Within the context of the state university, these researchers described students
involved in the IVCF as having “busy schedules” and “being part of a close-knit community” (p. 22). They also described the IVCF as attracting more students than most other faith-based student organizations. Cherry et al. reported that the IVCF at the Lutheran college was active as well. Bramadat (2000) studied the IVCF in his qualitative research conducted at a Canadian secular university. His study is essentially the first ethnography of a religious group on a secular campus. Bramadat documented very broad and active student participation. His ethnography vividly described the negotiation of Christian ideas with the broader academic culture and corresponding ideologies. The IVCF presents a context worthy of future inquiry. First, there is wide participation of students in IVCF chapters throughout the country. Second, this context speaks to broader themes of living one’s faith in a pluralistic environment. Future inquiry must focus not only on the respective environment itself, but also on the impact such environments have on the student participants themselves, on student learning, and on development outcomes including faith.

The challenge and caution, however, is to avoid assuming or claiming similar cultures from chapter to chapter within the IVCF. Cherry and colleagues (2001), for example, revealed two different cultures within the IVCF groups active in a state university on the west coast of the United States and in a Lutheran liberal-arts college in the northern region of the United States. These dissimilarities extend to the response of participants in worship (i.e., restrained versus clapping and waving of arms or contemporary versus classical music). IVCF chapters are shaped by the context of their regional affiliations including the personnel networks organized within the respective
regions. Further study on the IVCF must address specific institutional and regional contexts to advance scholarly understanding and analysis.

Themes, Gaps, and Core Findings

College and Community Contexts

The potential role of higher education in nurturing young adult faith is clearly grounded in the literature. At the same time, there appears to be a significant question regarding the formation of faith and the culture of the academy. While faith is holistic, the academy is often divided into domains of personal and public, intellectual and affective. Extending from a divided academy, questions of ultimate meaning, which lie at the core of faith, are peripheral to the purposes of contemporary education. Further, faith is a relational enterprise, which is also challenged by the ethos of the divided academy. The overlapping notion is that of process and development. Both learning and development are processes of increasing complexity and interpersonal connection. The ethos of the higher education academy is built upon a 4-year academic program that grows more complex with each year. While several efforts have sought to reunify education with questions of faith and meaning, these efforts are emergent and atypical.

A central theme drawn from the literature, as it relates to the dynamics of faith, is the role of community as a mediating variable of self and the environment. The theoretical frameworks of faith outlined by Fowler (1981, 1987, 1996) and Parks (1986a, 2000) focus explicitly or implicitly on the relationship of self and other and the dimension of community. Fowler also articulated the impact of the social environment by emphasizing the role the setting plays in individual faith development. Community plays
a vital role by providing a social context. The notion of a holding environment, introduced earlier, is a critical lens in this inquiry. The term emphasizes a context for individuals to construct faith they can own and that guides their commitments to self and their connections to others. It is in the examination of the social context of students that may reveal patterns in their dynamics of faith.

The focus of self, community, and ultimate concern is uniquely applicable to faith formation during the college years. Faith provides orientation, purpose, and a shared commitment to self and the respective community (Fowler, 1981). Faith allows individuals to view themselves in relation to a common frame of meaning, thereby encouraging the development of community. This addresses the foundations of the faith framework as constructed connections between self, community, and ultimate commitment. Communities may serve as developmentally appropriate, relational arenas, which engage ultimate concerns and connect individuals around these issues. They may serve this function through challenge, as well as support, of any given faith understanding.

*Transformation*

The notion of faith is also built upon the cornerstones of process and development. The notion of transition within the Fowler (1981, 1996) framework is a critical aspect of faith development theory. Transition is a significant growth experience. Consistent with the larger body of cognitive development theory, progression to a new faith stage depends upon cognitive conflict. Cognitive conflict can lead to either growth or stagnation, depending upon the appropriate balance of challenge and support the
individual is receiving within that context (Kegan, 1982). Passage from one stage to the next represents an attempt to construct new ways of knowing and relating. The new stage emerges when a person becomes aware of the limitations of the present stage and seeks to move to a new mode of making meaning. The experience of developmental change involves distress as individuals experience such transitions as a reconstruction of self-understanding and their relationship to the world. Specifically, this represents a shift in meaning (Kegan, 1980a). Kegan (1980b) noted that this constructive developmental framework, examined holistically, speaks to ultimate dimensions of human experience. Summarized, the literature identifies several elements of the transition of faith. In the college years, a common transition is from Fowler’s Stage 3 to Stage 4. In this transition the locus of authority shifts from external to internal, from other directed to internally motivated.

*Inquiry Questions in Light of the Literature*

As themes of the literature are reviewed collectively, questions surface that inform the conceptual and methodological context of this current study. There is an intentional lens focused on the faith dynamics of individual students. This lens incorporates views of the self as they relate to the development of faith, the community of the IVCF, and the larger environment of higher education as it relates to faith.

The review of related literature also highlights the narrative dimensions of faith. Narrative themes will be further highlighted as this inquiry turns to conceptual frameworks for analysis. Previous research using a narrative model for faith moved away from the Fowler model (as cited in Anderson, 1995). This current study incorporates the
FDI based upon the research conducted by Fowler and colleagues (Fowler, 1981; Moseley et al., 1993) and also engages its narrative dimensions. Much of the research on faith development in higher education has focused specifically on the Christian college (Bolen, 1994; Cureton, 1985; Haggray, 1993; Newman, 1998; Rice, 1994; White, 1985). The ethos of the university, with an intentional lens on the dynamics of faith, is a unique contribution of this current study. Additionally, this research seeks to better understand and recognize the role of particular social contexts in the challenge and nurture of faith for students involved in the respective contexts. Likewise, that social context of this study—the IVCF—is unique in its faith orientation.
CHAPTER 3

Conceptual Framework and Research Procedures

Inquiry Orientation

This inquiry sought to understand and describe the dynamics of faith for students involved in the IVCF at a private secular university within the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The purpose of this inquiry, and its guiding inquiry questions, serve as a collective foundation for the conceptual orientation, framework, and methodology of this research. This is a qualitative inquiry. Despite great diversity within the qualitative tradition, several features differentiate qualitative research. These features are categorized in terms of ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Creswell, 1998).

A basic ontological principle of qualitative research is that reality is socially constructed by all individuals involved in the research, including the participants, researcher, and reader (Creswell, 1998; Flick, 1998; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative inquiry accesses participant construction of the world and personal experiences from their unique perspective (Flick, 1998; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Sherman & Webb, 1988). Qualitative researchers are “interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Qualitative inquirers rely upon participant perspectives to construct the research narrative (Creswell, 1998). An epistemological assumption of qualitative research is that the interaction between
researcher and participant, as well as inquirer reflexivity, are inherent elements of knowledge production (Flick, 1998). The researcher is as much an instrument of the study as an interview or other tool used toward data collection. Qualitative researchers interact with those they study, and minimize the distance between researcher, participant, and the study phenomena. The axiological position of qualitative research is that inquiry is value laden. The researcher openly reports the ethical nature of the study, as well as his or her subjectivities. The researcher is present in the text and writes with a personal voice. The research voice represents the inquirer’s interpretation and representation of participant perspectives and the research phenomena under study.

Stemming from the described positions of qualitative research, several interconnected constructs can be distinguished. The inquiry is naturalistic; real-world phenomena and particulars of experience are explored (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research seeks to understand “how and why things actually happen in a complex world” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 38). Human experience and inquirer understanding are shaped in context. The researcher documents phenomena in their natural environment, appreciating the dynamic, interwoven variables of time, place, and person. Data in qualitative inquiry emerge from particular situations and direct experience (Patton, 1990; Sherman & Webb, 1988). Qualitative data often assume the form of written text. Meaning and understanding aptly describe the aspirations of qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research is inductive; theory is ultimately constructed from analysis of the data (Patton, 1990). Qualitative methodologists explore broad, open-ended research
questions and do not impose preexisting expectations on inquiry phenomena or the setting. Immersing themselves in the details of the data, qualitative researchers attempt to discover interrelationships and patterns among dimensions that emerge from the data. Such investigators display a holistic perspective. Context is essential for interpretation and accurate understanding of the research phenomenon. Qualitative-research portrayals acknowledge “nuance, interdependencies, complexities, setting, and context” (p. 51). The researcher assembles a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, setting, and participants.

The qualitative inquirer will demonstrate context sensitivity as research findings are presented in a “social, temporal, and historical context” (Patton, 1990, p. 40). Accordingly, generalizations outside the particular context of inquiry are tentative.

Qualitative research provides a complex analysis and portrayal of participant perspectives and context in light of the phenomenon under study. It involves personal contact with the participants, setting, and phenomenon under study. Fieldwork involves knowing the participants personally in their own environments and obtaining first-hand understanding of the research phenomenon. The researcher-participant relationship and the personal insights of the investigator are instrumental to the inquiry. The researcher is the “primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

Research design in qualitative study is dynamic and emergent. Inquiry questions are refined based upon field experience (Creswell, 1998; Flick, 1998; Patton, 1990). Qualitative research places no a priori constraints on outcomes and leaves room for discovery during the inquiry. Design flexibility is a critical characteristic of qualitative
research. Qualitative methods select a few exemplars from a unique case that provide depth and detail in connection to the central purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 1990). Qualitative researchers presuppose that much can be learned from a small number of particular cases, which are described in rich detail within the study documentation. The qualitative researcher adopts a stance of empathic neutrality with regard to the phenomena under study. Empathic neutrality adheres to the verstehen doctrine; meaning and understanding honor the unique human capacity to know, understand, and make sense of the world (p. 56). The qualitative researcher is committed to “understand the world as it is, to be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and to be balanced in reporting both confirming and disconfirming evidence” (p. 55). This stance demands depth of personal reflection on the part of the researcher to formulate authentic outcomes.

The broad context of qualitative inquiry lays an appropriate foundation for application in this study. The credibility of qualitative research rests on the consistency of the research questions, conceptual orientation, and methodology. The phenomenon of faith involves basic epistemological questions consistent with the paradigm of qualitative research. This inquiry examines the dynamics of faith for students within the naturally occurring, holistic context of the intersection of IVCF involvement and personal and educational interaction within a private secular university. The inquiry centers on broad questions, assumes a dynamic research process, and focuses on a small number of exemplars. Detailed descriptions of participant experiences are incorporated in the study documentation to allow readers to accurately interpret the study. As the researcher, I
maintain personal contact with the participants and serve as the instrument for analysis and representation. The appropriate nature of the research method, in light of the conceptual framework of the inquiry, is also a pivotal feature of qualitative research (Flick, 1998). Narrative inquiry provides the conceptual framework for this study.

*Conceptual Framework*

Qualitative researchers “make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 1). Narrative inquiry renders these aims explicit by generating stories from personal experience and portraying interpretation and findings in narrative form (Schwandt, 1997). Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary method, drawing upon traditions in literary theory, drama, and psychology (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). It draws upon an understanding of narrative itself as an avenue toward knowing and both organizing and representing experience (Bruner, 1990, 1991; Czarniawska, 2002).

Narrative inquiry is rooted in hermeneutic tradition. The central message of hermeneutics is that, to be human, is to create meaning. The term hermeneutic connotes the presence of a text in some form through which meaning is expressed and from which meaning is extracted (Bruner, 1991). In fact, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to narrative data as “field texts” (p. 83). Field texts provide the basis for reconstruction and interpretation. The hermeneutic standpoint enables the inquirer to study the “origin and revision of people making sense of themselves” (Josselson, 1995, p. 35). Narrative inquiry produces a description of others who are simultaneously engaged in understanding themselves (Josselson, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988).
Several distinct features characterize the ethos of narrative inquiry. Such inquiry is experience based, aiming to understand and create meaning of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Crites (1997) argued that experience is “inherently narrative” (p. 26). The central focus of narratives is personal lived experience (Bruner, 1991; Josselson, 1995). Experience in an inquiry context intersects both personal and social dimensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); yet, personal experience is understood in a social context. Narrative inquiry makes sense of life and the ways that individuals experience the world (Conelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Narrative inquiry examines experience within a temporal dimension. Humans reflect on experience in an “inherently temporal way” (Crites, 1997, p. 33). Narrative examines experience through the present. While past and future are elements of narrative, they are continuously mediated through the lens of the present. Narrative contains the temporal dimensions of experience in a unity of form (p. 39). Narrative inquiry views individuals in a holistic manner (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin 1990). It represents a “self in conversation with itself and with its world over time” (Josselson, 1995, p. 33). Personal experiences take on a sense of unity when examined within the overall continuity of life (MacIntyre, 1997). A narrative is essentially an account of events. However, constructing a narrative is more complex than simply placing events in a chronological order. Narrative construction involves drawing meaning by bringing coherence to seemingly disordered insights and experiences (Josselson, 1995). Events are constituted in light of the whole; textual interdependence between both the part and the whole is evident throughout narrative inquiry.
Narrative inquiry involves a layered set of characters—“researcher, participants, and resource persons”—all of whom form a *textured construction* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xvii). The notion of textured construction elucidates the contextual orientation of narrative inquiry. Narratives of personal experience reflect the setting. Narrative researchers believe they can learn more about people and their meaning interpretations by studying individuals within context (Josselson, 1995). The context provides an environment conducive to understanding the why, when, and how of narrative. Both researcher and participant agency are present in narrative inquiry, and both are active interpreters of the perspectives of each other (Bruner, 1991). Purpose is inherently involved for the participant narrating personal experience and for the inquirer narrating the research story. The inquirer remains mindful of textured construction through interpretation and representation. To summarize, narrative inquiry focuses on the holistic study of people within a particular setting and time. Josselson (1995) captured the essence of narrative inquiry by referencing narrative as a route to “imagining what is real in whole people in their world” (p. 29). Narrative inquiry captures the processes involved in the creation of meaning for both the participants and inquirer. The voices of both participant and researcher are incorporated explicitly throughout the inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is constructed through several “interwoven threads.” It informs the phenomenon, method, representation, and ethical considerations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This current narrative inquiry is influenced by the disciplinary perspectives, phenomena, and inquiry questions that ground the study as well as the methods of field text collection, interpretation, and
representation that compose its findings. As an educational inquiry, this study focuses on how lives are constituted and incarnated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It examines faith experiences within a particular higher education context and provides avenues for narration of college experiences. Examining experience is central to education. Education involves thinking in terms of continuity (i.e., the culmination of experiences internal and external to the classroom, as well as the intersection of higher education experiences with the personal experiences and histories of students).

The central phenomenon of this study is faith. Faith is a process of creating meaning through “seeking pattern, order, form, and significance” (Parks, 1986a, p. 14). Narrative inquiry seeks meaning, form, and significance in the stories of individuals. In methodological terms, this inquiry focuses on the personal experience of faith within a particular place, time, and context. Dimensions of both self and setting are explored in relation to the central phenomenon of faith.

The Qualitative Interview

Extending from the conceptual framework and inquiry questions, the primary technique incorporated in this research for field text collection was the qualitative interview. Within the qualitative paradigm, the interview offers a lens to experience and understand the world of the participants expressed in their own words. Within the disciplinary context of education, the qualitative interview provides a means for gathering data regarding “educational practices and identities” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 454). The discipline of education has renewed its emphasis on qualitative versions of the
research interview in recent years. This inquiry explicitly sought to understand the dynamics of faith as shaped by the educational experiences of undergraduate students attending a private secular university.

**Characteristics**

The qualitative interview generally refers to interviews of extended duration, multiple segments, and personal interaction between the interviewer and participant (Johnson, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Characterized well by Kvale (1996) as a guided conversation, the interview focuses on the direct, lived experience of participants and their relationship to the world (Kvale, 1996; Sherman & Webb, 1988; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The inquiry text addresses personal information regarding the participants and their personal experiences, ideology, and perspectives (Johnson, 2002). The qualitative interview is based upon words. Language bridges experience with understanding. Descriptions are precise and meaning interpretation is rigorous (Kvale, 1996). The interview is focused while remaining open to shifts in participant descriptions and meanings during and/or as a result of the interview process.

The purpose of qualitative interviewing and associated fieldwork is to understand the meanings drawn by participants (Josselson, 1995; Warren, 2002). Inquirers use “interviews to understand particular aspects of given theoretical puzzles” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 466). Interviews are uniquely suited for “studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). Interviews provide a means to develop response to the particular
inquiry questions by gathering and interpreting the “words and ideas of those who
experience the reality in question” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 459). Inquirers seek access
to assumptions undergirding personal constructions of the world (Sherman & Webb,
1988).

Descriptions of personal experience, as well as the context shaping these
experiences, can be explored in the qualitative interview. Interview field texts describe
the meaning composed by participants in connection to events and activities (Kvale,
1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Warren, 2002). The interview aims to describe “precisely
the possibly ambiguous and contradictory meanings expressed” by participants (Kvale,
1996, p. 34). The qualitative variety of the phenomenon under study is sought as the
inquirer seeks to “grasp and articulate the multiple views or perspectives on and
meanings of some activity, event, place, or cultural object” (Johnson, 2002, pp. 106–107).

Interviewer and participants interact with each other with mutual influence in a reciprocal
fashion (Kvale, 1996). Both interviewer and participant draw upon intersubjective
knowledge to make sense of inquiry conversation (Johnson, 2002). The interactive
elements of the qualitative interview enact implications for both interviewer and
participant. Participants are “meaning makers” (Warren, 2002, p. 83). As the interviewer,
I also serve as an “active sense maker and interpreter of what is seen and heard in the
research context” (Johnson, 2002, p. 105).

Utilization of qualitative interviews originates with a researcher who is
knowledgeable of the study topic. Sensitivity to the phenomenon of inquiry is critical to
adequately probe participant reflections. My task, as the interviewer, is to provide
conditions that encourage participants to communicate their experiences. Critical
discursive conditions include interview questions oriented to personal experiences. Such
questions assist participants in drawing meaning and being able to communicate it back
to the interviewer (Chase, 1995). Important relational conditions include comfortable
rapport between the researcher and participant. The qualitative interview provides
numerous benefits for the researcher. Interviewing lends itself to “building general theory
about the nature of social phenomena” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 91). Such interviews
are versatile (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and particularly valuable when research interests are
well defined and time constraints present (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). However, qualitative
interviews also introduce several limitations. Individuals can only report their
experiences and the interview may be affected by the emotional state of the participants
during their interviews (Patton, 1990). The feasibility of individual interviews is also
limited by financial considerations.

Narrative Orientation

The qualitative interview is an appropriate method of data collection for this study
primarily because it fulfills the narrative orientation of the inquiry. Mishler (1986)
pioneered the framing of interviews from a narrative perspective by explicitly describing
the interview as a discursive event. Czarniawska (2002) made this same case by
articulating that interviews are “sites for the production and distribution of narratives” (p.
735). Discussing personal life experience with another individual is a “multilayered,
context dependent, discursive event” (Bell, 1999, p. 354). Essentially, interviews invite
personal narratives regarding some “life experience that is of deep and abiding interest to
participants” (Chase, 1995, p. 2). Wengraf (2001) articulated that an interview that elicits the telling of the personal story can be referenced as a “narrative interview” (p. 111).

The qualitative interview was used in this study to invite narratives of personal experience (Denzin, 1989; Johnson, 2002; Riessman, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Warren, 2002). The invitations came in the form of two interviews presenting semistructured questions to the participants (see Appendices A & B). An important component of the interview as narrative in this inquiry is that the narrative is specifically biographical. By narrating their stories, participants draw meaning of biographical experience (Crites, 1997). This biographical component reflects the value of the narrative experience as “an act of meaning-making” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 62). The “temporal range” of the interview extends from the past into the future (Warren, 2002, p. 85). While it is focused on a particular place in time, participants reflect upon that moment in light of their past and future.

Similar to narration, faith itself has been framed as a process and grounds for the creation of meaning (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986a, 2000). This inquiry sought to understand the dynamics of faith for students involved in the IVCF at a private secular university. There were two phases to the interviews conducted in this study—the FDI and the faith experience interview (FEI). Both phases involved the investment of approximately 4 total hours for each participant. The interviews took place during the summer and fall of 2001. I originally intended to complete the two interviews for each participant within a 3-week period of time; however, it became apparent that continuity was enhanced the closer the interviews were conducted to each other. Consequently, I
made an effort to conduct the two interviews for each participant closer together. There was a wide range of time in the actual space between the interviews among all the participants; the shortest duration was 24 hours and the longest being 12 weeks.

The FDI Guide, designed by the Center for Research in Faith and Moral Development, was used in the first phase of field text collection (Moseley et al., 1986/1993). This interview focuses on four major areas: life review, relationships, present values and commitments, and religion. Part I is designed to place the participants at ease and suggest topics around which the individual may be most comfortable in sharing their story. It is designed in an open-ended format and intended to produce qualitative, spontaneous data (Nelson & Aleshire, 1986). Placed within a narrative paradigm, the first question in Part I essentially elicits a full narrative of the life of the participant up to that point. Further, the question invites the participant to draw meaning from their experiences by dividing and naming their life chapters. Part II is designed to provide an in-depth life review by posing questions surrounding influential people, events, relationships, and crises. Part III elicits information regarding the manner in which faith impacts the perspectives of the participant surrounding community, decision making, the meaning of life, and suffering. Part IV focuses on religion as a category of “appraising human faith” (p. 193).

The narrative framework and undergraduate student participation in this inquiry are reflected in modifications to the language and process of the FDI. Designed as a semistructured interview, the interview guide was used with greater flexibility reflecting the theoretical orientation of this inquiry. The questions were posed as starting points and
additional probes were added. The FDI is typically scored using a standardized measure. The protocol generated by Fowler and his team of researchers analyzes the FDI by assigning stage and aspect codes to responses. The scoring form preassigns each question in the interview to an aspect of faith development. Complete analysis produces an overall faith stage score, which is the mean score of all coded responses (Moseley et al., 1986/1993). An overall faith-stage score may include a range of scores on respective faith aspects. The score that provides the range between these aspect scores and the overall score indicates faith-stage transition. This scoring method was not used in this study.

Language that allowed for a broader life span was modified to reflect the shorter life experience of college student participants. The modified protocol is provided in Appendix A (Fowler, 1981; Moseley et al, 1986/1993). The FDI was estimated to involve approximately 2 hours for each participant. The actual time commitment ranged from 90 minutes to 5 hours, with an average of 2.5 hours per participant. I negotiated additional time with each participant, when necessary, to accommodate his or her schedule.

The second phase of the interview was conducted using the FEI. I constructed the interview to effectively couple with the FDI in drawing data related to the central questions of inquiry. The FEI provided an opportunity to build upon the first interview and focus on elements of the faith story that had been previously articulated. The second interview was estimated to require approximately 90 minutes. The FEI ranged from 70 minutes to 2 hours; the average was 80 minutes. This interview focused on experiences within the IVCF, as well as within academic, social, and interpersonal contexts, and the student participants were asked to reflect on how experience within these domains may
have reinforced, challenged, or led to an examination or questioning of their faith during their college years to date. The FEI Guide is provided in Appendix B. A pilot test of the FEI Guide was conducted with one male and one female undergraduate participating in an IVCF chapter at a similar institution not connected with this study. The FEI Guide was refined following this testing. Both students participating in the pilot suggested that family was an important category that the original interview had neglected; hence, the addition of family as a category resulted from the pilot process.

Setting, Site, and Participants

The context for this study is revealed in the inquiry questions, my own personal experience as the researcher, and the social significance of this study. The inquiry focuses on the experience of faith for students involved in the IVCF and enrolled within a private secular university. The IVCF is an evangelical, interdenominational, Christian campus-based ministry that was incorporated in 1941. Based in Madison, Wisconsin, the IVCF focuses on college students attending secular colleges and universities. The presupposition of the Fellowship is that Christian students attending secular colleges can indeed continue growing in their faith (Hunt & Hunt, 1991). The contemporary expression of this core purpose is articulated in the mission of the IVCF, which states that the IVCF seeks to “establish and advance at colleges and universities witnessing communities of students and faculty who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord: growing in love for God, God’s word, God’s people of every ethnicity and culture, and God’s
purposes in the world” (IVCF/USA, 2003a, ¶ 1). The IVCF is active on more than 560 college and university campuses nationwide, and more than 34,000 students and faculty participate in its ministries (IVCF/USA, 2003b).

My involvement with the IVCF as an undergraduate provided a network of familiar individuals who helped me negotiate entrée for this study. During my undergraduate years, I met Vera and her husband, Ethan\(^1\) as they served with the IVCF. Ethan currently serves as an IVCF Area Director covering a large mid-Atlantic region of the United States. He was my initial contact within the organization as I sought access to IVCF students. I also sought support from the national IVCF organization to use the Fellowship as a research site. The IVCF President supported the involvement of IVCF students in the study and affirmed that Ethan would serve as the appropriate person for determining a specific campus chapter. Ethan affirmed our initial discussions of the study and agreed to assist me in referring local staff, determining an institution, and in establishing a time line. Letters of support from the area director and the president of the IVCF were obtained.

Deciding on a particular site within a broad scope of options was primarily a matter of convenience and intuitive discernment. Ethan and I discussed various possibilities and the ethos of each was discussed from within the lens of my undergraduate experience. A first choice to solicit for participation in the study was made, as well as a second chapter at an alternate institution in case the first did not come to fruition. Contact information for staff advisers within each chapter was provided.

\(^1\) Vera and Ethan are pseudonyms, as are all the names mentioned throughout the research text.
Those of the first chapter were contacted and informed of the study and its purposes. The anticipated responsibilities of the staff were also discussed. I met personally with them to talk further about the study and address the questions. Emerging from this conversation, we discussed the importance of involving the student leadership team—referred to as the “Servant Team” —in the final decision.

Eight members of the Servant Team were informed of the study during one of their regularly scheduled meetings. I described the purposes of the study and the anticipated expectations for all participants. My personal narrative regarding the impetus for the inquiry including my own past experience as an IVCF undergraduate were also articulated. Questions regarding both the content and process of the research were encouraged. The Servant Team was subsequently asked to consider submitting their chapter for participation in the study. Individual participation was also requested because many of these student leaders were expected to meet criteria for inclusion in the study. It was noted that it would be important for the Servant Team to consider their personal involvement at the same time they considered the collective involvement of their chapter. If, as a team, they affirmed chapter participation, but no individuals committed to participation, the research process would be hindered. The Servant Team privately discussed the possibilities and the chapter adviser communicated the following day that the team had decided to participate. A letter indicating the support of the staff advisers to use their chapter as the study site was obtained.

Finally, permission was sought from the institution that hosts the particular IVCF chapter selected for study participation to utilize their students for purposes of the
research. Upon fulfilling an expedited research-review process, permission was granted and, as a result of the review process, research agreement was provided to be sensitive to the time commitment of the student participants and to the confidentiality of the institution. A site adviser was assigned to assist with the study on the campus site. This individual was helpful in negotiating logistical relationships with the institution, particularly with reserving appropriate campus space for interviews. The participating institution is a medium-sized university that awards baccalaureate degrees and is located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The university is independent and not affiliated with any religious denomination or faith-based mission. The institution is highly selective, offering programs of study within the liberal-arts and applied disciplines.

Potential research participants were identified by applying theoretical sampling (Creswell, 1998). Such sampling selects participants who fit an analytic profile specific to the questions of inquiry (Johnson, 2002; Warren, 2002). Theoretical sampling in the context of this study meant identifying participants based upon their immersion in the setting of the IVCF at the secular university serving as the study site. Inclusion criteria included undergraduate involvement in the IVCF chapter at Mid-Atlantic University. Involvement was defined as individuals “committed to the purposes, plans and activities of an InterVarsity fellowship,” as evidenced by taking responsibility for, or serving, the entire chapter fellowship (Roeckeman, 1991). Involvement was operationalized as sustained IVCF participation at the research site for a minimum period of 1 academic year and specific participation in at least two of the following IVCF experiences: the
student leadership team, Bible study leader, small-group Bible study participant, conference/retreat participation, and/or Chapter camp participation. A balance of gender perspectives was sought so gender representation was also a selection criterion. Persons with provisional interest in the inquiry and adequate time to participate in the interviews were also considerations (Johnson, 2002).

Communication with the participating IVCF chapter advisers was initiated by telephone and electronic mail to clarify the purposes of the study and the criteria for participant selection. The staff advisers were asked to use the basic criteria outlined previously to generate potential research participants. One adviser suggested the Servant Team as potential participants because each of the team members would demonstrate involvement and investment in the chapter and its mission. Written correspondence (see Appendix C) soliciting individual involvement was initially directed to the eight members of the 2000-01 Servant Team. A Participant Information Form (see Appendix D) was included with each letter, allowing each individual to proactively volunteer. Seven members agreed to participate; six of these ultimately served as participants including two who were interviewed after their graduation. Five members of the 2001-02 Servant Team, who were not represented on the team of the previous year, were also invited to participate using the same method. Four agreed and three were ultimately included in the study. The two individuals who expressed interest, but did not participate, were excluded due to my own time constraints and those of these potential participants.
Ultimately, nine total participants completed the study—five women and four men representing university sophomores through recent graduates. Profiles of these nine participants are outlined in Table 1. Each student served on the Servant Team in the 2000-01 and/or 2001-02 academic years. Essentially, final participant selection shifted from a focus on general student participants to a focus on student leaders within the IVCF organization. Individual meetings were held with each participant prior to the interviews to address any questions they had surrounding the research and to build rapport between myself and the students. Participants were also provided with a copy of the Life Tapestry Exercise to enhance reflection prior to the FDI. This exercise was designed to be administered in conjunction with the FDI (see Appendix E; Center for Research and Faith Development, 1993).

Data Analysis, Synthesis, and Presentation

Qualitative research is a “path from theory to text and another from text back to theory” (Flick, 1998, p. 11). Grounded in the conceptual orientation of this inquiry, narrative provided the interpretive framework for the data analysis, synthesis, and representation of the findings. The task of narrative analysis is to provide a systemic way of understanding how meaning is created from personal experience (Riessman, 1993). Making sense is an interpretive act that brings insight to words and actions (Josselson, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Warren 2002). Narrative analysis can be applied to any spoken or written account (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The interview is a spoken account subsequently represented through written text. Because narrative inquiry is holistic and
Table 1

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic major</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Religious affiliation</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>21/22</td>
<td>Computer science</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Math and Computer science</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Electrical engineering</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Nondenominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dara</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Psychology and Spanish</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Nondenominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Nondenominational Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nondenominational Christian</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The participant with the pseudonym of “Keisha” turned 22 years of age during the study interviews. Religious affiliation and ethnicity are noted just as provided by the participants, hence the variations in terminology of nondenominational Christian versus Christian as well as Caucasian versus White.
contextual, analysis provided a means to review the interview responses within context. Ultimately, narrative analysis is hermeneutic; the meaning of the entire text is constructed from separate components (Bruner, 1991). As participants make sense of experience through narration, the inquirer constructs a coherent narrative encompassing the diverse commentaries of real people attempting to grasp complex human experiences (Czarniawska, 2002; Josselson, 1995).

Analysis involved interpretation of the field texts and ultimately constructing a research narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2002; Kvale, 1996). Each interview was transcribed to develop the field text (Kvale, 1996). The FDI and FEI were viewed together and analyzed narratively. Many hours were invested in listening to the verbal accounts, as well as reading and rereading written transcripts. Based upon these readings, content-based highlights of personal experience were generated, thereby identifying general “narrative codes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). This analysis was also influenced by the biographical approach of Denzin (1989). He described this approach broadly as the “studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning-point moments in an individuals’ [sic] life” (p. 69). Narrative codes included characters, settings, starting points, turning points, and tensions that emerged as the field texts were read in comparison (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin, 1989). Consistent with this approach, the contextual locus of narratives remained a major focus.

As a “bridge” from the field texts to the current research documentation, interim texts were created (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The most critical were constructed narratives addressing the central inquiry question for each participant. Aiming to honor
participant voice, the voice of the interviewer was edited from the narratives resulting in a “cohesive, first-person” account (Johnson-Bailey, 2002, p. 324). Additional interim texts were constructed across all participants to display the intersections between the field texts and the larger theoretical discourse (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They were based upon each of the following narrative codes: people, places, and moments that had an impact on faith, the definition of faith as expressed by the participants, as well as participant perspectives on the settings of the IVCF and Mid-Atlantic University. Essentially, the interim texts synthesized the wide variety of data and made visible the analytical plot that grounds this research text.

Finally, the research text was constructed using the narrative codes and biographic analysis, creating a chronicle representing the themes, persons, and experiences of the participants as they intersected with the theoretical discourse to address the central questions of the inquiry. Actual excerpts of discourse are presented so the reader can examine participant narratives within the context of their own analysis. As narrator for the research text, my voice remains distinct from the voices of the participants. Connections of meaning between my perspective and the viewpoint of participants are evident in analytic bridges throughout the research text.

Ethics and Authenticity

The narrative conceptual framework, coupled with the participant interviews, raises specific ethical considerations (Kvale, 1996; Widdershoven & Smits, 1996). Asking individuals to reflect upon their faith required intentional, ethical processes that demonstrated concern for the well-being of the participants. The students in this inquiry
were asked to reveal important aspects of themselves, which were very personal stories shared ultimately for my benefit as the inquirer (Lieblich, 1996). Narratives in this inquiry were solicited in an interview and interpreted and portrayed by me (Kvale, 1996). Personal narratives were interpreted within the context of the specific inquiry questions. Based upon personal lives made public, narrative inquiry can potentially cause emotional and social harm (Bakan, 1996).

Research ethics and authenticity began with the basic ethical guidelines of informed consent and confidentiality to protect participants and their communities from the potential consequences of research interviews (Kvale, 1996). I made every attempt to protect the vulnerability of participants by avoiding exploitation of the information shared (Chase, 1996; Johnson, 2002). Such protections extended not only to individual participants, but also to participating communities (Johnson, 2002). Several ethical considerations were implemented to effectuate this protection throughout the inquiry. Effort was made to move toward deeper ethical standpoints than minimalist protections of consent and confidentiality to afford some benefit to the participants through their involvement in the study. Credibility is also a fundamental ethical consideration. As the inquirer, I sought to ensure that my research text communicated in a trustworthy fashion. Authenticating qualitative research depends upon conceptualizing the phenomenon in a manner that captures its complexity (Kvale, 1996). Being faithful to the experience of participants maintained priority throughout this inquiry.

Ethical matters were “narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 170). Ethics were not rectified at any stagnant moment
in the inquiry, but rather, were addressed through a continuum of relevant activities (Mishler, 1990). Ethical considerations, including trustworthiness, emerged throughout the inquiry cycle; consequently, ethical protections were enacted within each phase. Ethical considerations were grounded in the purpose of the study. An ethical study contributes to the scholarly community and extends effort to improve the human condition (Kvale, 1996; Miller, 1996). This inquiry aimed to illuminate educational experiences as they relate to faith. Ethical considerations continued with the design of the inquiry, considering the fit of the phenomenon under study and the interview method (Kvale, 1996). Inquiry questions were clarified and provided the basis for refining the interview guides. The interview questions were phrased in familiar language, and the questions elicited substantial description of participant experiences. They also invited the stories of the participants and encouraged their contribution to the interview conversation.

Preparation for conducting this study involved several critical ethical considerations. The integrity of the participants was maintained, and selection was based upon their ability to articulate their perspectives on their world, dignifying them as capable contributors (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Informed and written consent was secured from the individuals and institutions associated with this study. Consent for the study was obtained from the IVCF at the national, regional, and local levels, as well as from the host university. Participants were fully informed as to the purpose, procedures, and time commitment involved through written correspondence and individual preinterview meetings with me. Participants were encouraged to ask questions regarding their participation in the study and each completed a Participant Consent Form (see
Appendix F). Participation was fully voluntary, and the students were free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time. Confidentiality was maintained in all aspects of this inquiry. Pseudonyms were used on transcripts and research reports for individual participants, as well as for the university host for the participating IVCF chapter. The participants were invited to create their own personal pseudonyms, which one student did. I constructed pseudonyms for the remaining eight participants.

The interview context also raised ethical considerations. Provision of a context in which participants could respond comfortably and honestly was sought (Patton, 1990). Each participant was made acutely aware of the research agenda (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Personal reflection was encouraged, which served to increase self-awareness for each participant within the interview context (Miller, 1996). Increased personal understanding was a critical aspect of reciprocity in this inquiry. My personal connection to member knowledge and lived experience shaped a positive rapport that was highly beneficial for the study interviews by providing initial understanding and shared language. In the interview context, matters of confidentiality and consequence were clarified. First, as narratives were solicited in the interview, I examined how deeply to probe for participant reflections. Some of the inquiry questions evoked deep, emotive responses from participants. Sensitive topics were carefully negotiated by maneuvering through the interview dialogue in a manner that honored each participant and his or her story. The promise to protect participants in inviting them to share their personal
experience was regarded with the highest respect and care (Denzin, 1989). The feelings of the participants were protected with patience and keen attention to their words and meanings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Transcription of the interviews provided yet another context for ethical consideration. With the permission of each participant, the sessions were audiotaped and verbatim transcripts were generated. Confidentiality emerged as a critical issue at this phase as pseudonyms were determined and instituted. On the transcripts, pseudonyms were used for both the participants and the university. Trustworthiness emerged in determining what constituted an accurate written transcription of the verbal statements of the participants. The translation of spoken words into written text proved to be an “interpretative practice” (Riessman, 1993). The authenticity of interpretation depends upon the adequacy of the description of the phenomenon of interest. Authentic description rested upon the use of careful, systematic transcription procedures (Johnson, 2002; Mishler, 1986). I utilized transcriptionists committed to confidentiality. Tapes remained in my possession or with the transcriptionist at all times. I carefully listened and relistened to the tape-recorded interviews to refine the written transcripts of the field texts. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and refine their personal transcripts. One student communicated personal experience in his interview that he did not want utilized and I accommodated this request. Each participant was provided with a copy of his or her own transcript. Maintaining a written text of their perspectives of faith during their college years provided an avenue of reciprocity.
During analysis, consequences for participants emerged as a central issue. Assessment was made at that time of how deeply and critically to analyze the personal narratives (Kvale, 1996). Participants had a voice in the interpretation and were invited to provide feedback on the initial findings of the research. The participant feedback generally affirmed initial findings and no changes were instituted. Research portrayals were not exempt from ethical protocols. Confidentiality concerns arose anew as interim texts and the final research text were generated. The protection and potential consequences of participants and their communities were critical during this phase. Pseudonyms and identifying information were appropriately handled in the editing to protect individuals and communities in their portrayals. Thick, rich description was critical to these portrayals to allow readers to judge the trustworthiness of the findings.

Significant ethical sensibilities are inherent in authorship. The “process of transforming a conversation into a published text involves the production of authority” (Bell, 1999, p. 369). To some extent, the participants in this study negotiated the use of their narratives by reviewing their own transcripts and the initial findings of the research. Nonetheless, I maintained interpretive authority for the analysis and composed research. Narrative analysis ultimately reflects the interests and decisions of the inquirer (Chase, 1996; Price, 1996). An extension of authorship with qualitative inquiry is the ethical imperative of reflexivity. Researchers conducting in-depth interviews must understand themselves and be conscious of their interpersonal interaction (Johnson, 2002). Recognizing personal subjectivity is foundational for an ethical, authentic inquiry (Kvale, 1996; Peshkin, 1988; Price, 1996). The biographical perspectives of the interviewer may
impact what is viewed as critical, frame the analyses, or affect the selection of illustrations. Based upon the biographical context, it was necessary for me to critically examine my own personal ideologies and assumptions as crucial lenses for discerning the meanings expressed in the student interviews (Johnson, 2002).

As the researcher in this inquiry, I maintained a reflexive journal, which documented questions and analytic insights that emerged in the process of field experience, in reviewing the interview tapes, in analysis, and in generating the research text. Notes from the theoretical discourse, and insights and questions that emerged during the literature review, were also included. The reflexive journal documented the discernment of meaningful aspects of the inquiry. Specifically, writing in the reflexive journal allowed me to situate the notion of faith in my own experience and to critically assess my openness to notions of faith in the experiences of participants. Commitment to the reflexive journal encouraged the time necessary to support the authenticity of field text collection, analysis, and portrayal. Finally, an inquiry audit was conducted to consider the appropriate nature of the findings and the procedures of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the audit, interview transcripts and research findings were shared with the research adviser to enable review of the process and authenticity of the analysis.

Interpreting the value of this inquiry is an important element to the overall research. Several contextual aspects must be utilized by the reader to assess its application in diverse settings (Kvale, 1996). As a narrative study using an interview method, this inquiry examines the social world of a particular population of college students and contributes a refined understanding of their world. The exemplars are
traditional-aged undergraduates, active in a Christian, campus-based ministry at a private secular university during a specific period in their lives. The past and future of each participant are interpreted through the lens of the present. The future formation of faith is yet to be determined and past formation of faith is viewed through the lens of current experience and understanding. As such, the portrayals are descriptive of tentative findings. One of the strengths of narrative inquiry is the “elicitation of voice” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). While strengthening this inquiry, participant voice is a context the reader must acknowledge. Not only are the voices of participants highlighted for their experiences, but the setting, events, and programs are also all embedded within their voiced expressions.

Inquirer-as-Instrument

My personal history and perspective highlight subtle descriptions of the inquiry phenomenon and contribute a “multiperspectival construction of knowledge” (Kvale, 1996, p. 286). It is therefore critical that I make explicit my perspective as the inquirer, providing a transparent and specific context for reader interpretation. Consequently, I offer a “backdrop” to my perspective which is comprised of both my reflections on personal experience with the inquiry phenomenon and settings, as well as my conceptual inclinations. The impetus for this inquiry stemmed from my undergraduate experience where I was actively involved in the IVCF on a secular, liberal-arts college campus. My faith formation was deeply influenced by this context. Academically, I held a double major in psychology and religious studies. It is only in retrospect that I now recognize the interplay inherent in these two seemingly separate interests. Together, psychology and
theology interweave the foundation of this inquiry, both in the review of faith
development discourses and in the adoption of a narrative lens.

As a result of the timing of my faith commitment and my entrance to college, I
never considered attending a faith-based college. I have periodically pondered the impact
of this decision on my own faith formation. Notably, my tenure as a senior student
affairs officer at a faith-based college has provided an opportunity to imagine how my
personal journey of faith may have otherwise unfolded—for good or for ill—had I attended
a similar type of college. The very act of conducting this inquiry has also enabled me to
reflect upon my faith and the contexts—primarily the secular college and the IVCF—that
have influenced my own faith formation. Since my undergraduate experiences, I have
maintained several relational connections with individuals from the IVCF organization.
This affiliation and the individual relationships it facilitated have proved to be invaluable
to my personal, professional, and faith growth. Similar to the participants in this inquiry,
my own experience with the IVCF was generally positive, but not perfect. The
expectations I had of myself sometimes diverged from the expectations my IVCF
mentors had of me, particularly as they related to campus involvement outside the
Fellowship. I recall personal bewilderment as my inner voice conflicted with my self-
selected external authoritative voice. I continue to consider the impact of my ultimate
decision to follow my inner voice given the divergence.

Conceptual reflection is equally imperative to understand the standpoint of the
inquirer. I view my stance as an inquirer to rest confidently within the interpretive
tradition. I find myself most “at home” in the world of reflection, and have been
fascinated by the deeper meanings of everyday experience for as long as I can recall. I enjoy finding connection amidst seemingly disconnected experiences and events and appreciate the opportunity to bring coherence to experience. I am intrigued by narrative as a metaphor and have often utilized the metaphor of story to bring meaning to my professional work as an educator. In fact, it is through the use of metaphor that I am often able to delve more deeply into matters of meaning. Consistent with the narrative orientation, I consistently seek a “big picture” perspective and find myself intuitively drawn both to concepts at their global level and to the personal stories that underlie research contexts and theoretical outcomes. It is the “broad brush strokes” of life that capture my attention. I often find myself impatient with day-to-day details.

My educational sensibilities are indebted to the arts, which have been tremendously influential to both my teaching and learning. Personal interests and experiences in theatre and music have increased my appreciation not only for a good story but also for excellence in its telling. As I teach a course on narratives of faith, I ask students to analyze published spiritual autobiographies and to construct and share their own stories. In this course, both teacher and learner seek to understand the life stories of others while concurrently recognizing and addressing the excellent writing that is necessary to communicate a good story. As an interpretive inquirer, I have great interest in artistic as well as authentic portrayals of the texts in my research. I began this study with an intuitive sense that the secular academy offered something unique to faith formation. Nonetheless, I initially viewed faith experiences within the secular academy as disconnected from academic experiences. Aside from the faith-based student
organization, I imagined cocurricular experiences as similarly detached. Moreover, I began this research journey with great interest in the theory base that has, to date, predominantly influenced faith inquiry. At the same time, my examination of the theological and developmental-psychological perspectives that underlie this theory base and serve to polarize the related dialogue left me with a deep ambivalence toward faith development theory. Consistent with my interpretive propensities, I ultimately sought to reveal the “deeper meanings” of faith development theory.
The inquiry focus and the narrative framework guided and shaped the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of findings. The findings are presented at the level of individual stories, as well as a collective story of the experience of living within the Christian faith while attending college on a secular campus. Understanding the perspectives of the participants is critical; hence, a profile for each participant is first presented. Each profile encapsulates the life context of the individual at the time of the interviews and highlights some of the experiences that influenced their faith perspectives. Each profile is followed by a narrative describing his or her experience as a person of faith during the college years. These narratives are presented to allow the reader familiarity with the participants as whole persons, as well as to contextualize the collective account of the dynamics of faith.

_Chad: “Never even got to see the Promised Land”_

Chad was 22 years of age at the time of our interviews—6 months past his graduation from Mid-Atlantic University. He is reticent to use the term Christian to describe his faith perspective due to its different meanings to different people. Additionally, Chad is careful to communicate his faith in ways that will draw others
toward it. He initially declared biology as his major, intending to progress toward medical school. He changed his major to psychology with a minor in religion. His grades suffered ostensibly due to his extensive involvement in the IVCF; consequently, his family raised concern that Chad was overly distracted from his studies and went so far as to express their opinion that his IVCF involvement was too “radical.”

Chad lived in campus residence halls throughout his 4 years at Mid-Atlantic as an extension of his commitment to the IVCF “dorm ministry.” He was deeply involved in the founding of the Fellowship chapter at this university. Other campus activities in which Chad was involved extended from IVCF commitments. For example, he served as the IVCF representative to the InterReligious Council formed by the college. He wanted to be a “disc jockey” with the campus radio station, but was unable to approach involvement due to his time commitment to the IVCF. As he stated it, Chad dealt with “junk” in his life as a result of his involvement with the IVCF and also sought help from the campus counseling center.

In Chad’s narrative of faith, it is evident that the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter was born out of conflict with another campus group, particularly conflict over lifestyle issues. Chad had a high school connection to Ethan—a regional director for the IVCF—which led to Chad’s involvement in the founding of the campus chapter. It is also evident that Chad’s own affiliation with the IVCF and his relationship with his staff worker, John, ended in the midst of conflict over life decisions. When Chad and John disagreed over whether Chad should continue his relationship with his girlfriend, Chad sought guidance from a high school mentor. This mentor agreed with Chad. Consequently, Chad was
forced to not only choose his course of action amidst the conflict of authoritative voices, but he would subsequently need to continue in light of disappointing one of those authoritative voices. Additionally, his vision of his future as an IVCF staff worker was shattered. Throughout Chad’s sophomore, junior, and early senior years, a central aspect of his life focused on shaping the IVCF chapter. He reflected,

*I got to Mid-Atlantic. I chose Mid-Atlantic, basically because it was a good school . . . and academically . . . I didn’t choose it for spiritual reasons at all. My Bible study leader in high school said to me that he thought that I should choose a school based on spirituality and where I would be able to grow and, pompously, I said, “You know, well, I’m not really worried about it ’cause I’ll go there and, if there is a group, then that’s cool, I’ll get to be a part of it, and if there isn’t, then I’ll start one. And that’ll be how God wants to use me, either way. When I went, I was the stereotypical freshman where I was very worried about me and my relationships and what that would “look like.” I mean, I was looking for a Christian fellowship, but, that wasn’t even . . . Priority Number 1. It was on there, but it wasn’t the first thing. I think I probably would have said at the time it was . . . but I’m not sure it was. There was this guy in my hall, who was a basketball player, and he got really involved in a Christian group at Mid-Atlantic and encouraged me and basically took me out to meetings . . . and how am I going to say “no,” you know, to a Christian fellowship, you know, with my background. So I, so I just went and started out . . . about the first few weeks being really good. They ended up inviting me on their Worship Team and, you know, I actually, actually the first few months was really good. By Christmas break of my freshman year, some weird things started happening. They really started, they were really into rebuking, and they rebuked me on a bunch of things. People pulled me aside to tell me I shouldn’t, you know, I should be going to church more often, but I was going to church and they just didn’t bother to ask me whether I was, and they also told me I shouldn’t play Twister; it was too provocative, and somebody else told me I shouldn’t be dating my girlfriend; I should be “courting” her. Somebody else said I should only listen to Christian music. I got bombarded by a bunch of people telling me different things, and some of these people really had no relationship with me outside of that . . . so it was hard for me and it hurt a lot and I honestly took it to heart, thinking that I was a horrible Christian ’cause all these people were coming up to me and telling me all these things that I was doing wrong. So I remember talking to some people. . . . I talked to Ethan. We were just basically dealing with that and praying through stuff for me, and eventually coming to the point where. . . . I didn’t necessarily agree with all the things that they were saying, and it didn’t really make any sense for me to do that prescribed plan of theirs. And after that, it sort of opened my eyes and I started talking with
different members of the Fellowship and they just disagreed with me and told me I was wrong and all that stuff, and I started getting really angry and less and less involved in the group and it was hard because some of my best friends, as a freshman, some of my only friends were in that group, and it was hard to sit down with some of those people who I really respected as friends and tell them that . . . I was really hurt by them—to have them then disagree with me and say I was wrong.

But then I started meeting more and more people like me, more and more stories like that. I also met a bunch of African-American students on campus who didn’t have. . . . I met a lot of Christians who were African-American. I started tossing around the idea with Ethan about starting up an InterVarsity fellowship, and this one guy who was the director of the Gospel Choir at the time—an African-American guy. He introduced me to Keisha who was also thinking of starting up a fellowship at the time, and it was really this awkward meeting ‘cause he took me to the, in the middle of, in the middle the Gospel Choir practice, took this, just like, “Hi, this is Chad, this is Keisha.” We’re like, “Hello,” you know; it was just very forced, very weird. Since then, she’s become one of my best friends, but we both were interested in starting up a group . . . and we talked a little bit about that and we had a meeting with Ethan and we . . . Well, actually, Ethan and I also . . . we, we knew that things with the other Christian group weren’t right so we tried internal change for a while. . . . We talked with lots of people . . . had lots of different meetings . . . Ethan came up . . . had meetings with people, and eventually, we brought all the Christian groups together and we said, “Look, we’re going to go for InterVarsity. We just, we can’t seem to agree on some of these issues.” So that’s where we met, and we made it clear to the other groups that we weren’t trying to draw people away; we were just trying to serve the population on campus that was not being served at that time, and we definitely felt that there was a population there.

So yeah, Keisha eventually accepted, like, halfway through the summer and said she wanted to do it even though she had just about no idea what InterVarsity was. Also, over the summer, I found out from Ethan. . . . He called me up and said that John and Elaine would be our staff workers and that was just awesome to know that we were going to have staff too, right away, and you know, it wasn’t going to be “flying solo,” but, you know, we. . . . I met them over the summer, and then when we got to, to school, we wanted to start things kind of, kind of slow. We didn’t want to kind of “bombard” the campus because, if we did and we had 40 people, we wouldn’t have the resources to accommodate 40 people out. So what we did was, we you know, went to the activities fair and we, kind of, had a, kind of, small, small display and, kind of, whoever stopped by, we talked to. Then I’d try and build relationships with people and, kind of, do it that way by people who I was able to connect with and build relationships. I’d invite them to this Bible study, and I remember walking around campus with this. . . . I had a list of people who showed interest and their names and their room numbers, and I remember I would just go out and I bought all these Fruit Rollups and things, and
like fresh fruit and things, and I’d go around to people’s rooms and just talk with them and give them fruit. . . . Had lots of doors slammed in my face, and that was hard, but you know, there was a list of like 40 people there, and I remember the first Bible study, like 12 people came out, and I was so devastated because I had invited 40 people, and I was, like, “I can’t believe only 12 people came,” and I was so upset, and well, you know, we went to. . . . We went for ice cream that day and we came back, and then just that year was tough ’cause I was leading a Bible study. I had no idea . . . and this was actually studying the Bible, and I had no idea how to do that. The only thing that I had done was Chapter Camp the year before, so I kind of took it to be, “Oh, Bible study InterVarsity style is very intensive,” so I would, I would try to lead my Bible studies that way, and quickly became known as the “Bible Nazi.”

And yeah, it was just other things that were happening, such as being sort of. . . . For fall conference, I invited 40 people, and this time, only five, or no, seven people signed up, and the day before that, two people bailed, and that, that was crazy—and painful too—to have all these people just at the last minute, but it ended up OK ’cause we came back and talked it up really big, and the next year, we had, I think, 17 people, so . . . but that year, that year was tough.

Also that was really tough for me spiritually in my. . . . where I was living. I was living with three other Christian guys and, basically, two of them. . . . one of them being the guy who brought me to Christian stuff my freshman year, basically, really decided to give up the faith for a while. That was really tough. I know the one guy. He was sleeping with his girlfriend in our apartment all the time and, you know, you could hear them at night, and it was weird, but I think that was my first real taste of how tough being a Christian is and walking with Jesus is. I also remember this guy taking me out to, for coffee one day, and talking to me when I was really devastated one day. I don’t even remember why, but I was so frustrated just about how InterVarsity was going, and he took me aside, and he basically told me the story of Moses and how Moses. . . . God took him to the desert for 40 years, and he never even got to see the promised land, and yet here he is, one of the “big cheeses” of the Old Testament, you know, the Bible, and I don’t know, that was, that was really powerful for me.

But then, at the end of the year, we went to Chapter Camp; we had five people there. That was wonderful. That was just a really amazing time for the five of us. We grew so close, and we were adopted by several other fellowships over there. I remember, like, just weeping the last day, of like, just great, just tears of joy and excitement for the next year. Then the next year, I was moving into a dorm with an IV friend to try and do dorm ministry and ended up on a hall with a group of “guys guys,” and I am not that. They just liked sports all the time, and played basketball. I’ve never played basketball, you know, and I, I just thought it was, honestly, the sports thing was lame. . . . I’d much rather be doing, you know, art stuff or music or something, but . . . but I ended up making, building relationships with the two guys that I knew. They were Derek and Greg . . . the kind of two guys that I really decided I was really going to focus on. Derek was on the hall and

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Greg was in my dorm, but in another spot, and those two guys . . . Oh, gosh, I can’t . . . I could talk on and on about how great they are. Both of them were not Christian at the time, and I got to introduce both of them to God, and it was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever experienced . . . just to see their lives just rapidly change before my eyes, and to be a part of that was wonderful.

And that year, we also started up a Thursday Night Fellowship, and that took off and was doing really well . . . Thirty people were coming out every week and, personally, I thought it was going to “flop” after 2 or 3 weeks, but it didn’t end up doing that. We ended up doing it all year, and the year after. It ended up doubling in size, but that year was also tough, spiritually. All that stuff was going on, but yeah, I was really dealing with my own junk, just areas of sin in my life that were really “hitting home,” and I felt like I was doing these wonderful things and God was working through me in these awesome ways, and yet, I was still just “crummy” on the inside, and I don’t know, it was just . . . It was hard. I, I ended up seeing a psychologist that year to deal specifically with that stuff. I don’t really know what happened or how that ended up, but somewhere in there, I definitely got to see that God loved me.

And I just came back the next year a lot more confident that I had overcome some things and just feeling a lot better about myself, feeling just really ready to go, and I also felt confident about myself, that God loved me, and that God loved the people around me, and I was . . . I felt like was in a really, really healthy place at the time, and was excited about InterVarsity. Thursday Night Fellowship grew, you know, twice as big. God was working in awesome ways. All these people that I’d met in different ways, and every single one of them, at some point, came out to InterVarsity. It was just God was doing amazing things. Every single one of those people there—Christian or non-Christian—all came out to InterVarsity, and it was just “trippy,” and things were going awesome, and I went to go have conversations about going on staff with InterVarsity ‘cause I just couldn’t picture doing anything else, and I was real excited about this, and as I was talking with Ethan, it came up about some of the sin issues that were in my . . . what I needed to do to completely solve the problem, and that I needed to do that and deal with that before I could be on staff with InterVarsity, and that just crushed me ‘cause I . . . that was what I wanted to do, really badly. That’s where my passion was. So that automatically was just a weird thing because I . . . I told John, and John and I had just a lot of hopes of being on staff together, and really just dreamed of that for a long time and we had some conversations and he told me that I should definitely do this and I got upset with him because I wasn’t sure that I definitely should and I definitely felt like I disappointed him, and I was a big disappointment and, to him, and I had a hard time then. Like, I still loved InterVarsity; I still loved everything about it, just had a hard time with John and my relationship with him, and he was around at a lot InterVarsity functions. We had talked about that, and yet, things still didn’t seem to change. He was the person that I went to for a lot of spiritual guidance. I felt like he didn’t care about me anymore, and that was hard, and I still struggle with those feelings. I also
Afterwards, I’ve had a hard time, you know, wrestling with God about that too, because you know, I . . . I just stinks that, you know, I spent so much time; just like, like planting a tree or something, and now that it’s good and there’s fruit there where I can eat, and I just want to eat the fruit up. . . . Now is when I gotta leave [graduation and not being able to go on staff], you know; I can’t partake of that anymore.

Keisha: “Looking for something more”

Keisha celebrated her 22nd birthday between our first and second interview. The interviews were conducted just after her graduation from Mid-Atlantic University where she majored in computer science. Keisha is African-American and, during her first and second year, she was active with many student organizations providing support for African-American students within the predominantly European-American environment of Mid-Atlantic.

Keisha lived in a campus residence hall her first and second years of college. She spent the first semester of her junior year abroad in London and, during her senior year, she lived in the African-American Studies House on campus. In addition to campus involvement with the IVCF, Keisha was involved in Gospel Choir and a multicultural theatre ensemble. She was raised in a single-parent household and is very close to her mother who raised her in the church. She is also very close to her grandmother who Keisha describes as a “model of faith.” During Keisha’s first and second years on campus, she dated a Mid-Atlantic student who did not share her faith perspective and challenged Keisha with the notion that her commitment to Christianity was incompatible with her identity as an African-American. Keisha describes this relationship as challenging, yet ultimately, an avenue of growth for her faith. During her college years,
she wrestled with questions of identity and self-worth, particularly as these issues related to her relationships with men. She examined her own life and family history and deciphered a need to differentiate herself from her mother in terms of faith commitments. She realized that her mother’s relationships with men had negatively affected her own understanding of intimacy. She intended to modify the understanding she had received from her mother.

As mentioned in Chad’s narrative, Keisha was a key partner in the founding of the IVCF chapter at Mid-Atlantic University. Part of her purpose in contributing to the creation of the Fellowship was a space where ethnic minority students could be comfortable, which she found lacking in the existing fellowships. Keisha’s narrative evidences the affirmation her faith received by witnessing the growth of the IVCF group on her campus. She also indicates that her faith growth was positively impacted by her commitment to involvement in, and leadership for, the Fellowship. The meaning she found reflecting upon her choices during her early years of college was that she was looking for fulfillment in the wrong places. Following graduation, Keisha joined the IVCF staff on a volunteer basis to continue to serve students and the Fellowship at Mid-Atlantic. Keisha’s narrative of faith reads in the following manner:

*My freshman year, I came in, like, really excited about . . . really excited about God. Like, I was so “gung ho” that I was, like, “If there’s not a Gospel Choir, I can start one and I’m going to start a Black fellowship, and I’m going to do this; I’m going to do that.” Thankfully, there was already a Gospel Choir, but there wasn’t really any place where I, as a Black student, felt comfortable in any of the fellowships. So most of my freshman year, fellowship for me was mostly the Gospel Choir. . . . I tried to really make it a place where you could really spiritually connect with people, even though it wasn’t at that time. It was just, like, a group of people who like to sing and like to have fun, and that was kind of frustrating . . . for me because I was looking for something more, and . . . I*
definitely. . . . Because I didn’t plug into a community, I definitely got into a lot of stuff my freshman year because I didn’t really find what I was looking for . . . because I was looking in a lot of other places for it.

Then my sophomore year was when I was really, like, “Now I really need to. . . . If something’s not here for me, I need to create something,” and I’m just that kind of person. Yeah, I’m just a visionary person. Like, I’ll have something in mind and I’ll just try to make it happen and try to do it, and that’s when I met Chad who was interested in starting something else up too, and we just had a few conversations about, like, what we expected out of a fellowship, what we were looking for, and they ended up being very similar, and that’s when he. . . . He was still learning about InterVarsity at that time too, I think, and he was just, kind of, brought me along to find out what it was about and, eventually, he was thinking about starting it up on campus and asked me if I wanted to be a part of that, and it was a huge. . . . It was a lot of trust ‘cause it was, like, I didn’t know where InterVarsity was; I really didn’t know him, and that’s a big thing. It would be, like, we start up this chapter and you don’t even know what it’s really about.

Yeah, so that was good, and when I got plugged into InterVarsity, that was . . . a really good outlet for me. It was finally something that I could. . . . Not only was it a community I could go to, but just to know that I had an influence in it too, and what it could become. It was really helpful. So, my faith over the years. . . . my faith has always been pretty strong; I think it’s definitely grown over the years, especially with the help of a community, a Christian community. It’s something that just keep you in the Word, keep you. . . . just keep things in perspective, spiritually.

At the end of my sophomore year, I think we had, like, two Bible studies. . . . or less. Something along those lines; it was, like, our first, like, small group, and we didn’t have a large group yet, and then I went abroad my junior year, which was really hard to leave InterVarsity, knowing it was such a formative time, but. . . . It was good. I really needed to—not get away—but I really needed a change in perspective—open my eyes up to more global. . . . issues, and that’s the first time when I went abroad because I really haven’t. . . . but when I came back, it was. . . . InterVarsity had grown—wow. Just, like, they actually had a large-group worship service, and I was, like, “Who were all these people, like, praise God. . . . but wow!” It was so overwhelming that I was, like, “Where’s my place?” Like, before I left, it was, like, I knew my role. When I came back, it was just, like, “Where. . . .?” And everybody knew me because Chad would talk about me, so people would just come up to me and talk to me like they knew me, and I’m, like, I don’t know who you are, and so that was definitely a little weird, but by the end of my junior year, I felt like I was a part again, and I was really excited to do a little more in my senior year.

So my senior year was probably my best year. . . . It was great because I was more involved in terms of leadership with InterVarsity, and that, like, for some people, it could seem like a burden or a turnoff, but it was really. . . . I got just so many more blessings out of it. . . . out of, like, the more you put into
something, the more you get out of it, and so, like, the more I put into ministry, the more I know. . . . I just felt like God rewarded me with just happiness I never really experienced at Mid-Atlantic.

Leanne: “Totally accepted by this community”

Leanne, 20 years of age, is a math and computer science major. She enrolled in local college courses during her senior year in high school before enrolling at Mid-Atlantic University. She lived in a university residence hall her first and second year and, as a junior, lived in a thematic house for African-American students. In addition to her involvement in the IVCF, she serves as President of the Gospel Choir. Leanne was raised by her mother and stepfather and has four brothers. She attended church throughout her upbringing. Her college years have provided an opportunity to reexamine the theological positions of her home church including the role of women and the place of dating. Leanne has wrestled with difficult issues of loss during her college years, including the death of her father when she was 5 years of age and the sexual abuse of her stepfather. She has also examined personal issues such as body image and her bout with diabetes. She indicates that too much of her identity has come from academic achievement. During her college years, she has tried to reprioritize and place her identity in perspective. She saw a campus counselor to help her through these issues and also worked through them in the context of her IVCF involvement.

Leanne’s narrative of faith evidences several core issues. She joined the Fellowship after its conception, but early in its development, and was able to witness not only the growth of the Fellowship, but also to recognize the influence of the individuals who started the chapter, specifically Chad, Elaine, and John. Her narrative gives voice to
the value of IVCF mentors combined with IVCF activities, including inductive Bible study, conferences, and mission experiences. These relationships and experiences enabled her to be honest about her struggles, to gain the courage and ability to address them, and to examine her faith in relationship to these personal experiences. Leanne also models the value of peer leadership in influencing personal and spiritual growth. As she helps others, she enriches her own understanding. As her narrative denotes, a cycle of IVCF events is evident both on and off the Mid-Atlantic campus throughout the academic year. Big Love is the regional fall conference, and Spring Fling is a regional conference held during the spring term. Chapter Camp is a week-long intensive experience for chapter leaders that includes extensive inductive study of the Bible. Leanne also experienced mission trips through the IVCF—an urban project in a regional city in which she was the only Mid-Atlantic student participant, as well as a mission trip to South Africa that was comprised of primarily Mid-Atlantic students. She also attended Urbana—a triannual national conference for IVCF students across the country. The urban project, South Africa, and Urbana experiences and associated Bible studies collectively influenced her commitment to issues of reconciliation. Leanne’s relationship with her staff worker, Elaine, is a strong and powerful mentoring relationship. Elaine asks Leanne deep questions and helps her process issues in her life without giving her specific answers. She helps Leanne personally own both her understanding and her resolution of these issues.

Keisha also serves as a peer mentor for Leanne. Leanne describes the importance of “being real” with her peers and sharing “deep stuff” as part of her own growth. It is also evident that relationships are built in the context of the cycle of activities that create
the space necessary for deep sharing to occur. Leanne’s narrative also notes the
difficulties of dealing with personal struggles that relate to family in the context of the
IVCF during her college years and subsequently experiencing awkward reentry into her
family environment during the summer. Summarily, the transformative effect of her
affiliation with a community of people represents consistent challenge and support as it
encourages her to address difficult issues. According to Leanne,

I came to Mid-Atlantic knowing that I wanted some kind of Christian fellowship. In high school, I’d been involved in Young Life and so I was excited coming in and finding that . . . maybe Young Life in here. So I was going to be a leader and get all into that. So I signed up for that. There’s an activities fair. I just went and saw all the different groups, and out of the three Christian fellowships that I visited, the tables of InterVarsity stuck out a little bit. So I went to some Bible studies with InterVarsity and I loved it. It was really “cool.” We studied by the inductive method, which is a method that I’d just learned from my church, so I was really excited ‘cause it was like a connection for me from something I had before, and so I didn’t really ever go to any other fellowship’s Bible studies, and then I went to Thursday Night Fellowship, the first one that we ever had, and I hated it, so I wasn’t going to go back ‘cause it just . . . Nobody knew the music, and I didn’t realize all this stuff beforehand. Nobody knew the music, we weren’t familiar with each other, it was new for everyone. So it wasn’t, like, a very comfortable-feeling place. So I just didn’t, didn’t like it, and then, but I stuck with the Bible study ‘cause I thought it was cool, and then some time a little while later, I started going back to Thursday Night Fellowship, and it was better. I liked it more. It was more open. It was more familiar. It was something to do with the people I was “hanging out” with at Bible study anyway.

And then I went to Big Love, and I don’t even remember what the speaker talked about, honestly, but the thing that stuck out for me that week was just being, like, totally accepted by this community, and never before had I gone to conferences and had people want to hang out with me. People always just went out in their groups and then I was by myself. This time, people would come find me and ask me if I want to go with them and stuff like that. So that was really cool, and then, see, I came back from Big Love being really excited about this new Fellowship with this new group of people. We started this little, like, small group; we called it the Salt Shaker Group. We read Out of the Salt Shaker by Becky Pippert, and we’d meet once a week and talk about evangelism, stuff like that, and then went home for Christmas and came back early so that I could go to Vermont with some people in that group who read that book and we were gonna talk about some more stuff up there, and then we did that; that was really cool. The second
semester, my Bible study. . . . I changed Bible studies just ‘cause there were
gonna be two instead of one the next semester, so I was asked to move to another
one, so I did. It was still with InterVarsity, and then, so I got involved in that one
that was mostly women and then, through that, a lot of body-image stuff was
coming up for me. Well, it had always been in my head, it just starting come out.
So Elaine noticed that. . . . She was leading it and she decided there were other
people that was coming up for, too, so we had this group of people that we set up.
We would meet once a week and just talk about how we were doing. Toward the
end of the year, that was really fruitless, didn’t really do anything. We weren’t
really honest about what we were dealing with or anything. So it just died. I
didn’t think it had much point.

But I went to the spring conference and there I was. I had been talking to
one of my friends about some of the body-image stuff, and he was the first male
who would ever really listen to me about that stuff, but he still didn’t get it and
didn’t get it and then, finally, at the spring conference, I was talking to the group
as a whole, and we were sharing what was, what was there for us, and that the
speaker had brought up a lot of stuff. So I was sharing that and he. . . . It looked
like he finally understood, like, I would explain how I was feeling and then he just
looked like I kicked him. He just, it totally registered with him, and that was really
cool for me to have somebody understand that stuff.

And then, so I think about the year. It was all, like, conferences and stuff
that finally were the turning points. The spring or the, the end of the year
conference/camp—Chapter Camp—that was where I started to really understand
what following Jesus was, and there’s the story of the bleeding woman in Mark,
and that really resonated in me. Just ‘cause I felt so ashamed because of the
abuse and I’d never told anyone. So that, I shared that with Elaine that week and
that was so hard for me ‘cause I was sitting there crying with Elaine and I never
cry. So people would walk in and see me and wonder what in the world was
wrong, and toward the end of the week, I kind of shared a little bit with people
what was going on. It made going home for the summer kind of weird ‘cause that
was so in my mind, and I went home. It was like I changed, but home was the
same and people didn’t understand that and my family didn’t really understand.

So I was home for a month and then I came back for the urban project.
Did that, saw a lot of stuff about the city, a lot of stuff about injustice, about
community, intentional community, living together, stuff like that, got really
excited about race and racial reconciliation and about justice. I came back to
Mid-Atlantic, wanted to talk about it, and wanted people to understand me, and I
was the only one who had been on the project so nobody really knew what I was
talking about, so it was frustrating, and when I came back to school, I started
some counseling with a psychologist on campus, and then Elaine and Keisha
would meet with me and pray every week, and that. . . . My semester was so
hard—my first semester—just dealing with that stuff. ‘Cause never before had I
been allowed to be angry, and it was how I really felt, so it was going through all
that stuff.
I was leading, too, in InterVarsity by myself, which was tough. Like, we have a team, but in our respective places—our Bible studies that we were leading—there were pairs, and I was one of the ones that was by myself, and that was really hard, but I think really good for me. First semester wasn’t really about me doing anything else. I just was trying to keep going for me. Big Love that year was hard for me cause the speaker kept talking about family, our relationship with our parents, and there was this song—I Have a Maker—that we sang, and it was a rough time. Came back and decided that I needed to confront the conflict that was there. So I brought it up with my parents. That was messy and hard, but how my parents responded to me was different than I expected them to, and for the first time in my family’s history, as far as my interest goes, we actually dealt with conflict and let it be there, and that was OK, and that was really cool—really weird, but really cool.

So when I went home for Christmas, I was at my house for, like, 3 days, and that was it. That was weird, not being home. Then I went to Urbana and there was more stuff there about racial reconciliation that came up, and I feel like that, that’s something that my life is supposed to be about, and then there was last spring. My focus really changed from being how much I’m hurting and how much this is just terrible, to being . . . there are these people I’m living around. I want to hang out with them and get to know them, and stuff started to happen on the hall. People, like, started to hang out together. I’d go to people’s soccer games; they’d give me rides to places. All the stuff that the Fellowship had been for me, now was starting to be that way on the hall because I was spending time with the kids on the hall, which is originally why I moved onto that hall . . . so that I could get to know people, and hopefully introduce them to Jesus, which, first semester, I don’t think that happened very much, but . . .

Second semester it started to happen more, and it was really cool. I got really excited about stuff, and then started planning to go to South Africa, too, and that was good for me. Like, the Urban Program had been the team where I didn’t know anyone going into it, so we could spend the time getting to know each other some. South Africa was a team that knew me beforehand, so I had to be real with them, and it meant that when I shared stuff about myself, it was . . . It was really deep stuff, and that was hard for me ‘cause that’s always, those kind of pain, pain-related ideas are hard for me to open up about, but it, it was challenging. It was hard sometimes, but I learned a lot, and God showed me some things about myself, about how I find value in doing things for people rather than just in being, that I realized that I needed to change. I realized my ignorance as far as what’s going on in the world. There, I felt like a love for the city again, that I had felt the summer before. Feel like the city’s where I’m supposed to be, when I get done with school. I don’t know where that’s gonna go, but some city. There was just, and race stuff came up again. It’s kind of a continuing theme, and I came back to school, the leading again. I’m coleading the Bible study this semester, which is cool to have partnership, and I’m seeing that some of the stuff that was happening on my hall last year at the end of the year, it’s happening
now, beginning of the semester . . . this year, so I’m just excited about relationships that can form and come to me this year. So that’s kind of like a detailed version of what it’s been.

Greg: “God answered my question and things snowballed from there”

Greg is a senior 22 years of age. He grew up in a Christian home, and his father had a conversation with Greg that encouraged him to claim his faith for himself as he transitioned to college. Greg was a civil-engineering major during his first and second years in college and describes his major change to geography as a turning point in his life. An impetus for the change was his desire to spend more time on relationships with other people and with the Fellowship. Greg has lived in campus residence halls with different roommates for all 4 years of college. In addition to the IVCF, he has been involved in a campus fraternity and was a wrestler during his first year.

Greg is engaged to a woman from his hometown. During the dating phase of their relationship, his fiancé committed to Christian faith as a central priority in her life. Her decision and their relationship play pivotal roles in Greg’s reassessment of his own faith commitment. In Greg’s narrative, several key aspects of the impact the college environment has had on Greg’s faith are apparent. During Greg’s first year, he was very tentative regarding his own faith commitment and embarrassed to make his faith public, most notably with a roommate who embodies a divergent faith perspective. Greg attempts to address the questions his roommate posed surrounding God, found himself unable to do so, and began to wrestle with these questions until he found answers. The first intersection between Greg’s first-year roommate and the IVCF is a clash between his two worlds, which he resolves in the moment by distancing them from each other. This
interaction occurs during his sophomore year while his roommate from the previous year is visiting. The critical moment of making a commitment to faith as part of the journey toward growth, and the related aspect of owning faith rather than depending on the faith perspective of previous authorities, is witnessed in his narrative. Additionally, the value of IVCF conferences at off-campus sites plays a key role in shaping Greg’s faith commitment and his ability to make his commitment public, as he indicates in the following narrative:

When I came to Mid-Atlantic, I had grown up in a Christian family, so, like, considered myself a Christian, but you couldn’t tell by looking at my life, and it wasn’t something that was really a big priority in my life at all. I didn’t really choose Mid-Atlantic; it was kind of random. When I was looking at schools, it was between this and another college and this was a lot smaller, more personal. The wrestling coach was really nice. Dean of Engineering’s really nice and this campus is closer to home, so I came here, and I’m glad I did, and yeah, so I came here, and then freshman year was wrestling and engineering, so I did nothing else.

I believed . . . and that led to the point where, like, I actually, I did bring my Bible to school. I didn’t really use it much, but I had it out . . . and like, I had some conversations with my roommate, . . . I just, ‘cause he’s very not religious or spiritual or whatever you want to call it. So it wasn’t, like, it wasn’t, like, I’m coming to school and rejecting everything my parents taught me or anything like that. Like, I believed, but I was probably, like, embarrassed of it, or I don’t know. It wasn’t a big thing, for me. I mean, like, I had conversations in that, like, just like, “Yeah, I do believe there’s a God” and like . . . I don’t remember, like, specific conversations. I remember him, like . . . Like, I remember he, he would . . . I mean, he would draw a diagram of what he believed God was, and like, he had these two different theories. I don’t even remember what they were, but it’s like we’re all part of God and, like, things like that, and so a lot of the conversations were me, like, listening to him and still saying, “OK, but, but that’s not what I believe,” but not really able to back up with too much confidence of what I believed ‘cause it wasn’t really a huge thing for me then.

And then sophomore year was when I joined a fraternity, which was a big surprise to me, and but then my girlfriend was going to kind of a deeper level in her faith, rethinking her priorities, and that was kind of like the catalyst for me to start thinking about “Well, what do I want? What do I believe?” Like, I knew I believed, but I also knew that I needed . . . that I wanted it eventually to be a big part of my life and something that, you know, was part of me, and so, I guess the
whole thing was just a process of me making it my own thing and not my parents’
thing, and in her going to a deeper level, she was. . . . I could tell that she was
rethinking her priorities, just in life and stuff like that, and during this rethinking,
I was not the center of her attention. I could tell something was up, and I could
tell, like, “OK, she’s not really, like, focusing on me, or there’s something in her
life that’s more important than me,” and I remember, even in there, we had a
conversation. I was saying to her, like, “I know, I just know at some point in my
life, I’m gonna take this—I don’t know what to call it—Jesus thing or whatever. . . .
I’m sure, at some point, that it’s gonna happen and, like, and become real for
me,” and little did I know, it was gonna be in like 2 weeks. I was thinking you
know, years. I didn’t know what I was thinking, but so I. . . . I don’t know what
made me decide to say to her. “I think I want to give this a shot.” I don’t
remember what it was. I mean it had something to do with all that, and then I
guess I’d been mulling it over in my head. Then I said that to her one night, “I
think I want to give this thing a shot. How do I start?” And she said, “Uh . . .
pray.” So I guess I remember I prayed or something. I don’t remember too much
of that night.

And then, next morning, I was walking around campus, like it was real
heavy on my mind. “Just how do I start this? What do I do?” and looked up and
saw the sign for Thursday Night Fellowship—InterVarsity . . . e-mailed the
contact person, which ended up being Chad. Chad and John stopped by my room
that night. It’s actually really funny. My roommate was in my room and they
knocked on the door, and I had no idea who these people were, and he’s like, he’s
like, “Oh I’m Chad; I got your e-mail earlier today,” and like, I was so. . . . I like
jumped in the hall and shut the door ‘cause I was afraid of what my roommate
would think. ‘Cause I still was just like, “What am I doing and what’s that?” I
was like, you know, I was talking or whatever. I was, like, that must be shady for
both parties involved, and so I talked to them out in the hall and they, you know,
gave me a little, like, “schpeel” of InterVarsity and who they were. They were
very “chill” about it, and said that the good way to get to see what we’re about,
and to get to know people and stuff, is to come to Big Love, and the deadline for
that is, you know, is tomorrow.

So, I decided to go to Thursday Night Fellowship the next day, and
decided to register to go to Big Love, and so . . . and I think the conference was
either that weekend or, no it was the weekend after that. I don’t know, it was in,
like, a week or 2 so nothing really big happened up until then, and then that was
when God kind of answered my question, and I guess I committed to following
Him and to making that a priority, and then things kind of just “snowballed” from
there.
Kyle: “InterVarsity let me get in touch with Jesus”

Kyle is a senior, 22 years of age, and majoring in electrical engineering. He has lived in campus residences all 4 years of his college life. While he never joined a fraternity, he has maintained strong friendships and connections with fraternity life on campus. He immersed himself in the “party” and “popular scene” at Mid-Atlantic in his first years and continues to try to connect with those friends; however, they are, at times, distanced by Kyle’s radical change in lifestyle including choosing not to drink and changing the way he interacts with women. This distance is a challenge for Kyle. His parents are divorced. He has a strong connection with his mother and sisters who share his Christian faith commitment. He struggles to connect with his father who is more interested, from Kyle’s vantage point, in finding his identity through money and status.

Kyle grew up attending a mainline church and made a new commitment to his faith during his high school years. He describes his first 2 years at Mid-Atlantic as a time of searching. He looked to the popular crowd to find meaning and identity. Meanwhile, his faith “took a back seat.”

Kyle has been dating Dara, another participant in this study, for several months, and she has played a key role in his involvement with InterVarsity, as well as in his faith growth. Their relationship began when Kyle saw Dara at his hometown church a few hundred miles from Mid-Atlantic University. He recognized her from his religion course and felt an immediate connection. He also sensed that Dara would understand his search for a fellowship at Mid-Atlantic that was similar to what he had experienced in his home church. Initially, he did not view the IVCF as a group with which he could connect.
Subsequently, an initial connection was made with the weekly inductive Bible study of Mark, and later, Kyle connects with Thursday Night Fellowship, and finally, he joins the Servant Team. Kyle describes rapid growth and transformation in terms of the size and style of the Fellowship during his college years, particularly over the first two. His impressions of his IVCF peers changes radically over these years and, over time, Kyle develops a strong connection with the IVCF.

In Kyle’s narrative, the importance of the connection between his faith and all areas of life, rather than merely a Sunday church event, is clear. His narrative evidences the effective manner in which the IVCF facilitates an in-depth understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus in the lives of participants. While Kyle describes himself as a follower of Jesus upon his college arrival, he senses that the IVCF has enabled him to truly understand Jesus in a more meaningful way. Dara challenges Kyle to apply his faith to his lifestyle choices, particularly around the use of alcohol. In the overlapping context of family, home church, and IVCF activities and relationships, Kyle reconsiders the authenticity of his faith commitment. He demonstrates a renewed commitment to Jesus in his junior year. As highlighted in the following narrative, his experience of faith on a secular campus is summarized by the notion of searching.

*I would start by saying I was a follower of Jesus from the time I got to college on, and I spent the first couple of years really just searching for something, like, almost like just anything, and then InterVarsity, you know, it wasn’t until 2 ½ years later, but InterVarsity was the first thing, as far as a fellowship that I had been able to find, and I mean, the story goes back all the way to when I met Dara. Like, she went to my church at home and would have known what I was looking for, and I remember one of our first conversations when she was telling me she was going to go on the leadership team for IV, and I just remember thinking she was crazy because of the experience that I had had there, but the way that it’s changed over the past couple years is amazing.*
The first involvement I had with IV was our Mark study, which was a whole semester long, and so I started that, I think, February; the first week in February was the first week I had gone. That was the second week of the study, and the reason I was excited about that was because, as much as I wasn’t feeling connected to IV the times that I had tried it, I knew that the Mark study would be something that I could go and sort of take what I wanted and then leave and not have to have all the same interactions and have to, you know, deal with what I didn’t like about it. So that was the first interaction I had with IV, and that lasted the whole semester—every Sunday.

Based on the way I’ve sort of been feeling about, about my connection with God, which was sort of like Sunday was really good and then, you know, it just sort of, like, how close I feel just sort of dies out, and then Sunday comes again and there’s just, you know. So I picked a day to fast—Thursday—which was between there. . . . I mean, for all intents and purposes, midweek, and so it just so happened that that was the day of Thursday Night Fellowship, and it wasn’t like I planned it that way, but that was the reason I really went for the first time. Because it was the very first day I fasted, and I just remember thinking that I wasn’t doing it right, that I wasn’t getting anything out of it, and that I really needed something, and so then was it was only that day just before Thursday Night Fellowship that it finally “clicked in,” and I was like, “Oh yeah, Dara goes to Thursday Night Fellowship. . . . That’s on Thursday’s so, you know, maybe I’ll just go, and maybe, hopefully, that’ll be something that’ll help me get a little bit of a more of a God connection than I’ve been getting myself today.” So I did, and that was the first time that I saw how different it was. ‘Cause I had tried it the beginning of freshman year and beginning of sophomore year and then, like, the first week of my junior year, and both of those times, it was, it was drastically different from what it had turned into. So I went that first Thursday and just really enjoyed it, just had a good time worshiping and actually saw some of the people that, through my Mark study, I was saying, “Oh, I guess those people aren’t so bad,” and so I went that first Thursday and just was really good, and so that was the first time I was like, “Oh wow, like, I’ve been wrong about this IV thing,” and so that’s how I continued through up until Easter as I was going to Thursday Night Fellowship each week, and so that was the two ways that I got involved.

The way that IV has really been good for me, though, is through the Mark study and through just the way IV teaches. I feel like I got to know Jesus and I didn’t know Jesus before, and what that sort of was leading up to was I don’t know really, in my heart of hearts, if I was a believer in Christ before Good Friday last year, and I think that was through having this, this intensive study of, like, seeing who Jesus actually is and what Jesus talks about and what Jesus does. So it was something that, all along, in my following Jesus, there was teaching about Jesus and we obviously studied the Bible and, but it was just like. . . . It was still about God, and finally, for the first time, InterVarsity let me get in touch with Jesus.
Dara: “Do I want to be popular or not?”

Dara is a junior psychology and Spanish major 20 years of age. She has been dating Kyle for several months and is also close friends with Renee, another study participant. Dara has lived in campus residence halls each year she has attended the university. She was involved in a campus sorority for a while, but ultimately disaffiliated herself as a result of conflicting commitments with the IVCF. In addition to time conflicts, she found the sorority environment to conflict with her need to abstain from alcohol and maintain a healthy body image. During her college years, Dara has struggled to come to terms with brokenness in her life, as well as with disappointment over her hearing impairment. She has also dealt with an eating disorder, which included spending a week one summer at an inpatient program for such illnesses. She describes her family as severely dysfunctional. Her parents divorced when she was very young, remarried each other, and were again separated at the time of our interview. Her family history is also filled with alcohol abuse and addiction.

Dara’s narrative describes a tension she has felt between involvement with the popular crowd on campus versus involvement in a campus fellowship. It initially seemed to her that, being involved in a campus fellowship and its associated commitments, precluded her campus popularity. Dara struggles with being “set apart” as a result of her faith commitment resulting in feelings of alienation and loneliness. This tension is particularly evident during her first year and in her relationship with her roommate. Dara describes her roommate as popular on campus. Initially, they were inseparable and Dara was actively involved in the same lifestyle as her roommate including the party scene and
the heavy drinking that went along with it. She describes feeling unhappy as her lifestyle and faith commitment conflicted. As she disconnected from the partying and drinking, she found herself alone and lonely. She actively considered transferring to a Christian college at the end of her first year. Her motivation stemmed from her desire to avoid being alienated from the larger campus population as a result of her faith.

Dara’s narrative describes the balance a fellowship must find to connect with interested students without leaving them feeling pressured to be involved. She describes needing “space” to “choose in” to the Fellowship. Her choosing into the Fellowship begins with her attendance at the weekly Bible study in her residence hall and attending Thursday Night Fellowship. She avoided further involvement because she did not sense a personal connection with the group, and she also sensed this disconnect to be mutual. One IVCF staff adviser pursued relationship with her in a manner that makes Dara somewhat uncomfortable, but not so uncomfortable that she disengages. In Dara’s narrative, it is evident that her growth toward wholeness coincides with fully committing to remain at Mid-Atlantic, embracing a status set apart from the mainstream campus population. She sensed a turnaround when noting that IVCF peers treated her as a “real person,” enabling her to experience a strong sense of “home” within the Fellowship.

Affiliations within her faith commitment are important to Dara. She maintains deep friendships with other Christians including those women in her accountability group and students on the Servant Team. She also sought a roommate that shared her Christian commitment and she benefited from sharing her faith journey with her roommate. The dynamic of cultivating a genuine presence and asking good questions begins a process
leading to searching and, ultimately, to greater commitment. This dynamic is clearly apparent in her narrative. The IVCF staff advisers walk alongside Dara in the challenges she faces, but do not make decisions or solve problems for her. They encourage her to do so on her own. Her narrative concludes by giving voice to her strong commitment to her faith in spite of questions that remain unanswered. One question remaining unanswered for Dara is how to put her faith commitment into action.

I would say that, when I came to school freshman year, I wasn’t entirely sure if I wanted fellowship to be a huge part of my life. I had kind of created kind of a role for myself in my high school that kind of confined me to be “bad girl turned good” and all that stuff, and I had kind of missed out on opportunities to be “popular.” So my freshman year, I was kind of toiling with which way I wanted to go, but I couldn’t imagine my life without a fellowship. Like, I went to the first event where you got to hear about all the different fellowships, and InterVarsity was the one that appealed to me, and immediately there were people visiting me though, and that kind of turned me off. I had people from IV and other fellowships. They would visit me on a fairly regular basis and just stop by, and because I was so unsure, then, of what I wanted, I was kind of turned off from that because I felt like they weren’t giving me an opportunity to choose and make my own decisions about what I wanted to do, and so I kind of didn’t go to any of the IV things at first. I think I went to, like, one and was unimpressed and stopped going, and it turned out that they have a study in my dorm and there was, like, nobody from my dorm that went. I mean it was... They still joke about how it was the “study from hell,” and I was the only person that, after a while, started coming regularly. So a lot of times, it would be me and John one-on-one for study, and it just wasn’t that appealing.

And the “flip side” of things being that I had a roommate that was really popular. She had a senior brother here, and there was always alcohol in my room and all the right people on campus I was just immediately introduced to, and so literally, like the idea of, like, “Do I want to be popular or not” was immediately presented to me, and having to make those choices, and so I just kind of struggled through. Like, I felt like I had been continually called apart from everything my whole life and was just so craving to embrace that “just go with the flow” feeling, and so I really, my first semester here, it was just back and forth and I’d say I chose into going with the flow on almost every occasion, but I was really unhappy. I really didn’t like my roommate. I didn’t like who I was “hanging out” with and did not like that I was getting drunk all the time and just was very displeased with my life and displeased, but anyway, so I was, during that time, though continuing to go to those two studies, that Tuesday study and then I think
that, by November, I started going to Thursday Night Fellowship, but it was just very interesting to me because, outside of those two things, I did nothing. I wasn’t invited to anything and I did nothing. I felt very shunned by InterVarsity in the beginning, just really felt like I was that “bad girl” that came every once in a while and . . . but for some reason I knew I was missing God, and I knew that that was an aspect of my life that was just really hurting—being gone—and so I decided over Christmas break to transfer, that this was not the place for me. I guess I was so void of God that I wanted to go to a Christian college where I would just be completely consumed again, and I wouldn’t have to make that popular versus, like . . . like it wouldn’t be such a drastic change or difference between the two groups.

And then, when I came back, I sort of . . . I think it was that what turned me. I kind of started praying to God again, and went like, you know, “What I’m going to transfer and it’ll be all better, but you just need to get me through this semester,” and I think He heard that—like, “Get me through this semester” deal—and He was going to get back to me about the transfer part, but He just like really helped me through that semester and I was called apart like none other. I made the decision to stop drinking, which was immediately. Like, I just immediately started losing anybody I hung out with that first semester. I spent a lot of weekend nights alone in my room, and it was just very trying ‘cause I still wasn’t at a point where I knew how to really pray with God to like turn to the Bible or any of that stuff. So I was. . . . I was just kind of. . . . I just knew He was there and I continued to turn to Him.

And then, I would say, I continued to choose into IV and finally, midway through the semester, I went to the spring conference, and I was sort of starting to know people, they started to talking to me like I was a real person a little bit, and got to know Pete and I said to him one night, when we were talking, I was like, “What is it? Like, why do I feel so out of place in this Fellowship? You know, I come every week; I attend everything,” and he basically told me that I kind of had this, not nickname—I don’t think everyone was talking behind my back—but this, like, “too cool Dara,” and they just thought it was a matter of time before I would leave. So again, I was like, “God, what am I doing?”

Just that, all the sudden, the last 4 weeks of school, God just used time after time. Like, I had two professors approach me and asked me to major, and I was asked on the Servant Team for InterVarsity, which was a huge gamble for them, I know, and I had had that conversation with Pete and started to get to develop real relationships there. I had, I met Kyle like the last weekend before school, and it turns out that he went to my church at home and invited me to a new church, and it was just like, “OK God, all these doors are opening,” so I decided to hang in there and stick it out, and I really, from Luke 5 about like “putting my nets into deep water,” even after being exhausted and having tried. So I just feel like, from that point on, like God has just overflowed my “nets.” There’s so much going on; I have so many relationships—Christian relationships, and accountability. I mean, God just is taking me step by step and just keeps
growing me further year after year, and I just think that freshman year was a huge testing period for me, and that’s kind of who I am.

And the other part of the last-minute door opening. . . . This girl that I had met during that first program Mid-Atlantic had about the Christian fellowships, I was introduced to her and we, like, didn’t talk for the rest of the year. We ran into each other and, all of the sudden, we had coffee for, like, 3½ hours, realized we were so alike, and just really enjoying each other’s company. Randomly, it was like, “Do you want to be my roommate next year?” which was kind of strange ‘cause we didn’t even know each other, so it was kind of a gamble, but she’s now my best friend, and it was just, she went through almost the identical thing that I went through my freshman year with her hall, and so we had both kind of disappeared and were trying to find our way back, and so that’s why we were kind of at a loss at the end of our freshman year.

And so I think being able to have a Christian companion, living with a Christian, somebody to hold me accountable on a daily basis and to just really point me towards the truth and all of that stuff was, was really key. Even getting to know, I’d say Servant Team, that Greg and Chad were probably two of the people that really made me feel at home on Servant Team because I still felt like I was the one that was constantly bringing up new ways to do things and other ways to not make people like myself feel outcasted in the group and not to have this threshold of perfection that people had to reach, you know. So that was cool and really just established more relationships, got myself out, out there. I was able to be real.

I joined a sorority that was more than I could have bargained for; it doesn’t have a whole lot to do with my faith. It was just kind of there, and a burden. I mean, it was a, it was a continually testing period because I had decided not to drink. Like, I struggled my second-semester freshman year, drank a few times, but did not pick up a drink from May of my freshman year until now, and so that was really difficult to be part of a sorority on campus and try to uphold the no drinking thing. Sophomore year, I started leading a study. I had also made the decision not to date. I had never dated before. I don’t know why I made that decision before God. I think it was because I have my eating disorder, and I was trying to stop that too, and I’d say it was about a month into my sophomore year and I fell back into it, and I don’t know if that was lack of faith as much as just not knowing how to, like, cope with everything around me.

I really was not at a place to be on Servant Team, I don’t think. I thought I was because that’s what I did in high school. That was just kind of who I was; I was always in leadership positions. I liked the idea of being. . . . I think I thought of Servant Team as more of a vision team, and in that case, I really was part of it and enjoyed it and was really, really tested when I had to lead studies every week, and I just didn’t have the energy and just realized by second semester, like, I needed to be “fed” more than anything else, and I was so used to “feeding.” I would take just little “crumbs” and try to transform that into this amazing “feast,” you know, which can be done. I mean, we all know that, but it just was
getting really taxing for me, and so I really tried to take second semester as
personal time and I felt really guilty for that and had a hard time telling myself
that that was OK, but in doing that, just, it was almost harder just, like, I was
knowing myself more and more and more and how weak I really was and how
little I really could do and how bad my coping mechanisms really . . . but just in
relationships and being in fellowship and just being OK and feeling freer and
freer to be myself, and God just showing me being faithful, like, “I will open these
peoples eyes; I will change your heart too.” Like, there was just a lot of changing
that needed to go on both sides of being open minded and just being willing to
accept people for who they are, and that was huge, and then, this summer,
obviously my faith just, it has just “skyrocketed.” Like, I don’t really know how
to, I mean it’s weird. I feel like I’m on a “roller coaster” now that, like, I’m so
often praying that prayer like “I believe; help my unbelief,” like, I just am
constantly, like, “I know that You’re there but there’s something that I just keep
falling short.” You know, like, “I just keep not being able to ask You for certain
things, and so I feel like my faith is strong, I feel like being able to put it into
action is really not meeting. . . .” I don’t know what I’m trying to say; it is not
working. So that’s pretty much where I am.

Renee: “God was in His ‘little box’”

Renee is a junior student, majoring in psychology, and 20 years of age. In
addition to the IVCF, Renee has been involved in the Gospel Choir and in community-
service activities on campus. She lived in campus residence halls her first and second
years of college and, at the time of our interviews, lived in the university apartments.
During her first year, she lived in a substance-free living program in the residence hall.
She has had many conversations with her roommates over lifestyle questions. She also
describes being in tension with those who do not share her faith, and desiring not to “step
on their toes”. Renee’s parents divorced when she was a toddler, and her father died
when she was a teenager. She is very close to her mother and helps her out a great deal by
managing family matters while in school. Renee was also close to her aunt, her mother’s
sister and best friend, who was killed in a drunk-driving accident when Renee was in high
school. Renee’s relationship with her mother shifted from one of daughter to one of supporter as a result of this family loss. Renee was raised in poverty, and this has been a struggle throughout her life including her college years.

Renee’s story of faith on campus speaks to catalysts that have shaped her faith, such as IVCF’s Chapter Camp, which occurs during the summer break just after the academic year, and her accountability group. She describes the importance of making connections between her life with God and the rest of her life. Renee also gives voice to what it’s like to “choose into” Christian faith for herself. She describes the impact of her IVCF staff worker, Elaine, who helps her by asking personal application questions in the context of Bible Study. Renee’s narrative also speaks to her realization that Christian faith is not a static event but rather a lifelong, dynamic process of growth. Part of Renee’s growth is spurred by her relationship with her boyfriend, who at the onset of their relationship, did not share her Christian faith. He asks her difficult questions, which challenge Renee to wrestle with her own questions. He ultimately commits to faith, which is a pivotal affirmation in Renee’s faith journey.

"I think, freshman year—like the way I viewed things—was very compartmentalized, very separated. God was in His “little box,” in His little place. I went and took care of that and then it was kind of done, and then I lived the rest of my life. Like, I wouldn’t say I was living a “double life”; I wouldn’t say that I was doing things that I would regret. Like, I wasn’t, like, doing the “God thing” and then, like, putting on a mask and, like you know, doing church, and then like doing the worldly thing. Like, I was still living with my Christian values, but I didn’t carry God into all the aspects of my life. So I think that was really freshman year."

"I’m trying to pinpoint when I started changing. I’ve been trying to think about it, and I realized that, at Chapter Camp freshman year, when the breakthrough started occurring, where I realized. . . . We were studying about the parable of the sower and I remember that. . . . I just, like, Elaine was saying something like, you know, “The seed falls on the good soil,” and she’s like,"
“Everyone here probably automatically thinks they’re the ‘good soil,’ but are you really the ‘good soil’? Are you really willing to be the ‘good soil’? Because that means that you have to hear it and hear what God’s saying and do something about it and use it,” and just realizing things that I don’t. . . . Like, I hear it, but I don’t really change a lot of things a lot of the times. I think that was when I started really realizing that, even though I was a Christian, it wasn’t just “OK, now I’m a Christian, way to go, you’re done.” It was when I started realizing it’s like a growth process.

And then coming back sophomore year and getting more involved in IV and choosing into that because I realized that I did want that to be a big part of my life. I wanted people to be able to recognize that I’m a Christian, and I wanted to not be ashamed of it . . . but I never wanted to “step on toes”; I never wanted to say, “Oh, do you want to come to church?” I’d never want to ask that kind of question ‘cause I never would want to offend or anything like that, so I would just. . . . If anyone ever asked me, I would talk about it, but I was very careful not to “step on toes” about what people believed, really get into religious discussions, things like that, and then sophomore year was when I just started more and more choosing, choosing into God more and letting people in on that more, letting just my friends in on that, and when I started dating Steven, I kind of kept it this separate thing from him and, you know, “Going to Thursday Night Fellowship now” or “I’m going to go to Bible study,” but never talked about what I learned from it or anything like that, and I think the first time that I really did, I remember I had been crying at Thursday Night Fellowship about something. I really got convicted about or something . . . and he started challenging me on it. He’s like, “Why don’t you ever talk about this; this is a major area of your life that you just leave unsaid. Like, you just don’t talk about it, and I don’t know anything about it, but you don’t bring it up,” and I was, like, “Well. . . .” I said that “I always feel like you don’t want to talk about it” and that’s how I think I felt. So that was when I really started talking about it.

And then getting into accountability . . . changed a lot of things and I started seeing what God wanted in my whole life—how God wanted me to be with Steven; how God wanted me to be with my friends; how God wanted me to treat my family, even though my family are Christians. I don’t know, looking back on it, I see how it was different, but then, I felt like I had it, like, together. It sounds now so superficial and so surface level, but when I was there in it, I felt like I knew what was going on. I felt like I had a handle on what God wanted me to do with my life and how to be, you know? Not just because I was raised in it, but I always believed it and always trusted in God and trusted what He wanted for me, but I don’t think I really carried that out into everything. I think I just put Him over here on the side. It was, like, you know, “When I need You for help, or when I’m worried about something,” like He’ll take care of me, and I trusted in those aspects and He always did take care of me; we’re always provided for and things like that, and I always saw those ways, but I don’t think I really got it until, really, sophomore year.
I was “on the road.” It really started “sinking in” that God is everywhere, everything. Nothing is more important than that, and that He should come first . . . . but never really being, like, “God change me . . . help,” you know, “stretch me in these areas that I’m so confused on and so messed up in how I think about things,” just areas like that. That’s what I really started doing and really started trusting that God knew what was best for me. I think that was something . . . I thought I knew what was best for me, and when I didn’t know what was best, that was when I would go to Him, but that would be a few rare times, like, worrying about the future or, like, “How is this going to get taken care of?” but now, I try to. . . . I really try to pray about things first and try to find out . . . to really try to seek His will, like, from the Bible and from praying and from really thinking on things before I just go into them, so I think that was where it really started changing, and I think more and more, it’s just growing like that because, for example, like, I’m thinking about the possibility of going on IVCF staff after I graduate, but I’m really realizing God saying, “Don’t worry about those things now. That’s the future, and, yeah, think about ‘em, but,” like, “don’t worry about tomorrow.” I was getting to the point that I was worrying about it. Like, worrying “Why isn’t there a decision? Why don’t I know whether I’m supposed to do this or grad school? Why don’t I know? Why don’t I know, God? Why aren’t you telling me?” and just to the point that I was, like, “Is that a sign? Am I supposed to do that?”

And I was trying to talk to my mom about this summer, possibly doing some kind of mission thing, like the urban project. My mom was, like, “Well, you really need to work this summer,” and I was, like, “Mom, but I’m just gonna trust that God’s gonna provide for me. Hasn’t God provided for me all along?” and I realized, like, talking to Mom, that’s where I used to be. Like, “Well, God understands that I need to work and God understands,” and totally limiting God. Like, the passage that’s really been sticking with me lately is, like, “Do not be anxious. Don’t be anxious about what you shall eat or drink or wear.” You know, “Seek the Kingdom and all these shall be yours and more,” but when you’re seeking the Kingdom, the things that you want are going to change. Like, your goals are going to change, and I think my goal isn’t to have money anymore. My goal is to get closer to God.

I think, before, it was always, like, “Well, I’m in school to get a good job,” and like, I still am here, and I’m still doing my best, but I’m here to get closer to God and grow closer to Him, and the ways I can do that, I want to do, even if they mean sacrificing money for next year because God will continue to provide. I just need to trust in that, you know? So I think those are areas, like, where even in growing towards the future, that I’m trying not to worry about and trying to trust that God will provide for me and will give me the things I need. Not the things I necessarily want, but the things I need, so it’s kind of a big question.
Justin: “It was kind of a lonely thing”

Justin is a male junior student, majoring in mathematics, and 20 years of age. He lives in a residence hall on campus and has been involved with the math association and the chess club, in addition to his IVCF involvement. His older sister was also involved in the IVCF at another university, which caused him to look into the Fellowship at Mid-Atlantic. Justin committed to Mid-Atlantic after being recruited to play baseball for the university. After matriculating, he did not make the team the first year. This created a significant crisis for Justin and he immediately began pursuing potential transfer schools that would allow him to play baseball. Justin’s parents separated and divorced early in the spring semester of his first year. It was in the midst of this experience that the IVCF and staff worker, John, rallied around Justin. At this point, Justin decided he could not transfer as he would be leaving this group that had become family to him. It is in this experience of care by the community that Justin begins to commit himself to involvement in the Fellowship and to related relationships. The IVCF demonstrates an ability to meet people in the midst of their brokenness and help them address difficult circumstances. At the same time, problems are not solved for individuals; rather, individuals are challenged to address difficult matters themselves as the IVCF extends support as needed. This encourages growth as opposed to stagnation.

Justin’s narrative of faith gives voice to a sense of loneliness and awkwardness in being a person of faith on a secular campus, particularly in the residence hall. Justin also describes how encountering difference was a critical experience in his faith, particularly in the context of a religion course. He recalls internal tension with his desire to speak up
in a classroom setting when dissenting faith perspectives are voiced around him, but does not find the confidence to do so. A transition with a good friend within the IVCF forced him to mature in his faith; Justin addressed the critical questions underlying the decision made by his roommate to leave the Fellowship and discount his own faith commitment.

Justin’s experience leading others in a Bible study also facilitated maturation. He was forced to seek answers to questions he was asked in the Bible study setting. Additionally, in the process of preparing to teach others, he experienced deep learning. His involvement in the IVCF urban project transformed his understanding of the city and led him to declare a minor in sociology. As demonstrated by Leanne and Keisha, Justin evidences a commitment to reconciliation—a commitment fostered by IVCF activities and relationships. He describes his faith experience on campus in the following manner:

Well, coming into freshman year, I definitely wanted to get involved with a fellowship and, actually, specifically InterVarsity, because my sister, who is a year older than me, she had gone to college the year before and gotten involved in InterVarsity there, you know, and just had a lot of good things to say about it. So when I found InterVarsity was at Mid-Atlantic, I did want to get involved with them, and fortunately for me, there was a Bible study in my dorm and so I started going to that the very beginning of the semester, but it was hard, like, a lot of nights because definitely most of my friends were on my hall, and so I would be spending all my time with the people in my hall and “hang out” with them and then, every week, at a certain time, like eight o’clock, “Yea, guys; I gotta go. I’m going to Bible study,” and none of them were interested at all in the Bible study or God or anything like that. I invited some of them sometimes . . . there’s no interest. So it is pretty hard just to always be leaving like those people who were pretty much everyone I knew. So that was hard, like, just having to step out from my hall and walk to the other side of the dorm by myself. I don’t know, it was kind of a lonely thing, but it definitely helped that I built some really good friendships in the Fellowship . . . in the Bible study. Some of my closest friends were in that Bible study freshman year, and I got to know them. My best friend freshman year was in the Bible study in InterVarsity. He was actually a senior that year, but we hung out. We did everything together. We played baseball together, and through freshman year, I think, mostly is just kind of awkward and lonely just to . . . like
you’re the only person in the hall to be doing anything. . . . Like, I was the only one who went to church at all or anything like that. So that was very hard.

And actually, in freshman year, my parents got divorced, like February, I think, of the spring semester and so, yeah, that was pretty devastating. That hit me pretty hard, but it was actually really good that I was involved in a fellowship because those friendships rallied around me and those people prayed for me, like really lifted me up through probably the . . . hardest time in my life, so that was really, really good for me. I think that’s when I really started to choose into those friendships more. Like, after that was when I started to hang out with those people more and not as much with the people from my hall. So that’s when I really got to be better friends with the people in the Fellowship.

And so then, my sophomore year, I roomed with the guy who led the Bible study the previous year and we were going to lead a Bible study together, and you know, kind of do some leadership-type stuff together, and we “block booked” with four people from my freshman hall, so I had those four friends, plus my roommate who was pretty much one of my really good friends from the year before. So we were really looking forward to a good year, a year in a dorm with a lot of freshman, so we were going to reach out to a lot of freshman. So the fall semester sophomore year started out pretty well, but my roommate just went through a really hard time. It’s his junior year and he just was struggling with a lot of things, I guess. He ended up pretty much like dropping out of the Fellowship, like he got out of leadership and kind of disappeared for awhile, and that was really hard with him being my roommate and, I guess, sort of looking for him to mentor me through my sophomore year and starting a Bible study and all that stuff. So I ended up being left with the Bible study by myself, plus I had to come and deal with him and, like, him going through really a hard time. So, like, that experience is definitely forced me to kind of mature a little bit, just in leadership ability and nothing else, but yeah, leading a Bible study was, was actually really good for me. It challenged me a lot last year.

I think spring-semester sophomore year—the first half—I probably was very much weighed down, I guess, definitely being kind of “bogged down,” and I wasn’t really excited about leading it. So I’d just kind of go to Bible study without preparing an excessive amount. I think I even got in the habit of taking naps beforehand and would wake up like 5 minutes before, so I’d be “groggy” when I went. So that wasn’t so good; those didn’t go so great, and then halfway through the semester, right before spring break, one of the women in my study came and talked to me saying, “Yeah, like this Bible study is not going so well, but I think it could be a lot better,” and so we ended up, like, talking for, like, 2 hours and it was really good. Like, just that she actually stepped out and came and talked to me. . . . So I realized that I needed to really dedicate myself to serving the people in my study, and that made a big difference the rest of . . . that semester. Like, the second half of the spring semester was a really good time. I was definitely blessed a lot by the Bible study, by leading it, being able to be a mentor to the people in the study, and just having a relationship with those people.
Spring semester I also, I took my first and only religion class. It was called Religion and Popular Culture. So it was sort of like looking at religious aspects of life, sports or music videos, that sort of thing, TV shows, like aspects of religion and those things. So there are a lot of times, like, when stuff would get said and just a lot of time, like, OK, most of those times I didn’t say anything. I would just sit there and kind of like observe. So, I mean, I didn’t really like put myself out there and assert my faith and, you know, tell people where I was coming from. So, I don’t know, I think that class was pretty hard for me, like, to just sit there and listen to, like, all these things that people would say and, I mean like, the class format itself was just... We all sat in a big circle. There were about 20 people in the class. We would sit in a circle everyday and just have discussions pretty much about these readings that we would do, and some of their. . . . I think one of the readings, maybe one of the harder ones, was this guy who I think was pretty famous, like. . . . I don’t know specifically his field; it was like religion or something like that. This more like history of religion or something, and so like pretty much, was just saying that, yeah, like basically all religions kind of have these little basic properties, and so it was like talking about the different myths and these different religions and talking about these obscure religions from South America, and then talking about Christianity and, you know, how the different myths fit into all of this, and like the important thing isn’t whether or not these stories are true, but just the religious value that they have. So, like sitting through some of that and listening to some of that was really hard because, obviously, I think that Jesus’ story is true and so, like, just having conversations everyday about, well, it doesn’t so matter much if it’s true.

And then another class period we watched, I guess, scenes from . . . the Last Temptation of Christ . . . the movie. So that was hard to see because I could actually kind of get, like, a sort of good idea, but like, if you don’t really understand, like, all the background to the Gospel, then it can be a really dangerous idea. It ends with an angel saying to Jesus, “So,” you know, “get down off the cross; you don’t have to die, it’s OK, “ and so I think that part was the really dangerous part. So that was like the temptation, and so watching it in that class with a lot of people who aren’t Christians and don’t buy into it at all, and having to talk about it, like, that was a tough, tough week I think, and again, like I didn’t feel comfortable, I guess, talking too much about where I was coming from. So, yeah, that was, that was interesting. Those are couple of examples, I guess, in that class. Yeah, I mean, it definitely felt like just getting, like, sitting there everyday, like getting hammered. . . . It’s like, “Ahhhh, what do I say?”

I think we also studied, like, this weird festival. It’s called The Burning Man Festival, and it goes on out, like, in California or something, in the desert, and all these people get together and, like, do weird things under, like, the effigy of, like, is burning wooden cut out of a man or something, and so we’re talking about this. Well, this stuff is pretty immoral ‘cause, like, it was a lot a, like, debauchery and stuff like. . . . I think people just kind of wander around naked for a week or something and have sex a lot, do drugs and all. Well, this is a, you
know, it’s kind of weird, kind of immoral. So that was, like, one of the times I really spoke up and said I don’t think this is a good thing. It was just, was interesting, I guess. So, but I mean, it did help me in some ways ‘cause they changed my thinking from, like, if someone says they’re spiritual or they’re, like, into spiritual things like. I guess, before I was, like, connected that to, like, “Well, they believe in God and they’re Christians and so they,” you know, “kind of believe what I believe in.” So, I guess that class kind of opened my eyes and made me a wider picture of like, “all right, well, if someone is spiritual and all that stuff, then they don’t necessarily buy into anything, that’s for sure.” So, it kind of, yeah, it kind of gave me a better perspective in that way, so I guess it was good.

Then I guess I also decided to spend last summer doing an urban project rather than getting another internship. The summer after my freshman year, I did research for math and so I decided not to do that or not to get a job period, but to actually have to raise money and go and work in the city. I made that decision in the spring, so that was kind of cool, and I mean, just like all spring I just got more and more excited about working in the city and, over the summer, it was actually really good for me to be there. Like I was challenged in so many ways and, like, you know, just so many aspects of growing up in the suburbs and just taking so much of suburban lifestyle and suburban culture for granted, then going to an urban environment and seeing the difference. So it really opened my eyes, and I guess I would say it really changed my life because, as a result of that summer, I mean, after I graduate from college, I want to go and work in the city and I want to do some sort of ministry in the city, or at least teach in the city. And I mean, that was a lot different than what my plans were a year ago. So the summer definitely changed my life.

Then this fall, been leading Bible study again. It’s been a much smaller group than I had last year, but I think that’s actually been really good. I’ve had a chance, because there are fewer people, I’ve had a chance to get to know each person a lot deeper. I actually have time to go and visit each person pretty much every week, which is cool and actually spend time with them. Definitely, I think this semester, I’ve started to learn the importance of relationships and sort of like having a perspective that relationships and the people around me and all that is just so much more important than even schoolwork necessarily, which has been a tough lesson to learn sometimes when I haven’t done quite as well as I wanted to on a test or something, but after this summer, I definitely wanted to have the perspective like . . . I’m going to choose out of making grades as the most important thing about my experience at school. So then, like, the first test I got back that I didn’t do so well on it, it bummed me out for a whole day and so I had to think about that. Like, “Wait a second. I’m not supposed to be worried about grades.” So I got, like, a “C” and, you know, depressed for a day. So what’s up with that? So that was something I had to really work through, and pray through, but you know, it’s still something I’m working on, at least definitely trying to focus on the relationships with the people in my Bible study and with my roommate who is not a Christian, but we’ve actually been having a really good
semester together. Like, it’s been a much better rooming situation than I had last year or certainly freshman year, which. . . . I didn’t get to choose my roommate and that wasn’t so good. I mean, it’s been really good living with that roommate. Let’s see, I guess being interested in the city and that sort of thing has also led me to pursue a minor in sociology, and that’s something, you know, I’m working on now. I have two sociology classes this semester and I’ve really enjoyed both of them. So that’s been really good also.

*Erica: “Not just trying to confine myself to a Christian setting”*

Erica is a sophomore majoring in chemistry and 19 years of age. She lives in a residence hall on campus. In addition to the IVCF, she has been involved in the band and in a substance-free residence hall initiative on campus. She was raised attending church and remains very close to her parents. Her parents remain married and she goes to them, particularly her mother, for regular advice and counsel. Her parents remain her primary authoritative voice for matters of faith; however, she is moving toward self-authorship. Erica’s narrative speaks to her desire for exclusive affiliation with those who share her faith perspective. Initially, she “clings” to the Fellowship while she seeks a comfortable presence within the secular environment. Through her involvement with the IVCF, she is challenged to engage with others in the larger campus culture and also taught to see Jesus as one who built relationships with “common people.” Her understanding of Jesus is enlarged in the context of Bible study, as well as through a drama based upon the gospel of Mark that was presented at the IVCF fall conference, Big Love. When Erica speaks about her experience as a person of faith on a secular campus, she expresses how different her expectations were upon arrival to the university from what actually occurred as it relates to her involvement in a campus fellowship. In Erica’s narrative, it is apparent
how her growth has been encouraged by enlarging her application of faith from a tight circle of individuals who share her perspective to a larger circle and, thus, to the full context of her life.

I think I came into college having a much different expectation of what it really ended up being. I think I expected to come in and have it be a lot like high school where I was very involved in a group. I came to college and I wanted to find a Christian group to get into, and I went to the first InterVarsity meeting and it reminded me a lot of what I had had in high school. It wasn’t exactly like it, but there were certain things that I really liked about it—mainly the worship. I really liked the worship style, and so I came in knowing that I wanted to “dive in” to something like that, and I think I expected to come in and find a group and then that would be my group, and that would be the people I knew. Those would be people I’d always “hang out” with, the people that I’d eat dinner with, or hang out on the weekends, and I got here and it wasn’t like that, and that was pretty rough at first—definitely in the first semester because it wasn’t what I expected, and it was . . . that would have been a lot more comfortable for me if it had been like that.

So I got here and there was a lot of emphasis on having Christian friends and being a part of InterVarsity, but also reaching out to other people, and a lot of relational sort of things like getting to know the people on my hall, and so, come spring, after I was sort of through the “Wow, why didn’t I get to know people in InterVarsity better?” I looked back and realized that it was really good for me because I was good friends with the people I lived with, and my roommate and I got along great, and we were able to talk about a lot of things, which was very “cool,” and so I guess, throughout that, I guess some preconceptions that I had were being changed and I was growing and I was just sort of digging even more into that, and I think, in some ways, my faith changed, that it wasn’t just me and God. I mean, hanging out with Christian people, but it was me and God in, like, every context sort of. I think, growing up, I was definitely encouraged to “hang out” with, like, good people, and just getting to college and realizing that that’s not really what life is like, and that’s not what Jesus did, and so just sort of being out there, being among just normal everyday people and not just trying to confine myself to a Christian setting. I think, definitely, one of the ways I learned of them was Big Love last year and seeing Mark performed and just really realizing that Jesus didn’t hang out with the disciples all the time. That, and doing the Mark I last spring, and just seeing that Jesus was, all the time, out among the people, that He wasn’t . . . He didn’t go to the important people’s houses. He was definitely hanging out with the commoners, and I think, growing up, I had this picture of Jesus “hanging out” with the common people, but they were really good at heart and I think, last year, I realized that, no, these were just really
regular people and most of them probably weren’t exactly what we consider “good of heart,” but that was OK and that’s what Jesus was doing.

In the context of participant narratives, several similarities are apparent in spite of the broad range of class year and gender. Participants were encouraged to be “real” with their personal struggles and to wrestle with questions of faith. They all described benefits from close relationships with IVCF staff advisers and peers as they addressed such challenging issues. The campus experience for Keisha, as the only ethnic minority student in the study, is different from the others, most notably in how she influenced the Fellowship. Her commitment to reconciliation is evident in the lives of other participants, particularly Leanne and Justin who experienced a transformation in their understanding of themselves and their commitments to addressing oppression due to their involvement in the Fellowship. Overall, each participant learned to connect with the IVCF group and to negotiate the campus environment in a manner that ultimately cultivates his or her respective faith journey.
CHAPTER 5

Faith in Context

This chapter presents the collective story of the faith experiences expressed by the IVCF participants at Mid-Atlantic University. Their accounts of faith dynamics on campus are presented in a manner that emerged in light of the narrative context of this inquiry. The primary settings within which these college students described their experiences were the Mid-Atlantic University and the IVCF. Finally, the experiences that promote epiphanies of faith are presented.

Storyline

The starting point for describing and understanding the dynamics of faith for these students is their own definitions of faith itself. Their orienting images of faith are complex and interrelated.

Relationship with God and Others

The unifying idea among the constructions of faith described by the participants in this study is relationship—both a relationship with God and relationships with other people. Relationships with other people include individuals with similar, as well as divergent, faith perspectives. In speaking to faith, Chad expressed the following thoughts regarding the centrality of relationships: “I think the meaning of life, I think our
relationships, you know, with people, God, with Creation. . . . I mean, I don’t know if you could sum it up in one sentence. It’s like everything. Relationships are . . . so important.”

In the following excerpt, Chad recalls a speaker he heard one summer that shaped his understanding of faith:

“He explained to us, like, Jesus didn’t just die to save people to Himself, but He also died to save people to people and people to environment, like the whole . . . all of Creation, and all those different relationships, and that is probably a belief that I value, probably most, and that’s why I’m so sure . . . that that’s why I value relationships.”

Greg similarly described relationships as central to his faith perspective in the following manner: “Trying to be committed to, I mean, to God, but then to relationships in people. Caring about people and having that kind of take priority over other things. I mean, relationships with people is big.” Relationship to God is the central idea and relationships with people extend from that relationship with God.

**Infuses Identity and Purpose**

According to these students, relationships with God and other people infuse identity as well as purpose in life. Leanne, for example, connected identity and life purpose by articulating God to be the Creator of human life. She stated,

[Life] has meaning because God created me, created my life and every detail of what I look like and who my personality is and who my family is and He’s put me where I am. My purpose is to have a relationship with Him and to understand that He loves me. . . . To have a relationship with the one who created us, and then, after that, to have a relationship with each other.

The relational dimension of faith shaping purpose is affirmed by Keisha, as indicated in the following reflection: “My spiritual life and knowing God is what gives me purpose. . . . My meaning comes from my relationship with God and feeling like there is something
bigger than all the earthly things that we try to acquire.” Faith offers a sense of perspective in the world that interprets both surface and larger questions and experiences. The prominence of meaning, as an aspect of relationship with God, connects intimately with identity. Another participant, Renee, made a statement that affirms the identity theme and, at the same time, her words evidence that the relational understanding of her faith is a recent development: “God definitely makes my life meaningful. Well, because I have a new direction, a new purpose, I think—a new identity, shall we say. I identify that I’m a Christian, and that’s the reason why I’m here.”

Justin spoke of his faith in a manner that connected relational dimensions, with God and people each providing a new sense of purpose. He stated,

As just the joy of getting to know God more . . . every day, and just reading through the Bible and, in particular . . . and just realizing the joy He has for me. I think that totally gives my life meaning now, just realizing that, and being able to care for people. Because of that, I’m able to care about the people in my dorm and on my hall.

Some of the same ideas are presented more tentatively by Erica. She explained,

I would probably say the things that I do. I would probably say that “Oh, what I am saying . . .” that I think a lot of what I . . . It should be meaning to . . . would be my relationship with God, and that . . . what I’m doing with InterVarsity, and I’m doing a program on campus with the Healthy Living floor where I live with the freshman and plan things for them to do, and so, yes, in terms of helping people, I would say that that’s something, and I think school is probably a lot of my meaning, and I probably give school more meaning than it should have in my life, but I guess that, and the relationships I have with people, give my life meaning.

Erica’s education and involvements are motivated by her relationship with God. Faith, then, pervades all aspects of life in that it provides identity and purpose and motivates action. As Greg summarized, “I mean, I try to love Jesus; that’s who I am.”
**Being Real and Authentic**

The IVCF emphasizes being genuine with God and with each other. This focus infuses all activities and relationships. Sharing doubts, fears, and personal issues is emphasized in this community’s ethos and becomes a critical dimension of faith. Leanne expressed that faith is “being real with God.” Chad noted that you’ve got to talk about your doubts; you’ve got to talk through ways that you don’t believe, ways that . . . You’ve got to address all those issues and put them on the table because they’re there for every one of us, and if you are real about this stuff, even if you’re trying to pretend like you have this great faith and you don’t, then you just, you’re going through the motions; you’re never going to get stronger in faith ‘cause you’re not. There are those issues that are there; they’re just not being dealt with, you know. You’re not putting them on the table. . . . We need to be real with God.

Being authentic with other people about confusion they may have regarding their faith, as well as personal issues in life, are critical factors in growth and transformation. As Greg indicated,

And kind of like a whole, another aspect of mature faith like, like . . . you know . . be, like being real with other people about it. Like, as in, like, also like, if I have questions about something, or I don’t understand something, or like, not being always, you know, “Jesus is great and following Jesus is perfect” and you know, like, like being . . . being open with other people.

**Integral to All of Life**

Faith, in its mature form, offers a lens for viewing all of life, and it is applicable to all of life. The dynamics of faith during the college years involve faith becoming more integral in all aspects of their lives. As Greg articulated in the following manner: “I believe that it. . . . It’s, you know, I mean, God is real and therefore it has to do with all parts of my life.” For these students, faith is not compartmentalized; it is not something
that just happens on Sunday or during IVCF events. Faith is consistent, regardless of the particular context or circumstance, or whether that context is a band concert, an IVCF event, or in a classroom. Faith is present in all settings in similar ways. Greg also noted that faith is “a factor in all [his] decisions.” Erica described her parents and pastor from home as models of faith. In her following description, the notion of consistency to faith, in spite of changing circumstances, is evident:

It’s not so much just that they do the right things, but that they have the attitude, that they’re not . . . that they. . . . I guess if they, they believe even when it doesn’t feel good or it’s not something that changes depending on their mood. It’s something that’s a part of their life, that they. . . . I guess that they sort of see everything through that.

It is a process of two worlds—namely, their Christian world and the rest of their lives becoming one. Dara verbalized this as a response to a sense of “calling.” She explained, “Somebody who . . . somebody who takes action when they feel God calling. . . . In mature faith, I see people who are willing to go where they are feeling called.” For Leanne, it was “when you’ve decided that whatever you believe in is what you’re gonna follow and live by for your life, and then having your actions stem out of that thing, would be mature faith.” Faith involves actions that parallel response to that faith. Dara connected action to meaning in faith when she stated, “I think that, that it’s very much the only way [life] could have meaning is if we are doing what God wants to do through us.”

Experiential

Faith, for these students, helps them face life experience. In fact, faith is deepened by life experience. As Chad articulated,
People go through things with God and have their experiences shape what they believe and what they think and, I don’t know, I . . . How do I know I wouldn’t believe what they believe if I lived through what they lived through?

The study participants incorporated the experiences of their personal histories into their faith. Faith enables these students to authentically face challenges from previous life experience and allows them the courage to deal with tough issues. Greg spoke of the impact of challenging life experiences as influencing his faith in a manner more applicable to the whole of his life. He stated,

I feel like it’s been a kind of like a calling me deeper and deeper . . . into you know, real faith . . . and part of that . . . includes . . . or is defined by it becoming more and more of a . . . real thing for me and of a, you know, very integral part of me.

Life experiences provide ongoing validation of faith. Kyle affirms that his faith is influenced by his daily experience:

And so it’s more just from personal experience that I’ve realized, like, how cool it really is to, like, follow Jesus. Like, how amazing that is, like, day-to-day, you know, like, the more I’ve realized that, the more I want to do it.

**Particular—Following Jesus**

The accounts of faith articulated by participants are explicitly specific in nature. When the students spoke of faith, they described a particular Christian faith content; definitions and descriptions derive directly from Christian tradition. Participants provided accounts of the life of Jesus including his life, death, and resurrection. Specifically, they described their understanding of the contrast between the death and resurrection of Jesus as remembered annually on Good Friday and Easter—pivotal days
on the Christian calendar. Chad stated, “You need one to understand the other and kind of how that’s central to all Christian faith.”

Chad defined living a life of faith as an incarnational reality, a theological term which means that one becomes like Jesus. Referring to the life of Jesus as incarnational, Chad explained,

Jesus became human, and the more I think about it, the more “trippy” that is because He could have come in any form. He could have been some, you know, flash of light or some, you know, creature that glowed in the dark or something that would have set Him, something that would set Him aside from us, but He didn’t. He chose to be exactly like us . . . and I think that there’s a lot of significance to that ‘cause that means that He like . . . I don’t know, we, we . . . It’s only natural we could relate best. I mean, that’s partly why there’s so much racial segregation, ‘cause people relate best to what . . . they’re used to, I think, and, you know, I think, I think there’s a, there’s a call to . . . try not to just relate in a way that you’re used to, but also try and relate to people in a way that they’re used to and on their terms and in their ways, like Jesus did with us, you know. That’s what I mean by incarnation.

An aspect of the incarnational reality that the participants described is the dynamic of becoming more like Jesus. Becoming like Jesus is, in fact, part of the basic foundation of their faith.

Ongoing Process

Faith is a process of growing toward knowing Jesus at deeper levels, as well as being more and more like Jesus. Leanne noted that following Jesus means “a process of knowing him in relationship, in everyday life, and acting on that.” The process aspect of faith is also evident as Renee described faith as an ongoing process of spiritual growth in her comment, “And I’m in a continually . . . in a continual process of growing myself, so
every day I’m trying not to be stagnant, shall we say.” Kyle concluded that faith is an ongoing process without an attainable goal in any one lifetime. He stated,

The picture of mature faith is always finding a way to be closer every day. Like, every time you do something, like, you know there is a way to be closer to Jesus. To be more like Jesus in something, and to me, like the idea of a mature faith, is one that you can always find another way to get closer.

The participants described a sense of progression in their faith through their college years. This is evident in the following description offered by Keisha of how her understanding and knowledge of God changed, specifically during college:

I think when I entered college, I didn’t really know—and maybe I still don’t understand it—but I didn’t really know what it meant to follow Jesus and to live your life with Jesus. I think I came in thinking that I could . . . proclaim and claim to be following Jesus and be a Christian, but not really living that way, and still, I’m still challenged with that, like, you know with certain things. Like, if I really believe that God is this and that, then I wouldn’t worry about this or, like, you know . . . So still, I’m still faced with that, but over the 4 years, I’ve learned how to give my life totally to God and not just, like, halfway. You know, like really making it a part of my lifestyle, and not just something that I do on Sundays or something that I do some of the time, and then have this other life the other half of the time.

Chad indicated that he experienced predictable “stages” to faith in his own life and the lives of others during the college years. When I asked him about his faith during this life period, and whether it had changed, he answered unequivocally, “Yeah, my, my faith changed. I think it became a lot more mature.” In his conversations with his IVCF staff adviser, they have discussed three predictable stages to faith in college. Chad used marriage as a parallel to articulate these stages, which again evidences the relational foundation at the core of his faith perspective: “In any kind of relationship, you have your Stage One, Stage Two, Stage Three. Other people talk about it differently.” The first stage is the “honeymoon stage” where everything is wonderful. The second is when
things get “hard” and there is arguing and one wonders whether the match is right.
Finally, in the third “You kind of accept things and you roll with it and you get beyond that . . . and you come to a deeper understanding, a more real understanding of what things are about.” Chad described his IVCF experience, as well as the experiences of others he witnessed, in the sophomore and junior years—often the second stage, the hard times. Chad recounts, “My relationship with God . . . went through those changes during my college years. I definitely went through that transformation in my years.” Here again, the central idea that faith is a relationship that moves toward deeper understanding is pronounced. Chad noted that the college years are challenging times for faith. These challenges are predictable and may even coincide with class years.

**Emergent Definition of Faith**

In summary, for these students faith is an authentic relationship with God and others where the individual hides nothing. These relationships provide identity and purpose, are relevant to all of life, and lead the respective individuals to actions modeled after the life of Jesus. Faith involves an ongoing process toward deeper understanding of Jesus and deeper applications of the life and character of Jesus. Describing faith with language is difficult for these students; they wrestle with nomenclature. They avoided terms such as *Christian, religious, or spiritual* for fear of being misinterpreted. What seems to underlie the tension regarding these terms was the perception they might deliver to others. Chad stated,

Like *spiritual* and *religious*, or *Christian*, or any of those words, like you know, yeah, I think I’m all those things, but at the same time, with how so many people define them, I think, no, I’m not those things. I mean, personally, I’m Christian
more than any of the others. That’s, but even that, it depends on the context, depends on who, who I’m with. If I’m with a bunch of non-Christians, I don’t want to use that word because those people who are non-Christian, are non-Christian because they have no idea what Christian is.

The term religion is heavily “baggaged” with negative connotations. Religion is associated with doing all things in accordance with rules and going to church without any authentic relationship or impact on how life is lived any other time. Religion is generic and compartmentalized to merely a part of life. Where religion is perceived as a partial, habitual, and segregated aspect of life, following Jesus is all-inclusive. Religion may be inclusive of faith or an aspect of faith, but it is not the same as faith. The term spiritual seems to refer to something amorphous and separate from the institution of the church. The term Christian is also inadequate in describing faith because it means different things to many different people. For the participants, the term Christian has lost its true meaning for their faith.

Settings

Mid-Atlantic University Ethos

Because a significant question in this inquiry relates to the dynamics of faith within a particular college environment, the ethos of the college environment itself is a critical element of the analysis. Understanding the perspectives of the participants with regard to faith, demands exploring their experiences with Mid-Atlantic University. One of the ways in which this is addressed is in depicting the process of matriculating at Mid-Atlantic. The participants described their selection of Mid-Atlantic as academic in nature, as well as the smaller, more personal nature of the university. The implications for their
spiritual journey were not a primary aspect of their decision-making process. Chad spoke to this sentiment when he stated, “I chose Mid-Atlantic basically because it was a good school . . . and academically . . . I didn’t choose it for spiritual reasons at all.” Academic programs and outside of class interests, such as athletics, were core aspects of the decisions to attend Mid-Atlantic. The desire to find a Christian fellowship was secondary for most of the participants. The choice to attend Mid-Atlantic was typically articulated as between this secular college and other Christian colleges. Erica described her choice as predominantly intuitive, but also based upon her desire to be challenged by a secular college environment. She stated,

One of the things I felt was that I didn’t want to go to Christian college. I felt like it would be more of a challenge for me to go to a secular school, which obviously it was and, for some reason, I wanted to do that.

Mid-Atlantic University, as the participants described it, has several predominant characteristics. It is fast paced and busy. Keisha commented, “Mid-Atlantic is so busy,” and according to Leanne,

It’s really easy at Mid-Atlantic to get caught up in the “I have to do a bunch of stuff and do it really well to be valuable” sort of idea, and so you just keep on doing stuff, and there’s not many students here who just kind of “chill” for a little bit.

The university environment itself is a place of rapid change. Leanne explained,

Like, especially at Mid-Atlantic, you get, at the end of the year, the seniors graduate and the freshman move up, or there’s new freshman who come in and then there’s sophomores, there’s juniors who were abroad the year before who come back, and there’s sophomores who were here the year before who are now juniors and they’re going abroad. . . . People come in and out a lot, plus you only realistically have like 3½ months the first semester and 3½ months the second semester where you’re in the dorms living with people, and you’re hanging out with people all the time, so those relationships, like, deepen really fast where you get to know people really fast or, like, just ‘cause you’re around them all the time.
Image is also a major element of the Mid-Atlantic University ethos, body image being the most prevalent issue. Keisha revealed that students work very hard to be thin. She explained, “At Mid-Atlantic, you know, you deal with everything. It’s like, body image, everybody trying to be thin, work out, eating disorders, and things like that at Mid-Atlantic.” According to Kyle, this is “especially what Mid-Atlantic stands for, as far as image and body and dress and all that, and how that ties in with, you know, how people are social.” Mid-Atlantic is a party scene, with drinking as its most prominent aspect, as Kyle also emphasized by stating, “You know, and just especially the whole drinking issue was huge here at Mid-Atlantic just because of how much alcohol runs culture here.” Kyle spent his first year, from his perspective, immersed in the Mid-Atlantic scene. He described his experience in the following manner:

[I] spent my entire freshman year looking for a church and realizing that the fellowships weren’t any good. So in that I really got very involved with just the Mid-Atlantic scene, just very much, like, partied all of the time, like you know, academics was a little important, but it was, you know, it was important for me just to have a good time . . . the Mid-Atlantic side of things and just the partying and the popularity.

The “party scene,” as the participants described it, is driven by an active and prevalent system of campus fraternities and sororities. The students commonly sense pressure to join sororities and fraternities and participate in the associated parties. Keisha stated, “Well, 60% of Mid-Atlantic—probably more now—is Greek, and that’s not me, and if you’re not into that kind of thing, then there was very little alternatives.” Leanne volunteered similar descriptions of pressure to be a “sorority woman kind of person” in order to “fit in” on campus. She stated,
I’m not your typical, like, get excited about all the latest styles and dress up and be a sorority woman kind of person. I’m not really into a bunch of girls hanging out all of the time, which I don’t think fits very well at Mid-Atlantic . . . if you don’t have someplace to belong. It’s hard to not be Greek.

The participants frequently noted that the student population of Mid-Atlantic University is predominantly White, and referred to the campus as a place where racism is prevalent. As Kyle, a White student, stated, “Like especially at a place like Mid-Atlantic, where, I mean, racism is very prevalent here.” Keisha referred to the campus as socially challenging from her perspective as an African-American student. The term worldly was repeatedly used by the participants to describe Mid-Atlantic. According to Dara, the university is “very secular, very homogenous.” Kyle described his perspective in the following interview excerpt:

Mid-Atlantic stands for what the world stands for. . . . I think the world has very defined views on what’s important. Like, I named money and image and popularity and, I guess, I mean, that’s a pretty good just, just quick list, you know. And I think, in large, that’s how the world feels. . . . College is [a] place where, you know, like you’re, you’re taught to sort of think outside of what the world tells you. I mean, like, you know, a lot of colleges are about, like, growing as a person and, like you know, learning the real values and, like, I think that, that Mid-Atlantic is a very worldly place, and I think Mid-Atlantic is a place that says money is important, image is important, and what else did I say? Status is important. Like, all those things are what Mid-Atlantic stands for, and I think that Mid-Atlantic is a place that is very . . . very much like the world.

Erica recalled her arrival at college and being challenged by the non-Christian atmosphere. She stated, “And especially, I think, especially coming to Mid-Atlantic was hard for me, just because it’s not a Christian atmosphere.” Summarily, Mid-Atlantic University was experienced by participants as an environment divergent from their Christian faith.
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Ethos

This Mid-Atlantic University IVCF chapter was initiated by some of the students who served as participants in this inquiry. Consequently, the chapter is relatively new to the campus. The choice to begin the fellowship chapter with the IVCF was born out of experiences with other Christian groups on campus that demonstrated a lack of fit with the desires of these students. The IVCF chapter was expected to meet particular needs that were priorities for the students who were instrumental in founding the Fellowship.

Chad experienced a positive beginning to his involvement with a Christian group during his first year until conflicts between his views and those of others became apparent. Conflicts over Christian music, dating versus courting, and what games are appropriate in mixed gender settings served as the collective impetus for recognizing that the organization was a bad fit for him. After recognizing the differences of opinion and discerning that the opposing views were widely shared within the organization, Chad began the process of founding the new Fellowship. This decision involved leaving the friendship base he had cultivated from his first year. Consequently, his major contribution to the founding of the IVCF was focused on his own needs, but was also based upon meeting the similar needs of others. Essentially, the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter was shaped by a desire to create space at the university for divergent theological viewpoints.

The need for particularities of faith experience in the academy is evident in the story surrounding the initiation of this particular IVCF chapter.

As documented earlier, Chad initiated the Mid-Atlantic IVCF with Keisha and the help of the IVCF Regional Director. Keisha and Chad shared similar hopes and dreams
for the new campus Fellowship, part of which included fulfilling the need for greater multiethnic inclusiveness. As an African-American, Keisha was uncomfortable with the existing campus groups and felt that other minority students had no fellowship with which to connect either. Chad had also met several African-American students who didn’t have a fellowship they could call “home.” Due to the recent founding of the chapter, the participants knew the individuals personally who played key roles in its initiation. As a result, they identified the specific characteristics and attributes of these individuals in the interviews. Leanne volunteered the following description:

The characteristics of our Fellowship from the beginning have stemmed a lot from John and Elaine and from Chad. [They] are people who are very intentional about, intentional about relationships. [They] are people who question things all the time. They think about what’s good for someone before they ask someone to do something . . . like leading. Is it gonna be good for someone, or does it just seem like the natural step? What else? They just question a lot of why people do things or why things are these certain ways or how people are feeling and what people are doing in their everyday lives and how can they connect people to Jesus and those things, and so that kind of attitude has been prevalent in the Fellowship because it started from those three people, so it just kind of spread out from there, and those people, people who are in connection with those three, have picked up a lot of what they believe, and so then we pass it on to other people, and so that’s a lot of how the Fellowship has sort of . . . grown, with those things at the heart.

Leanne described several of the characteristics of the Fellowship that derive from its founding leaders. An analysis of the participant interviews indicated several predominant characteristics of the ethos of this IVCF chapter. The chapter is countercultural, relational, diverse, and “real.”

The term countercultural is used to not only describe the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter, but also the larger Christian culture beyond the university. According to Leanne,

We don’t do a lot of the things that Christian culture says you’re supposed to do, like listen to Christian music all the time and do all these, like, high family values
sort of activities. We look at what Jesus says we’re supposed to be and then go from there. So that means we get, we go to parties and “hang out” with people who are drinking, and it means we do all that stuff that you’re not supposed to do so people, that’s why they call us the “bad mouth Fellowship” or the . . . I don’t know, they look at us that way, but I kind of identify with those more real risk-taking people . . . as opposed to I am Mister Conservative Christian Person.

The participants wrestled with describing the Fellowship. Renee referred to the group as “liberal,” especially in comparison to the other fellowships on campus and comparisons drawn around lifestyle issues. She explained,

Because we’re considered kind of like the more liberal Christian group, where others are more strict, and I don’t even know how we’re more liberal exactly. I think just the people that are in it are more . . . I’d say are more liberal.

Drawing a similar comparison with other campus fellowships, Greg referred to the IVCF as

a good kind of right in the middle. Like see . . . in other groups you know on campus are just like in life that are very, like, real extreme, and real like. . . . It’s totally a “turn off” . . . and then other groups where it’s just, like, “OK, let’s just play games” the whole time.

This particular chapter also experienced a perception among other IVCF chapters throughout the region that they were different, as Leanne described in the following interview excerpt:

When we go to conferences, people talk about our Fellowship as the, they call us the “bad mouth Fellowship” or something . . . the “badmouth Fellowship,” or something like that. I forget exactly how they say it, but because there are kids in my Fellowship that will curse. . . . Like, we’re just a more rebellious-looking Fellowship.

The Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter presents a strong relational character. Participants describe the Fellowship as a place where people care about them by asking how they are and truly listening for the genuine answer. Erica experiences IVCF relationships as
people who really “enjoy each other.” Greg referred to the IVCF as “an extension of God’s caring.” Leanne compared relationships within the Fellowship to those in the general campus population in the following manner: “A lot more, like, relationships between people are a lot more real, a lot deeper, and a lot more caring, and forgiving or communicating, or something like that, than they are, than they tend to be outside.” Greg described the IVCF as relational, and considers the relationships to be the basis of the effectiveness of the IVCF as it relates to faith. He articulated this in the following manner:

And relational is, I mean, a huge thing of it. Without, without the relationships, I don’t think any of the other things would have worked. So I mean, I just had a bunch of deeper relationships and through those relationships . . . have been encouraged and to keep following Jesus in a real and relevant manner.

Leanne also described relational as something different within the Fellowship than it was within the greater Mid-Atlantic culture and stopped short of referring to the IVCF as a utopia. She explained,

In general, there’s a lot more healthy relationships between men and women in InterVarsity than there are on campus. I think, in the Greek system, men and women don’t relate to each other at all or very well if they do. The women live in sororities and the men live in the fraternities and it’s like . . . Just people don’t learn to relate to each other; they just see each other when they look their best . . . or when they, in order to relate to each other, they have to get drunk. I don’t think, in InterVarsity, that’s perfect, but I see a lot more relationships where men and women are very good friends, and close friends, than I do anywhere else.

The IVCF chapter within Mid-Atlantic University was also described as diverse. For Erica, diversity of the Fellowship equated to the styles of people and their involvement in campus activities outside the Fellowship. She based these distinctions on the model of Jesus, as indicated in the following interview quote:
I think InterVarsity here is very. . . . Like, it has so many different types of people, and I think that’s very “cool,” and you know, different types can come. I think there is a lot of people who really reach out. They know a lot of people and they’re. . . . They’re definitely a lot. . . . Some people are very “plugged into” groups outside of InterVarsity and I think that’s cool. I think we definitely have. . . . It’s a lot more of what I was talking about with, like, the way Jesus was, I guess, sort of. Very much, like, going out and reaching out to the people, so I think that’s a lot of the way I see InterVarsity here. Like, we definitely all come together, you know, Thursday nights at meetings and things like that, but most of the people also have, like, other groups that they identify with, and I usually don’t see people from InterVarsity on the weekends. You know, maybe one night a week we’ll get together and we’ll “hang out,” but for the most part, it’s not the group that I spend all my time with, so I think that’s definitely the way I see the group—definitely reaches out, I guess.

The Mid-Atlantic chapter is also described as diverse in terms of race and class. Leanne observed,

I think there’s a lot more people who are more giving with their money in a group than there are outside. People take care of each other more it seems like. . . . than outside. People of rich and, like, people with money and people without money relate more inside the group than outside. . . . These are all things that seem to be the case, I’m not quite sure, but. . . . and also with race, it seems like, I don’t see very many Black students “hanging out” with non-Black students on a regular basis. . . . or nonminorities. I don’t see very many White students hanging out with minorities on a regular basis. . . . in InterVarsity itself. . . . Keisha’s one of my best friends and she’s Black, and, like, it’s not that her skin color doesn’t matter; it does. . . . ‘cause it’s part of who she is, but it’s more like, I’m not afraid of that or, or I want to, I want to, like, be friends with her anyway. . . . It doesn’t matter.

The IVCF chapter at Mid-Atlantic University is also described as “real.” Greg referred to the group as “very organic, natural, and not, like, forced.” He explained that, by being real, the Fellowship had a positive effect on his life, and the activities and experiences within the Fellowship helped him see how “God is real.” Dara affirmed this by commenting,

So I think that, like basically, I think that, as a whole, as a fellowship, we are people that try to emphasize being “real.” Being, and by being real, meaning, like, not just, like, what kind of good things are you involved in, but like being honest,
like I am too tired to do this; I hate doing this. Like, I don’t want to be following God right now. Like, I think that, depending on where you are in your faith . . . as a fellowship, we’ve gotten better at challenging each other to try to do what Jesus is calling us to do and encouraging each other.

For the participants, part of being real obviously meant challenging each other with regard to their faith. Greg described the IVCF as a place where “people will challenge him and help him grow and learn more about God.”

Intersection of Mid-Atlantic University and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

Student perspectives on the intersection between Mid-Atlantic University and the IVCF are enlightening. The intersection is dynamic and evolving. The IVCF has changed, from Dara’s perspective, with regard to how it relates to the larger university environment. She explained,

Looking into IV places self as part of the homogenous crowd. . . . Breaking down barriers within IV goes both ways. . . . When I first came into InterVarsity, I kind of felt, like, because we live, are like, on such a homogenous, secular campus, that—and it was InterVarsity’s first year—that the people were “clinging to” InterVarsity were a case of. . . . There’s like 95% of the people on Mid-Atlantic are, like, the same. Then like the 5% that were feeling like they were kind of misfitted from the Mid-Atlantic community, and were just here because they got a good scholarship, because it has a good education program. They don’t really want to be here. You know, like, I was kind of getting a feeling that those were all the people that were clinging to IV, looking for a place to call home in the midst of this very secular, Greek campus, you know, and that was kind of how I was feeling, and I was just, like, “OK, great, like I know that God loves all people, but it is just so excluding, most of what Mid-Atlantic is,” and was just very upset and thought they were being very judgmental and very self-righteous, and just kind of learned later that it was more . . . it wasn’t self-righteousness and judgment. Some of it was, and they admit that, but a lot of it was fear, just not knowing how to communicate, you know, like, not sure if we even wanted them to communicate.

As Dara noted, the IVCF may begin for participants as a place to “cling to” in a world that presents radically divergent values and ideals from their own. Ultimately, however,
the students interviewed in this study referred to the experience of IVCF involvement at Mid-Atlantic as challenging with predominantly positive outcomes for their faith and for their ability to challenge peers in the larger university environment. The intersection enabled students to clarify personal commitments, bridge secular and faith worlds, and provided a “bigger picture” of their own faith.

*Clarification of personal commitments.* Because of the predominance of lifestyle commitments present in the campus environment, individuals within that environment are able to clarify their personal commitments by comparison and contrast with those of others. Dara found the intersection of Mid-Atlantic and the IVCF to be a difficult place to “casually intermingle.” She described a sense of being called apart from the larger environment, and yet, at the same time, struggling to connect with the larger environment. The intersection is tenuous; yet, it is also a place where growth flourishes.

Dara described this phenomenon in the following interview excerpt:

> I think what, what really makes us [the IVCF chapter] different . . . that’s what’s just really hard, is we are really calling ourselves apart from the Mid-Atlantic community and some of us are still trying to find our way in there, more for ministry reasons and outreach reasons, and have some acquaintances there, but it’s, we’re just finding how difficult, and how it really is to be in this Fellowship, and not just to be in this Fellowship, but to be following the will of God, and the call of God—how much that calls you apart from what the rest of [what] Mid-Atlantic stands for, and it’s so hard to just casually intermingle, and for me, it’s gotten next to impossible, when I used to be able to do that with such ease, and I just have such a hard time walking into a party now. Not because of judgment, but either because I’m very aware of how different I am, how different I am behaving, and I, I almost feel like I have no basis for which to kind of “shoot the shit” with them, you know. Like, I just don’t have anything to do that with anymore. So I’m trying to work past that, but I do feel like, as a fellowship, we’re called apart, but yet we’re very supportive and I think we try to be very welcoming and I think we are—of the Mid-Atlantic, physical Mid-Atlantic world—and I think we offer something intriguing to the Mid-Atlantic world. . . . We just offer something intriguing and something that people are wanting to check out more and more,
and that we’re becoming a more welcoming group as a whole, nonjudgmental or fearful of what’s going on around us, as much as just really having a passion and a hope to bring that, some of that down.

For Leanne, the perceived value of having money in the larger environment provided an opportunity for her to reflect upon the value of money in her life. Her own story involved IVCF students providing for her financially so she could continue in school. She contributed the following comments:

I’m in a place where I feel like I don’t have a lot that I can do with, so it just has to be me, and, so that, for me, that’s a unique challenge in my life that being here, that’s brought that out. There’s just a lot of stuff that, stuff that I deal with inside myself, that being here, like the body image and the race and the money stuff and, I don’t know, there’s probably academic stuff. Seems like, here, those are all really big concerns. At other schools, they might be, come up too, but I know that, at Mid-Atlantic, they definitely come up. . . . It’s definitely a place that brought them up easily.

The students described the character of the relationships within the IVCF as different from those external to the Fellowship. Justin described being able to “go deeper” in relationships within the Fellowship than in those within the general campus because he is able to be more honest, open, and real with members of the IVCF. He stated,

I think InterVarsity is a place where I can go and be comfortable with people, like, actually telling people about the ways I’m messing up and the ways that I’m struggling. Tell people about, you know, the pain I’m feeling maybe, or ways I’ve been hurt or, you know, just actually. . . . I can be really honest and open and know that, you know, people are really going to care for me. Like, regardless, anyone in the Fellowship, I could do that with, but like, people I had just met, like, I would feel, you know, I would feel safe in doing that. Whereas Mid-Atlantic is a. . . . It seems pretty impersonal, like, it’s getting less so as I’m, you know, progressing through here, through here because I am actually starting to know people in my classes. Just Mid-Atlantic, as a whole, is, like, I don’t see it as a place where there are people that I can really go deep with.
It was evident through the study interviews that the overlapping experiences associated with IVCF involvement provide an opportunity for self-clarification. In the following interview quote, Dara described having to choose between two ideals and, in the process, having the opportunity to get in deeper touch with herself:

So I think I was just kind of scared. Like, I had these two ideals. I had what, what it meant to be a Christian on the one side and what it meant to be a popular person at Mid-Atlantic on the other side, and I just did not know how to fulfill them both, and it’s just been me being, like, “erasing the whole slate” and just letting God be like, “OK, this might be characteristic of you; it makes you a little odd, it makes you a little eccentric, makes you not like the Mid-Atlantic world, but that’s OK,” you know, “and people, I’m going to, I’m going to show you. I’m going to give you these gifts of friendship of people that love that about you anyway,” and I think that, mostly, in being here, I’ve just been very in touch with my humanness and very in touch with all the ways I didn’t think I struggled, but I really do. So that’s been huge.

Leanne offered a similar description of involvement in the IVCF that created a “space” in which she was able to find herself, as well as a sense of acceptance from others.

Outward expressions of faith are also central elements of the intersection of Mid-Atlantic University and the IVCF. As commitments of faith are explored within the college environment, students experience a challenge to either “go the road less traveled” or to “go to neutral.” Renee noted,

I think you can go one of two ways. If you come to a secular university, you can either go “downhill” or “uphill,” you know? Like, you can let. . . . You can just kind of homogenize into the world or it can make you stronger.

Renee further described “homogenizing into the world” as the path of least resistance. Her reflections indicated that her faith is different precisely because she had to choose among distinct commitments, as detailed in her following comments:

I think, here [at Mid-Atlantic], I had to choose. I had to—“a little bird leaving the nest”—I had to choose whether I was going to “fall” or whether I was going to
“fly.” I really think that it’s been really good. It’s hard. I’m not going to say it’s not. It’s really hard. It’s hard when you’re different. It’s hard when you are in a really small population of people. It’s hard to try to explain to people what “TNF” is, what “IV” is. “Is that like a sports thing?” You know, like, “No, it’s a Christian thing,” like, trying to explain to people who don’t understand, but I think that that’s how the world is. I’m not going to be in a homogenized Christian community when I’m in the world. I’m going to be in a group of people who don’t believe, and a small percentage who do believe. Maybe I’ll be in a large percentage. I don’t know, but overall, the world isn’t homogenized. The world isn’t all believers, so I think it’s made it more world. . . . It’s more realistic; it’s more real world.

With respect to peer relationships, Renee also compared her experience at Mid-Atlantic to the experience she perceived she would have had at a Christian university in the following manner:

Who’s going to challenge me on why I think sex before marriage is wrong at a university like [actual name of Christian college stated] where they know it’s wrong? Here, I’m challenged on it and I have to make it my own. I’m challenged on it.

Renee also used the example of drinking and, in doing so, made it evident that it is the outward expression of faith commitment in such an environment, and exhibiting divergent values, that create the challenge. She stated,

I’m not, it’s a more outward thing. When I go to a party and I don’t drink, it’s more outward expression. There, they’re having the “sneak parties,” and all the people there are drinking, but then there’s the normal population who aren’t drinking ‘cause they don’t want to, and then the people. . . . So you have Person A who’s in the homogenized group in the Christian world who’s not drinking, but they don’t understand why it’s bad. Then you have people here who are in the homogenized group and are drinking, and then there’s Person A again and they’re, like, “Well, I don’t want to drink,” but they might just be easily swayed into going the other way. A lot [of] people just. . . . Like I said, like, how in my class, people. . . . You could say one thing and they’d switch the way they were going; they go to the neutral. People don’t know what they think on a lot of things. It’s not, like, drinking, but I’m just using anything, like. . . . People don’t know how to believe what they believe on a lot of issues so they take the neutral, so they “go with the flow.” Everyone goes with the flow. People don’t want to go against the flow . . . so, when you’re different, it’s a lot more obvious. . . . So I
think, here [at Mid-Atlantic], we have the large group and then you have this little
group. It’s a lot harder, but it’s a lot more rewarding because you have been
challenged on it and you’re affirmed in what you think. . . . For people who are in
the Christian society all the time, once you go out on your own, it’s where the real
challenge starts, when you go out on your own. So I think, for me, I had a
Christian community growing up. I had a Christian family; I had this strong
community. Then, when I came out to college, that was when I had to be
challenged.

Enrollment at a secular university challenged Renee to make her faith her own.

**Bringing worlds together.** The participants described their faith as different
because of the impact they believed their involvement with the IVCF had on the Mid-
Atlantic campus. Bringing words together is a source of faith development. The general
sense of how this shift in bringing the two previously separate worlds into one occurs is
articulated by Renee. She described the intersection of the IVCF and Mid-Atlantic—the
“two worlds” that, through her college years, moved from being separate and distinct to
fully “enmeshed.” She described the integration in the following interview comments:

Like, the two worlds kind of thing. Like, God’s over here; He’s checked off for
the day, and then the rest of my world’s over here, and they don’t really come
together, but now, they’re kind of. . . . They’re all enmeshed.

Kyle noted that the Mark study—an activity of the IVCF—provided an initial bridge for
him between the Fellowship and the Mid-Atlantic “scene,” and he described this in light
of the difference he perceives in his faith as a result of this intersection. He explained,

I’m trying to put this together. OK, the way that it was different for me was when
I first got involved with IV, like mainly the Mark study. It was still very, very
easy to make that separation between Mid-Atlantic and [the] Mark study. You
know, like [the] Mark study was just like this extra thing that, like, happened to
happen on campus. You know like, it wasn’t, it wasn’t Mid-Atlantic, you know,
like Mid-Atlantic’s here, you know, and I really should say, like, here’s Mid-
Atlantic and here’s [the] Mark study [draws two points on the page several inches
from each other], you know, like, it was like nothing. And the mesh that they have
is that . . . is that as I grew, as like, as my little teeny like, teeny-tiny God speck,
like, started to grow and it, it, it covered like what was Mid-Atlantic, and since
Mid-Atlantic was so big for me, when God got that much bigger, like, He was
allowed to have that part of it too, and so I had all this basis at Mid-Atlantic,
which was popularity and partying and grades and all that stuff . . . and that [is]
what was real to me, and then, like, just a little teeny blip on the radar is like this
God thing, and now, like, Mid-Atlantic is the little blip on the radar and, you
know, and it’s like that’s, that’s what I’ve gained from having both of them
together, was the way that I was able to grow in both. Like, I think I was, I mean,
maturing in one direction, and that allowed God to get bigger and Mid-Atlantic to
get smaller.

Dara described this effort to become part of the Mid-Atlantic “world,” rather than
exclusively involved with those inside the IVCF, as a distinctive challenge of
involvement in the Fellowship group. At the same time, she described it as increasingly
more difficult to successfully be a part of both worlds, as reflected in the following
portion of her interview:

And I think that, I think it’s intriguing ‘cause, as much as I just said it was
difficult for us to go and be a part of the Mid-Atlantic world, a lot of us still do.
I’ve just been noticing, more from my end, that it gets more and more difficult,
but so for them, for some of them, it’s not like, “Hi,” [and] we go be with
ourselves, that we are really as, as a fellowship, try to out reach into other
programs and other clubs, which may not just be fraternities and drinking. It
might be SGA, or any of those things. So yeah, I think the fact that we don’t just
exclude ourselves and become this or nothing, that we really still try to be a part
of the world.

“Big picture” perspective. Because Mid-Atlantic represents “the world,” the
participants felt that they have the opportunity to embody different values than those
commonly of the world. Kyle commented,

And I think that that’s why I feel like I feel, personally—more prepared for the
world—because of that, and it’s interesting that, like, you know, a lot of Mid-
Atlanticans feel more prepared for the world because, like, it’s so worldly here,
they’ve gotten good at that. I feel better prepared for the world because I got so
good at the Mid-Atlantic thing and then I put it in perspective and now I have the
whole world in perspective.

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The notion of “putting things into perspective” as facilitated by this environmental intersection, is not unique to Kyle. The intersection of the IVCF and Mid-Atlantic is constructed with blurred lines. The participants did not place strict boundaries between the two worlds. They emphasized that their life with the IVCF impacted their relationships with the larger university. In the following interview text, Greg makes it clearly evident how Mid-Atlantic has, in turn, contributed to the meaning of his faith:

I guess just, I’ve had a lot of, well, not a lot, but, like, I’m really involved with InterVarsity and that, and InterVarsity for me is not a closed, like, looking inward thing. I think it’s a lot of looking out, outward, and like, going out and just being with people and seeing, you know, and then coming back together. So it’s kind of hard for me to separate, ‘cause I don’t, I don’t feel like there’s, you know, OK, I do InterVarsity and then I go out on camp and then I’m on campus. Like, they’re much entwined in the same thing . . . I mean, I kind of think of them as the same. I mean, because I feel like InterVarsity is, well, InterVarsity, but God . . . is something that is really big in my life, and it’s not, it’s not like, OK, I’m going out and remember I’m on campus; I’m trying to recruit people, or anything like that. It’s not that kind of intertwinedness. It’s more just like, OK, Jesus was about people, Jesus cared about people, and that’s what I want to. I want to . . . be like Jesus, so, you know, caring for people, being about people, going out . . . and having it, and that just be something I want to do, not something like, “OK, I need to go out and care for people now,” or like . . . so they’ve been. . . . I guess it’s kind of like, like Jesus kind of working through InterVarsity and through, like . . . church and stuff has, has shaped and changed the way I live and the way I think and act . . . and has changed my whole perception of being on campus, and just like, there’s a whole much “bigger picture” of what’s going on and, like, a much bigger picture of what I’m here for or what I feel like God has me here for and so that’s totally changed how I perceive campus, how I perceive, you know, people I guess, just like. . . . It’s, it’s like. . . . It’s like a new outlook for me. . . . College is a lot of, I think, college is a place where a lot of people, you know, are forming who they are and what they really believe. . . . Like I’ve seen when a certain individual decides, like, has all these questions and decides to follow God, and it’s just like this awesome thing for them, and knowing that that that’s gonna have lifelong implications for them. . . . I think [my experience with IV at Mid-Atlantic] it’s, it’s kind of like, you know, been a kickoff. Like, like, like, I feel like it’s, it’s been a big kind of “booster” in starting it . . . and I feel like my experience with InterVarsity at Mid-Atlantic in college has . . . equipped me, and still is . . . helping equip me to following Jesus for the long run . . . not just in college.
Extending from their descriptions of Mid-Atlantic, the students thought it important, precisely because the university environment enabled them to gain a “bigger picture” of the world beyond college. Despite the flaws of Mid-Atlantic, or perhaps because of them, attending this university better prepared these students for entering the “real world.” Justin stated,

I just think this a better picture of what the world would be like. Obviously, Mid-Atlantic is seriously lacking in diversity—both economically and, like, culturally—but, you know, it’s still, the fact is, you know, there are a lot of people here who don’t know God, who don’t know Jesus, who share other faiths, and because of that, it’s, you know, a better cross section of the world than if you looked at a Christian school where it’s like an entirely, like, a Christian community. Like, in some ways, that’s really good. It can probably be very nurturing, but on the other hand, it’s not a good picture of what the world will be like once you leave there. . . . In some ways, like, it would be, like, if I spent all my time at InterVarsity and never talked to anyone else, which would be “cool” in some ways, but it also would be like not giving me the big picture.

Chad made it evident that the IVCF offers a context in which to negotiate the larger environment. He articulated this in the following manner:

I think, I think it was really good, and I’m really glad, and I purposely did not go to a Christian college. . . . I don’t know, I, I just felt like. . . . I felt like Jesus didn’t “hang out” with just His disciples, you know. He hung out with the non-Christians and He went to where they were at, and I definitely believe that it’s good to come together, you know. One, it’s such, there’s so many “catch phrases” out there. . . . and remember one, one that I really believe in is, you know, it’s good to come together ‘cause you’re weak and go out ‘cause you’re strong, and I think that both need to happen—that you need to be in a place where you can go out to non-Christians, and yet, there’s also a community you can come together to. . . . have help in that.

For Chad, the “community within a larger community” is valuable to his faith perspective.

Because of the intersection of university and ICVF life, the participants described entrée into the bigger picture of their faith. Kyle stated,
I think that it, it gives more, more perspective on God. Like having, you know, I mean, I think Mid-Atlantic is such a good microcosm of like the world because, like, Mid-Atlantic stands for what the world stands for more than a lot of colleges do, and so to be, you know, all about that and then to have something happen that, like, that can be, like, of zero importance, I mean, it’s like we watched a movie about, like, the. . . . It was about, like, this, the solar system, and about, like, it went, like, in, in, like, the camera would just sort of move, and it would just take squares of 10 by 10, and then it would get like 10 by 10 units bigger. Like, it would be, like you know, an inch and then 10 inches and then 100 and then, like, so really quickly it gets to be, like you know, you’d look at the earth as, like, the entire thing, but like, in two steps, like, you can’t even see the earth, and that’s sort of what I feel like has happened to me. You know, like this [points to dot representing the world of Mid-Atlantic] is all I know and this is all that’s important, you know, and then, like, I’ve been able to take two steps back and, like, I can’t even see it now. You know, so I think that that perspective that I gained by being so involved in Mid-Atlantic has, has made it . . . has made it bigger. What I have now almost.

The intersection of worlds is valuable because of the model others provide. Kyle found the particular intersection of the IVCF and Mid-Atlantic necessary, as he relates in the following text:

I needed to see other people challenging themselves and challenging each other, and like, for me, like it wasn’t even so much that, like, people pointed to me and said like, “You should do this, “ but it was like people were doing it and I was like hmm, you know, like there was, there was that aspect of community where it was, like, I didn’t feel so threatened that I needed to do it, but I saw other people doing it and, and just getting blessed amazingly by it, and so that’s what I’m a part of now, and I needed that aspect of it. Like, I needed to see, like, what other people were doing and I needed to see that, like, I mean, Jesus was, for me, this very abstract thing that I had just hadn’t got in touch with, but to go to Mark study and to hear people being, like, you know, “I,” you know, “I know Jesus,” or whatever. Like, I mean, in not so many words, like explaining their relationship that was so much different from mine. I was like, “I guess I don’t get this totally yet,” you know. So for me, that’s what it took. You know, like it took that fellowship and that community to, for me, to see that there was more to it than I was letting myself get.

It is evident that Kyle has made meaning out of what ICVF offers the larger Mid-Atlantic community. The character of the IVCF context has an impact upon the value it provides.
to the whole. What the IVCF offers Mid-Atlantic depends upon the attitude that the Fellowship holds toward that larger environment.

*Epiphany of Faith*

Using a narrative framework of settings, characters, and turning points, the interview transcript of each participant was analyzed to identify contexts, people, and points in time that related to their faith experience during the college years. Amidst this examination, several processes and variables emerged that shaped the collective faith stories articulated by the participants. As the inquirer, I refer to these as epiphanies to indicate moments when events, ideas, and experiences converge to produce a compelling “recognition of meaning” (Bell, 1997, p. 372). Each epiphany is shaped by the overlapping impact of context, people, and points in time. Additionally, each summarizes an aspect of these overlapping experiences that influence new meaning in faith. Across participants, nine primary epiphanies emerged that influenced the formation of faith for the IVCF students at Mid-Atlantic University. Three of these epiphanies were identified across both IVCF and Mid-Atlantic settings—studying faith, addressing questions, and making connections. Three epiphanies were also identified primarily within the Mid-Atlantic context—transition, encountering difference, and being set apart. Finally, three epiphanies emerged solely within the IVCF setting—affiliations of faith, choosing into faith, and faith mentors.
Studying Faith

The participants were drawn to religious studies courses as part of their Mid-Atlantic course work in an effort to examine their own faith. All of the junior and senior students had enrolled in a religion course during the college years. Dara described being drawn to the first-year Foundations Seminar because it focused on “losing religion and finding faith.” She found this course to provide valuable opportunity to reflect upon her own faith. She described the experience in the following manner.

We read stories and talked about how they affected us personally. So a lot of the times, when I was sharing personal reflections, it just really had a lot to do with why I believe what I believed or things like that.

Students generally enrolled in these courses as part of their general education requirements. Amidst a wide variety of options, these students chose religion courses. Kyle was so motivated to fit in religion courses during his college years that he planned early to ensure their inclusion in a tight electrical-engineering curriculum. He stated, “I looked ahead and said, ‘OK, well, I know I want to take religion courses. Like, how do I do that?’ and then the first, like, quasi-free elective I had, I took a religion.” Chad, a religion minor, indicated that he was drawn to these courses in an effort to examine, in a class context, the things that weighed heavily on his mind. He recalls his introduction to Judaism and Christianity course in his freshman year by explaining,

Just studying the history of, you know, Judaism through Christianity and, that was, that was a course where I had to think deeply. Just learning historically what the, the traditional faith has gone through, what the changes in theologies were, and where that’s comes from and all that stuff was really good, but I, I think, I think I was drawn to that a lot because of, I mean, that’s just what I was thinking about all the time, and it was “cool” to take courses on what I was thinking about.
Examining divergent faith perspectives provided challenging opportunities. Renee attended a comparative religion course that enabled her to reflect on her own faith perspective while also examining it in comparison to other faiths. She read a book in class that comprehensively described the Christian perspective, as she recounted in the following interview excerpt:

We read a book by Paul Ramsey called Basic Christian Ethics, or something like that, and I think it just really lays it out well, like, really gives you a grasp on entire Christianity, rather than just what you’ve grown up with and things like that.

The course also allowed Renee to find similarities and differences between her own faith and the perspectives of others. Finding similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, for example, affirmed her faith, as she described in the following text: “Like, you just start finding things that compare, so I think that class has been really good at just solidifying it—solidifying what I believe.” Similarly, Kyle enrolled in a religious studies course focused on contemporary questions and crises in religion. He found value in this course as the professor encouraged him to examine his own faith perspective. Kyle explained,

He let us sort of get into what makes sense to us—us and what is . . . what are our beliefs are and why. We talked a lot about worldviews and, and contemporary issues and stuff like that. So, I mean, that was, that was really good.

Questions of faith routinely emerged in the IVCF inductive Bible study. Students experience this Bible study method in weekly sessions, as well as in intense week-long sessions during Chapter Camp. The process of inductive study seems to offer opportunity for students to rethink their faith and recompose it in new ways. Interpretations received from their churches or families are questioned. The inductive method in the IVCF setting
pushes students to own their understanding of faith for themselves. The participants described the inductive method as consisting of three basic steps—observation, interpretation, and application. A key characteristic of the method is that a passage of scripture is typeset on regular paper so all in attendance have the same version. There are no headings or preconceived sections. The first step—observation—consists of writing down questions regarding the text and identifying recurring themes. The aim is to discard all related information previously learned and focus solely on the meaning intended by the author of the particular text. Each person first identifies their individual observations. The group subsequently shares observations with each other.

The central objective of observation is to construct a clear “picture” of what is happening in the passage, who is involved, and when it is occurring. Observations are then incorporated into the next step—interpretation—to determine the meaning of the observation. Participants seek to understand why things occur as they do. Finally, the process moves to application, which involves discerning how the resulting information might be incorporated to induce further meaning in one’s life. Greg described inductive study as “a really ‘cool’ way to get a lot out of the text.” Keisha described the process, particularly its interpersonal nature, as a positive challenge for her faith. She stated,

Basically . . . Bible . . . the dorm studies, man, just a really great, great way to do Bible studies inductively, like, together as a team, really analyze things, and you know you’re getting out of it what God is showing you or what you’re getting out of it, not, like, what somebody’s telling you that you should get out of it. I don’t know, it’s just been. . . . It’s definitely challenged me a lot, and to think through the challenging, like, maybe think about things differently is where I’ve really grown, and where God has really opened my eyes and really . . . spoken to me.
Erica spoke of inductive Bible study as a place that has helped her refine her understanding of faith. She commented, “And I think, particularly with InterVarsity and studying Mark in a way that I never, never had before, I was realizing more of what, what exactly faith is.”

Participants repeatedly referred to the Mark study as a valuable opportunity to reflect on the meaning underlying the Christian faith. Mark study is their inductive study of the entire Gospel of Mark—a text in the New Testament. The text is broken into two parts, commonly referred to as Mark I and II. The entire Gospel is printed on paper with no headings or preconceived indicators of sections. The Mark study is offered on campus each semester; Mark I or Mark II can be completed in weekly, 2-hour segments. Participants may have also completed Mark I or Mark II during their annual Chapter Camp where they complete the full session in 1 week by studying in a set group session for several hours each day. In either context, the Mark study is described as intense; however, Chapter Camp is described as particularly intense. Bible study groups are constructed of small groups of students, both from Mid-Atlantic and other schools. The study within a week-long campus context enables students to develop deep relationships in a short period of time. This seems to enhance the intensity and honesty of the subsequent inductive study.

Greg described his experience at Chapter Camp as “awesome. . . . I mean, the first year just made me study Mark for like 7 or 8 hours a day. It was like, wow, you come out of there and there is like so much, like, I learned a lot. Justin described the transformative
element of Chapter Camp and explains in the following interview excerpt that this context is more powerful than others for shifting faith understanding:

I think, well, Bible studies, you know, I mean, that’s what it’s really all about. I don’t know, probably, you know, freshman year. . . . I was still more like getting used to the idea of the Bible studies, manuscript study, and probably wasn’t taking it so personally, like you know, after every study I didn’t go back and reevaluate my life and figure out what it meant for me, but probably, probably starting Chapter Camp in my freshman year, like spending a whole week in studying the first half of Mark like that, you know, just totally “blew me away” and gave me this whole new picture of who Jesus was. That was totally different than I was given in church. In what maybe I saw glimpses of throughout the year in small-group study on campus, you know, not until that week that I had the “big picture” kind of laid out for me, and yeah, and showing me that definitely started like a lot of, you know, what I get out of Bible study now, which is certainly a lot different in every conference, is a real challenge.

Justin attended Mark I during Chapter Camp and commented,

A lot of it was just, you know, more than just, like you know, “God loves you,” and, you know, “Jesus came to forgive your sins,” but just like really hearing, like, the whole played-out story of how Jesus calls people into following Him and then what that life looks like in following Him. Like both—the challenges and, you know, the amazing things that you get to see—like those were, yeah, some of the things . . . that were just a totally different picture, and like studies, you know, a lot of the parables in Mark, like the Lost Sheep, like, you know. God is actually going to come looking for you, like you’re, like, that one lost sheep out of the 100 or you’re like a lost penny. You know, He’s going to search the whole house. So yeah, I mean, just some of those stories that just went a lot deeper than just what I felt I had gotten out of church.

Erica described a powerful element of Mark II in the context of Chapter Camp, specifically referencing the application component of the study in the following interview excerpt:

I think Chapter Camp was. . . . There’s lots in Mark II about cutting things out of your life that aren’t right, and. . . . I can’t exactly think of specifics at this point, but I definitely had the feeling that me being so hard on myself was definitely something that needed to be cut off. I think, whenever I would. . . . I think, before, I would have looked at that passage as, you know, if I’m, like, physically doing something sinful, then I need to cut that off, but then just going into Chapter
Camp, like, studying it and realizing that I need to be cutting off anything that’s keeping . . . that’s between me and God, and just realizing that the pressure I put myself under is not healthy. It’s all about me trying to control my life and not letting God do that. So, I think Chapter Camp was a lot of me recognizing that, even though I say I’m trusting God or I say that I know that God’s in control, like, the fact is that I don’t . . . I could say it, but it wouldn’t really apply to my life, and so I guess Chapter Camp was a lot of me trying to apply that to my life, trying to give things up like that.

The inductive study of Mark I and II enabled Justin to see Jesus in a different light than he had previously imagined, as he described in the following commentary:

Certainly, in Mark I, but probably a lot more in the second half of Mark. I know, like, that was last spring and I know that I went through that week saying, like, “Yeah, Mark I is, like, all, like, about promising you, like, all this good stuff and Mark II just sucks,” and it was a rough week. I mean, it’s all about, like you know, there’s a woman with an alabaster jar is, like, pretty much her dowry and she breaks it for Jesus and then the widow who, like, gives the two pennies and that’s all she has and, like you know, Jesus saying, like, you know, “This is a good thing.” So, it’s like all that stuff and then I think Jesus saying, you know, “You have to be willing to take up your cross and follow me,” which is, like you know, you have to be willing to get tortured and die for me. You know, it’s, like, all right. You know, it’s not something they tell you at church. You know, they might say, like, “This is so eloquent,” you know, “take up your cross and follow me,” but they don’t say, like, “Oh, think about it. What does that mean?” You know, they just . . . I mean, I never did that in church; I don’t know about other churches, but so it’s definitely, like, much more challenging, and just . . . then seeing, seeing Jesus, like, again, more than just, like, this loving guy who, like, has a little lamb, like on His lap and that sort of thing that you see on the cover of a lot of Bibles, but, like, the Jesus who, you know, curses the fig tree and then goes to the temple and overturns the tables. That’s probably my favorite, like, image of the Bible. It’s just how that all fits together, like the fig tree and the moneylenders in the Jewish court and all that good stuff, but just that, like yeah, Jesus is, is just kind of getting “pissed off” about stuff. Wait a second, that’s a different thought, and then seeing, like, Jesus as He’s, you know, showing His humanity and struggling with, like, the night before the crucifixion, just, you know, praying. Just the fact that, you know, that Jesus is really praying and being very passionate in His prayers. Just, like, all that stuff, just . . . I don’t know, it is so different than what I was exposed to. So much, I don’t know. So much different and better than it hearing, like, “Yeah,” you know, “Jesus died for your sins” and sort “just believe in Jesus.” Yeah, I guess probably a lot of it’s just, like, what does it mean to believe in Jesus? What does that entail? See I’ve been told my whole life how to believe in Jesus and to follow Jesus. It just to learn that to
mean that maybe that’s more than just going to church. You know, just kind of having your life and then going to church. So, just learning that it’s more than that.

What participants described as transformative is the in-depth nature of the Mark study. It is time intensive and facilitates deep understanding. Kyle initially found the inductive method frustrating. He recalls,

I remember not liking the method that we used right away. I remember just being, like, “This is crazy,” like, “This is just too in-depth.” Like you know, you’re trying to get too much out of this, but through that, really, like, being able to see, like sort of, I mean, definitely a better picture of who Jesus was, and getting a better picture of sort of some of the motivations behind just getting to the heart of why and how Jesus did what he did.

Leanne described a similar shift in her understanding of Jesus since her arrival at Mid-Atlantic when she stated,

I came into school thinking I knew, not it all, but a lot. Knew what my faith was, what it meant, and that was good for me. I think a lot of questions came out of inductive Bible studies because I’d come in and say, “Well, my Bible says this” or “Well, the Church always says this,” or whatever, and Elaine, most of the time, would say, “Well what does this text say?” and that was hard for me to say, “Well, it says this maybe; I don’t know,” and sometimes those things, like, trying to see what the passage says, shows you a different aspect of Jesus than you thought was there. Like when Jesus “hangs out” with the sinners at the dinner; He really does hang out with them and stay with them. Or when Jesus says . . . what’s another example? I can’t think of one right now, but there’s a lot of times when we’ve been studying the inductive, in the inductive method where Jesus does this thing that I would not expect Him to do, or He calls me to do this thing that I never thought I had to do. Things like that, where I think one way and then all of a sudden I see that it’s different. Makes me go, “Wait a second” and I have to figure out which way I believe it should be.

Keisha also referred specifically to seeing Jesus in a new light through inductive Bible study. She recalled that, as a child, her primary understanding of God was that of judge; the inductive study enlarged her understanding of Jesus and God to include grace and care. This shift is evident in her following comments:
I think studying the Bible in college has helped me see . . . Jesus in different ways. . . . Like, we studied the book of Mark pretty intently at Chapter Camp, or just dorm studies, small group studies, and I’m studying the book of Mark and seeing Jesus’ compassion for people.

Erica also broadened her understanding of who she should and could relate to in the context of perceiving Jesus differently. As she stated, she learned about “being among just normal everyday people and not just trying to confine myself to a Christian setting.” This shift occurred in the context of Big Love and particularly a drama based upon the Gospel of Mark. Erica described the experience in the following manner:

I think, definitely, one of them was Big Love last year and seeing Mark performed and just really realizing that Jesus didn’t “hang out” with the disciples all the time. That and doing the Mark I last spring and just seeing that Jesus was, all the time, out among the people, that He wasn’t. . . . He didn’t go to the important people’s houses. Like, He was definitely hanging out with the commoners and I think, like, growing up. I had this picture of Jesus hanging out with the common people, but they were really good at heart and, you know, like, and I think, last year, I realized that, no, these were just really regular people and most of them probably weren’t exactly what we consider “good of heart,” but that was OK and that’s what Jesus was doing.

Addressing Questions

The students described both the IVCF and Mid-Atlantic University as places that encourage questions of faith. Leanne described how the IVCF specifically challenges people to think deeply on issues of faith—to be real, and not to deny, project, or defer personal issues or questions. She referred to the IVCF Bible studies, as well as staff advisers, as particular aspects of the IVCF that prompted such questioning. She stated that the IVCF is a group that challenges people pretty deeply—I think, a lot—in following Jesus, especially if the Bible study leader is doing a good job at it . . . and asking really good questions. So in that context, where I’m always being asked hard questions,
that’s, that had, those have brought a lot, a lot of, like, mental battles out. Like “What do I really think about this?” or “What am I gonna do about this?” kind of stuff. So it, it’s been in those hard questions that InterVarsity typically has presented to me, and mostly, it’s been through Elaine that that has happened. Just like, why—why this, why that. Things that make me question. That’s primarily what has come out of InterVarsity and that’s primarily what has shaped my faith a lot . . . at school—those deeper questions.

Leanne also reflected on the changes in herself during college and the factors that lead to questions of faith by explaining,

It’s just been a lot more being willing to question what I believe on a daily basis. It’s more like it’s time to believe it for real now ‘cause it’s real life and I’m not, you know, where everything is the same anymore. . . . It’s just a place where it’s really easy to get to know people. I don’t know, I think that’s probably why, part of it. Plus people are questioning things a lot, and growing a lot, being away from home and stuff. So it’s just a place where a lot of questions come up and a lot of, like, changing and growing happens.

Sometimes the questions pertain to family. Dara recalled reexamining her family of origin in the following interview excerpt:

And now I’m kind of gone through and have reevaluated how I’ve grown up—what is lies, what is truth, what was right, what was wrong, you know, what to draw on, what not to draw on, and that’s kind of been what the past few years have [been] for me, and I think that, just in my own reflective process and prayer time, that God has just revealed a lot of that stuff to me, and I [have] just been a lot bolder to ask questions to them about their past life.

Academic experiences of college were also articulated by participants as opportunities to consider questions of faith. As Keisha noted in the following excerpt, parts of the academic experience lend themselves to reflection on these bigger questions more than others. She parallels college to the discipline of philosophy in the following excerpt:

I think college is kind of like philosophy. Like, just all the knowledge that’s in college can always—especially courses, humanities courses—where you’re, like, thinking about life and the world and existence. All those bigger questions can
always make you think. Is your faith, like, the way? Like, does it answer all these really huge questions that everyone has?

For Keisha—a computer science major—her humanities courses were a place of assessment in determining whether her own faith answered the “really huge questions” of life. She also recounted,

It’s definitely always been more of, like, writing or humanities courses that I’ve ever felt could possibly connect with faith. Like computer science and the binary numbers just. . . . Faith just never quite comes up in those classes, or like math . . . just doesn’t happen.

Leanne also affirmed that courses in math and science have not been contexts that have precipitated reflection on faith. She stated, “I haven’t had any, like, philosophically challenging classes that question my religion or my faith or anything like that. They’re mostly math and science.” Greg said that only one course—a religion-specific course—had any connection to his faith. He recalled, “the Native American Religions class was the only thing remotely, that had any content remotely related to talking about God and that kind of stuff.”

The students who participated in this study experienced conversations with their peers in and out of class, particularly those who do not share their faith perspective, as experiences that further enabled them to reflect on their faith. Peers tended to ask them tough questions regarding their faith, as well as tough questions regarding what their faith perspective could address. Such questions typically spurred reflection and examination. As Leanne affirmed in the following comment, “Or when I, like, other people ask really tough questions sometimes like, “Why does God do this?” or “Why study that?” Answering tough questions enables students to grow and transform in their faith. Such
questions tended to motivate the participants to seek answers to assist their peers. In helping their peers, they seemed to help themselves. Chad also affirmed this when he stated,

I have definitely had a lot of experiences of explaining to people, and I got better and better, and it became more and more clear to me, you know, what I believed as I explained to people and told them what I believed when people asked me more and more questions about what I believed in. Sometimes I didn’t know the answers . . . and . . . but I, that would just drive me more to think about it, about what I believed.

Peer leadership within the Bible study context is another venue for addressing questions. Renee described gaining clearer understanding of her own faith as a result of explaining it to others in the following account of her experience:

Just being more involved in people’s lives as a leader. Not being on Servant Team, but being more involved in people’s lives, choosing to know people deeper, and to be available has been the place that I’ve got deeper too, you know? When we’d be sitting there and people won’t be understanding it or won’t be getting it and you’ll be, like, “Do you realize what this means?” and like, as I’m saying it, I’m like, “Wow, like, I’m getting it,” you know?.

Leanne also spoke of growing in the ability to not only ask effective thought-provoking questions, but to bring out deeper questions within the context of a Bible study. Reflecting on her first semester, she recalls a shift in her faith in the following account:

I used to be, like. . . . Coming in, I, I knew, like, I said I knew the answers and, and somebody presented a really deep question, I had the answer, and now, when somebody presents a really deep question, it’s a deep question, and there’s not necessarily an answer, and I’m on the end where I’m asking those tons of questions and people are giving me the answers and it’s like, “No, if I had the answer, I would have answered it and moved on and I wouldn’t have the question anymore.” It’s not easy like that, and so, on one hand, like, it’s, it’s gone from me—being that way to realizing things and then seeing other people are still that way, so helping them to realize things and trying to lead them into thinking more deeply about stuff.
Having conversations outside of class and outside of the IVCF, specifically with those who do not share their faith, was a place where questions arose for the participants, and in addressing such questions, further queries regarding their own faith arose. Dara described addressing questions of faith to a friend in the context of the IVCF fall conference, Big Love, in the following manner:

And [my friend] ended up asking, like, every question known to man that weekend, and we stayed. . . . I remember when we stayed up, like, all of Friday night and Saturday night pretty much. We got like 4 hours of sleep the whole weekend, and just ’cause she had so many questions, and it was so awesome. It was like me, [my friend], and Greg and Renee at some points—just like answering her questions and just talking . . . which kind of re-got my “wheels spinning.”

As a result of this conversation of questions and answers with her good friend, Dara found herself wrestling with God over questions she was unable to answer. She described the experience in the following interview excerpt:

And then I really started wrestling with God after Big Love, after I started asking all those questions with Heidi. She was asking; I was trying to answer, and I realized I didn’t know the answer, and really started wrestling so that, by Christmas, I was like, “What do I believe and why?”

Justin described addressing the questions of a woman in his Bible Study that was not a believer of Christianity in the following manner:

I guess to some extent, like, this semester, getting to know a woman who is actually in my Bible study. She’s not really a believer at all, but yeah, she’s not a believer at all, but she has just asked some really hard questions. Like, you know, questions that I still struggle with and I think, you know, probably most Christians, like, they don’t know the answers, like, those are the answers we’re trying to find, and so, like, she’s really good about asking those questions, and you know, just getting them out there. So I really, you know, I tend to meet with her like every week, you know, for a couple of hours, and so [a] lot of those questions come at once. So that has really challenged me like to think through some of those things, like, rather than just kind of push them aside. It’s like, “Well, I’ll think about that some other time,” but just having her ask me, like, the
hard questions, you know, the questions that, you know, that you can’t just flip through a passage and read, or if you can, like, it doesn’t make sense right away. Like, because experience is so hard, and yet, sometimes life is really hard, and just seeing, like, her experiences, you know, pain she’s been through. She’s had a lot of bad experiences in college, just a lot of hurtful things that happened to her, so just to hear about some of those has been, you know, has been hard. You know . . . wow . . . so, just getting to know her has, you know, challenged me to think through some of those hard questions, to seek answers for some of the questions that maybe I haven’t even thought of.

Renee, too, described the challenges she faced as her boyfriend attended the Mark study.

At this point in their relationship, he did not profess to be a Christian. According to Renee,

He wanted to get . . . learn more about Jesus, so I had him come and he learned about the whole life of Jesus, and like, there’s so much deep stuff in the parables that he started asking about, and that’s where I started asking more and being, like, “Oh,” a lot deeper things that I really can’t even think because they’re just so ingrained in how I think now that that was a major part, just really getting deep in Scripture.

IVCF activities provide contexts in which students can discuss the questions they have surrounding their faith. Renee described Thursday Night Fellowship, Bible study, and relationships as experiences that enhance faith formation. She stated that these factors “have deepened my faith because there’s been opportunities to discuss the things I am confused about.” Questions are also precipitated by speakers for the IVCF activities. Greg spoke of the conference speaker at Big Love as being particularly powerful and relevant. He noted that he was listening intently as a result of his own internal search. The impact of the speaker stemmed from his ability to elicit questions of personal application. Greg recalled,

I remember I was. . . . I was searching enough that, like, I was taking notes. I remember I was taking notes at the talks, and it was just, like . . . but I remember he, like, what was powerful about it was he’d talk and be really relevant and then
even more relevantly, if that’s a word, he would, you know, ask us questions. Like, it’s kind of like with the inductive study, the application questions at the end, only I had never done any of that before, so I didn’t know, but it was like. . . . It was like asking us questions, you know, that, you know, “hit home.”

Global current events, as well as personal connections to these events, often introduce avenues of deeper reflection on faith as students turn to their faith for answers. Several of the interviews for this study were conducted just 2 weeks following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. These events not only caused students to reflect on their faith and any answers it could provide, but also to reconsider past experiences in a manner that elicited deep questions surrounding issues of faith. Leanne connected the tragedy of September 11 to her own, more personal losses, as she explained in the following interview excerpt:

Or when big things, big things come up like, like the September 11th stuff this year, that, that factors in . . . in ways too . . . like, events in my life do that too. Like the September 11th stuff brought up a lot of. . . . Like, the individual stories within it brought up a lot of the past emotions that I had with my dad dying, and, and that made it so real for me that it made me question that as if I had lost someone in it, made me ask God, like, “Why this?” or “Why that?” and question, like, well, “Your Bible, the Bible says this,” or “I believe you to be like this. How come. . . . Like, something that I believed doesn’t match up with what I’m seeing . . . and that, it’s like that in Scripture and it’s like that in my life . . . sometimes.

One of the key elements in addressing questions identified by students is their particular model of faith. Chad reflected,

I think Jesus, a lot of times, He, He put little things out there, you know, and, and kind of let people take it. You know, it’s the whole parable thing, you know. He said parables, and people who asked more questions, got more answers and, you know.

Epiphanies of faith seem to be generated in a parallel fashion (i.e., asking questions leads to deeper answers).
Making Connections

Outside religion-specific courses, the participants struggled significantly to identify connections between their academic studies and their faith. From content for course work to declaring a major, making this connection was challenging. Greg succinctly revealed that his classroom experience and his faith were disconnected when stating, “It didn’t really have much at all to do with it.” When I asked Erica if she had experienced any conversations with faculty surrounding matters related to her faith, she also answered succinctly with a resounding, “No.” Whenever particular courses enabled students to connect their life experience with their faith, this seemed to affirm faith for them. When this occurred for Leanne, her academic perspectives gave validity to her ministry experience. She had experienced and examined the inner city through an intensive urban project sponsored by the IVCF that was several weeks in duration. The similarity of issues raised between the academic and ministry contexts allowed her to connect and examine her faith, as is reflected in her following words:

It was a really interesting class for me because I got to see people’s perspectives on the city in an academic setting . . . It was interesting, but I’d . . . I had just gone through a lot of that stuff in [the urban project] before that and we’d done, like, a couple of different seminars, or had speakers come in and talk about the city, so I’d heard a lot of the stuff that I heard in class.

In the urban project, the students had discussed economic political realities in cities and sought application of the Christian faith within those circumstances. They also had listened to the perspectives of Ray Bakke, an urban ministry leader, regarding working with urban issues from a distinctly Christian perspective. Leanne described the
affirmation of her faith when connections between this experience and the academic course became apparent. She recalled,

And then, in the Urban Condition class we . . . they talked. . . . The professor talked about the same kind of things, so it gave validity to what Ray Bakke had said, and just said, “Yeah this is, this is the way it is.”

Justin’s experience ran parallel. He also participated in the IVCF summer urban project and pursued the same questions in the course context. He stated,

I think something that’s really, you know, been pressed upon me in the last year has just been the oppression of the poor, particularly the urban poor. I’m in a class now where we’re studying, like, the living conditions of the working poor, like in the urban setting.

Every Mid-Atlantic student is required to take a Foundations Seminar during their first year. Choosing a course topic on religion encouraged connections. The seminar chosen by Dara focused on religion and faith, and required her to write a paper reflecting on her faith. She described the experience in the following manner:

I had to write a faith-journey paper. . . . I wrote something called My Symphony, and that’s funny ‘cause it’s framed in my room now, but it was just kind of like this. . . . It was, it was supposed to be like this statement of my faith, or the statement of what spirituality meant to me, and it was. . . . It was “cool” ‘cause it was kind of like a pact with God, you know, or a pact before God of what I believed He would do for me.

Every student at Mid-Atlantic is also required to take a “capstone” course during their senior year to reflect on their 4 years of university education. The course chosen by Chad focused on spiritual development. He found that just talking about patterns that people show in their spiritual development, and seeing those patterns in me, and seeing where I, you know, just examining where I’ve come from and writing a paper at the end of the year on why . . . where my faith came from and how it’s developed and changed, was really good for me. . . . I made connections I’ve never made before.
At times, personal choice to address life issues in course assignments encouraged faith connection and development. Keisha described a pivotal paper that caused her to reexamine her faith; her faith was strengthened as the paper allowed her to make a connection between God and her personal brokenness. She recalled,

Last semester I was taking a course on later . . . later childhood and adolescence, something along those lines, and it was an education course, and I was just taking it for a requirement—a writing requirement—but I learned a lot about myself. We had to write a paper on something really significant, like a turning point in our life or something really significant in our life.

In the paper, Keisha was able to reflect on her personal history, including her family relationships and school experiences, and connect this history with her self-identity. She described the experience by stating,

So just all these different factors that contributed to the way that I am now, and that was, like, really, really good for me to look at it, and I think God was . . . He was in the midst of that. He was definitely opening my eyes to see . . . to see all of that. To see myself even, the way that I am and why I did some of the things did, why I had unhealthy relationships, and through all that, showing me how He was there. He was with me, and it was, like, a growing process and even now, like, where I’m at with Him. . . . I actually saved it . . . with all the important stuff in life. I think mostly because I never really thought of God being in the midst of all of that.

Renee described a course assignment in her education class that made it evident to her that she is uncomfortable documenting her faith within the realm of academia. She avoids “Christian lingo” to disassociate herself with potentially negative perceptions surrounding Christianity. It is awkward for her to set her faith reflections to paper in the course context. She explained,

We had to write a paper for Education class about religion and our life, and it just sounds so weird to be writing down, like, “I really want to do what God wants me to do in my life, and I really want my life to be His. I want to give it to Him,” and like, things like that, like, they just probably sound so bizarre . . . I just think those
kind of things just sound really weird when I’m saying them out loud ‘cause I know I think them, and I know, among Christians, it makes sense.

Another experience that affirms faith is seeing God work in a consistent manner within different geographical contexts. Leanne dealt with issues of reconciliation on a mission trip to South Africa, as well as during her summer urban project. In each of these contexts, she witnessed people of Christian faith living in community among the poor. This was a powerful affirmation of both her faith and her faith-based commitments. She was awed to find that they didn’t even know each other, but they were following the same God, and just seeing God do the same thing to people who are totally unrelated, or with who were totally unrelated, really strengthens my faith as far as that goes.

Ultimately, the participants described making connections between their cognitive understanding and feelings. Greg described these connections as part of making his faith more integral to the rest of his life. He explained,

It wasn’t until the . . . with InterVarsity and stuff like that, that I started to really, I mean not just head knowledge, but heart knowledge, realize, like, God is like a personal God and, like, He cares about me. I guess I had God in “the little box.”

Keisha described a similar connection in ultimately being able to allow her faith to impact all areas of her life. She said,

Over the 4 years, I’ve learned how to give my life totally to God and not just, like, halfway. You know, like really making it a part of my lifestyle and not just something that I do on Sunday’s or something that I do some of the time, and then have this other life the other half of the time.

Renee described this same shift in bridging God and the rest of her world. During her first year, “it was in the two separate worlds. Within sophomore year, everything was in one world.” Similarly, Dara described herself as trying to be two people in her first year,
and behaving differently in IV relationships than other Mid-Atlantic relationships.

Ultimately, all became integrated, as she described in the following excerpt:

> I think I’m pretty much the same now. Freshman year, I definitely lived two different lives. I remember, I used to smoke, and I would be afraid to smoke out on campus in case anybody from IV would see me ‘cause, as far as I knew, nobody in IV smoked at the time, but as I was . . . I was just. . . . I had this image I wanted to uphold of, and I felt like I had to have, in order to be a part of IV then, [an image] of being righteous and holy and not doing, not being simple, not struggling with certain things, and yet, when I went out, I wanted to be, like, I wanted to, I wanted to be liked and I wanted people to be able to have fun with me, but, I think now, that’s why, that I’m, I am becoming who I am and not, not as quickly transforming to whatever room I’m in at the moment, you know.

**Transition**

Transition emerged as a context for epiphanies of faith. The primary transition identified by the participants was that of high school to college. The participants indicated that moving to Mid-Atlantic forced them to find a new identity within their faith. Leaving both family and the church that facilitated the birth of faith in their lives up to that point was a precipitating factor. Moving to an environment where they were forced to seek out people and places to focus on faith provided the opportunity for faith transformation. Keisha recounted,

> Probably every day I just thank God that my mom “planted the seed” in me, and that it was from her faith that I got my faith and, of course, when I got to college, I really had to take ownership about my faith… ‘cause you’re on your own.

Renee described college as the first time she lived on her own. She stated,

> I’d say that was a turning point—first time out on my own, away from my mom, having to decide for myself what God was. I mean, I’ve always had an opportunity to do that, but it’s like, you’re “out of the nest; you’re flying on your own.”
Leanne credits the transition from high school to college as facilitating a more mature understanding of her faith as reflected in the following interview excerpt:

Like, a high school student, they are learning things, but they’re pretty much dependant on their parents and who their parents are and who their parents expect them [to] be . . . for the most part, and then, the transition that happens in college—and I’ve seen this from me and I’ve also seen it from other people—you go out away from home and, all of a sudden, you have to be yourself and figure out who you are, and it’s kind of just like freedom to just be who you are as opposed to what your family expects you to be, and figure out what you think and what you feel about life, and some people don’t even really choose to do that; they just sort of . . . don’t know what they think and don’t really want to talk about that, but I think, just in the process of growing into anything, it’s figuring out who you are in that and what you believe about it and knowing about it and what it means, and so that applied to faith, would kind of be knowing what it means and living by it.

Leanne also described this transition as between two different worlds as she stated,

I don’t know if there’s, like, there were two different worlds. I think there are kind of different perspectives on faith, different themes, or different ways that I looked at my faith in those chapters. I think that’s why I would break high school and college because, but I don’t know where I’d break it because the change seems so gradual, but then, so rapid at the same time.

The initial days on a secular college campus as a first-year student are particularly challenging, especially in terms of living out a commitment to faith. Dara recalls her first week by saying,

[I] would say that first week of my freshman year, when I was very immediately faced with like, “OK, I’m either going to go down this road or I’m going to go down that road,” and, you know, just the first, I mean like, I think it was, like, the first weekend I got wasted off of tequila and, I mean, I don’t really do that, hadn’t really done that.

Erica noted that her involvement with Christian friends was different than she had anticipated. She described this as a transition from her high school experience to her
college experience. Part of her faith realization was viewing her faith differently, as enabling her to connect with people outside her faith perspective. She explained,

I think one of the things that was very different for me, coming to college, was I was used to being, being in a place where I always talked about, you know, God stuff with my friends. Like, you know, my church friends, like, we were, we were very open about where that was and, at school, most of my best friends were involved in the Bible study and so, like, that was such a huge part of our lives, and I think I came to college assuming that I would find a Christian group and then that would be the people I would “hang out” with, and then that was, that was one of the hard things for me that first semester because I did get involved with InterVarsity, but it was definitely not like I was hanging out with them all the time, and which was not what I expected. I expected to come and, you know, find a Christian group and then we would do everything together, but looking back, it was really good because, that way, I got to know the people in my hall and I can still talk to them and they’re not Christians and that’s “cool,” and, you know, now that’s, that’s cool. Then it was a little hard. It was like, “What’s going on?” but so that, I guess, that was one of the main shifts for me. The first semester of college was. . . . I lost a lot of my, maybe, prejudice, so to speak, as far as just sort of looking at people and seeing one thing they do or say and then sorting of putting them into a category and realizing that God is bigger than that, and also realizing that I don’t have to just confine myself to a Christian atmosphere all the time.

Encountering Difference

The study participants described encountering difference as an opportunity to consider their own questions of faith and to examine their own commitments to faith. Differences are encountered both inside and outside the classroom setting. Differences also involved individuals of faiths other than the Christian tradition and those who shared the Christian perspective.

Academic content. While the students were drawn to religion courses, it is apparent in many cases that they were surprised by the academic side of religion and of the diversity of perspectives within the context of religious studies. In some cases, the participants described a hostile response to any verbalization of Christian faith in these
settings. Dara reflected,

Most of the faculty in the Religious Department is anti-Christian. If you try to offer up a Christian, like, faith or worldview, you’re almost immediately . . . you have everything working against you from Day One. So it’s just very difficult to, you know, they’re always looking for ways to “knock down” what you believe.

Dara also felt quite alone in the context of her religion course in terms of defending her faith position. She recalled,

Just feeling like I would be the only one, you know, that, if I didn’t say anything, then I would just watch them sit up there and denounce my God, or I’d have to say something. So it was just kind of constantly, you know, like having to raise my hand and be like, “Well, I believe this because,” you know, and I don’t know.

The academic context of religion courses forced participants to encounter different perspectives. Chad recalled being introduced to competing ideas within his faith perspective as a particular point of challenge. He described his Introduction to Bible course in which he encountered different perspectives from his instructor in the following manner:

The first day of class, that day, she read a piece of the Bible and she said, “Who here believes in this crap?” You know, like exact words, not . . . no exaggeration, and a few people raised their hand and she just, like, shook her head. . . . She would go through the Bible and say that this is a myth, or that, you know, that the Bible endorses slavery, things like that.

Through both the written assignments and class discussions, Chad found himself challenged to articulate his faith in new ways. He found it positive that he needed to give voice to his faith in light of disagreement with his instructor. He stated, “It was a good experience for me to stand up to, to a teacher, you know, to a professor.” Keisha enrolled in an Introduction to the Bible course her first year and also found it to be a particular challenge, as recounted in the following interview excerpt:
My freshman year. Oh. I had this class—Introductions to Bible—and the professor was atheist, and she, oh, she just . . . talked about the Bible as if it was, like, a myth, and that’s the approach that she had toward the class, and she would say that, like, “Don’t,” you know, “This class isn’t personal.” Like, “Don’t bring in your personal feelings about Christianity or the Bible,” but she would always say hers. Like, “Who actually believed that somebody could part a sea?” Like, she would say something like that in class, and you’d be, like, “Well, how can you say that, if I’m not allowed to say that? Yes, I do believe that somebody could part the sea.” So that class, in itself, was just a real. . . . It was good because it gave me more knowledge of the Bible, but in terms of my faith, the way the woman talked about the Bible just really . . . offended me, and it made me have to either choose to stand up for my faith, or to not, and so a couple of times in class, I had to be, like, “Well . . . no. . . . I think. . . . I believe this, dah, dah, dah, dah,” and at the end, I think she really respected me. I got an “A” in the class and, like, I did well on all the papers, and ever since that class, like, we had it out in class with differing opinions and beliefs, but outside of class she’d always smile and wave. So, but that was challenging for me.

Kyle also spoke of the Introduction to Bible course as a challenge during his first year of college by stating,

One of the first faith experiences I had when I got to college was obviously when I was still sort of just coming straight out of my youth group. I took an Intro to the Bible course and the teacher is very, ah, she’s got a very biased viewpoint, and she teaches her class that way and, generally, the very first day of class she said, “Who are you?” You know, “Why are you here?” Like, whatever, and so, of course, I stood up and said, “I’m an electrical engineer and I’m a Christian and I’m here because, you know, I want, I want to be able to get this more, you know, in-depth look into the Bible and the parts that I haven’t necessarily learned a lot about before,” and so, I mean, in retrospect, I see her in her grade book, putting a little check mark by my name, and the entire semester, she liked to really challenge the Bible and what is in there and what is contradictory. What [it] is saying [is] something different, you know, and in class, she would call on me and say, “Well Kyle, what do you think about that?” You know, and I mean, most of the time, I just was, like, “I don’t know.” Like, I just was put in such a tough position, especially for someone that had very little faith, you know, in, in retrospect.

Chad highlighted a particular course that enabled him to make sense of his faith experiences, particularly the challenges he had faced with a Christian group his first year
in college. He noted, in particular, that the course affirmed his faith in spite of the
divergent faith perspective of the instructor. He recalled,

And one course in particular that really stands out is my Postmodern Religion
course. That, that helped me tremendously to understand a lot about my, my
experiences, my, my freshman year of college, and just how a lot of Christian
groups are very modern in their thinking, very, you know, scientific and very, I
don’t know. It, it was just, it was nice to, it was important for me to, to study and
to learn then, you know. There are other paths to truth through art or history or
experience—all of those things and more than just science. So that that was good
‘cause it gave more legitimacy and more validity to my own beliefs because my
experiences have been powerful and they have shaped me in what I believe, and
there is no scientific experiment that you could do to prove whether God exists or
not. So it all. . . . It was funny ‘cause my teacher totally was non-Christian. She
was very anti-Christian, and yet that was the course that really confirmed my faith
. . . for me.

Examining faith perspectives outside the Christian tradition provided opportunity for
internal examination of faith. Chad recalled the value of examining other religions in
facilitating clarification of his own faith by saying,

I’ve taken other religious courses. like Native American Religions or World
Religions, and I don’t, you know, just learning about other people’s faiths and
what, what’s out there, I think helps me define better what I believe and thinking
about that stuff.

Justin also recalled experiencing different perspectives in the context of a religion course:

I guess spring semester. . . . I was also. . . . I took my first and only religion class.
It was called Religion and Popular Culture. So it was sort of like looking at
religious aspects of life, sports or music videos, that sort of thing, TV shows, like
this aspects of religion and those things. So there are a lot of times, like, I don’t
know, when stuff would get said and just a lot of time. . . . Like, OK, most of
those times, I didn’t say anything. I would just sit there and kind of like observe.
So I mean, I didn’t really, like, put myself out there and assert my faith and, you
know, tell people where I was coming from. So I don’t know, I think that class
was pretty hard for me, like, to just sit there and listen to, like, all these things that
people would say and. . . . Like, the class format itself was just. . . . We all sat in a
big circle. There were about 20 people in the class. We would sit in a circle
eyeryday and just have discussions pretty much about these readings that we
would do, and some of their. . . . I think one of the readings, maybe one of the
harder ones, was this guy, who I think was pretty famous, like, I don’t know specifically his field. Yeah, it was like religion or something like that. More like history of religion or something, and so, like, pretty much, was just saying that, yeah, like basically all religions kind of have these little basic properties, and it’s like talking about myths and so it was like, yeah, you know, talking about the different myths and these different religions and, you know, talking about these obscure religions from South America, and then talking about Christianity and, you know, how the different myths fit into all of this, and like, the important thing isn’t whether or not these stories are true, but just the religious value that they have. So like, sitting through some of that and listening to some of that was really hard because, obviously, I think that Jesus’ story is true and so, like, you know, just having conversations every day about, well, it doesn’t so matter much if it’s true.

Another challenge the participants faced was how to respond when perspectives offered within the course context differed from their faith perspectives. The participants often referenced their own silence on matters of faith when divergent views were presented. Justin recalled this experience, and Greg also described not speaking up in class. Greg had enrolled in an American Indian Religions course with his IVCF friend, Chad, as well as another close friend and roommate who does not share his faith perspective. Greg recounted,

But there were a couple, the professor, there was a couple times we would . . . He’d quote stuff, like, totally wrong out of the Bible, or just, like, and instead of or, or would ask a question or something like that and instead of . . . . Both Chad and I realized, like, afterwards, like, we had just both been too much of like a “pansy” to, you know, say anything about, or to speak up . . . and so, I don’t know if that had to do with, with just not wanting to speak up in class about it or having to do with [roommate named] being there or having to do with “it’s eight in the morning and I’m tired and I don’t feel like talking” or . . . but I remember thinking at the time, like, I should probably say something, but I’m not going to.

Justin spoke to a course in religion as facilitating an enlarged perspective and a “good challenge” that changed his way of thinking. He offered the following thoughts in his interview:
Certainly that religion class last semester. I think it challenged me and definitely changed the way that I look at things, like, not. . . . I’m definitely not as naïve as I was before then. . . . I think I’m more aware of, like, other stuff that’s out there besides just like Christian beliefs, and so think that was really good, even though it was hard to sit through that class a lot of times. It did definitely challenge[d] me in some good ways.

*Lifestyle considerations.* Encountering differing perspectives outside the classroom setting also served as an impetus to reflect upon faith. Justin attends the Mid-Atlantic chapel service each weekend, even though the “conservative nature” of the service does not appeal to him and he often disagrees with the campus chaplain. He described the experience in the following manner:

> I think also being in chapel is, like, really challenged me because I disagree with a lot of the stuff and so, like, I guess [it] spurs me on to think about what I believe in and that sort of thing. I think it’s actually kind of good, even though I disagree with a lot of stuff and am challenged by it.

Encountering difference also occurs in the context of peer relationships. Some of the participating students dated individuals who did not share their faith, which motivated them to wrestle with faith issues. Keisha described this scenario in the following interview transcript:

> My sophomore and junior years I was dating someone who wasn’t a Christian, so I was surrounding myself with him and other people who weren’t really. . . . They weren’t Christian, but not only, like, with him, he was against . . . pretty much against organized religion. Like, he believed in God; he wasn’t atheist, but he was against any organized religion, and he was really against Christianity, and so, being with him, I think, any time we actually were strong enough to battle out, definitely made me question because I had to. . . . I had to be able to “stand my ground” a lot. I believe what I believe with him so it made me examine my faith a lot.

Renee also recounted her experience dating a nonbeliever and viewed it as a point of growth. Conversations with her boyfriend presented multiple opportunities for Renee to
examine her own faith and particularly the commitments that extended from her faith.

She stated,

He pushed me mentally. Like, we’d sit down and have major discussions about why I believe the way I do, which was the first time that—not only about sex and things like that, but about my entire religion—which was the first time anyone had ever really pushed me because I always had been in this “bubble” of my mom, my church, my friends, and my friends at school didn’t really care what I did. You’re a Christian, whatever; that’s great, have fun, never really pushed, always kind of supported, you know, lifted up with it. So Steven was the first person that ever really pushed what I believed, so that was great. So actually, dating him, pushed me farther in my faith that way.

Later in their relationship, Steven made a commitment to the Christian faith. Renee was then able to clarify elements of her faith as she helped him address questions. She explained,

I feel like I was almost starting over in my faith when he did. I feel like I was rediscovering all the things I had just come to accept as truths, all the things being raised in the faith—“God wants to get to know you like I want to get to know you”—and really, like, putting [faith] in a context for him, put it in a context for me.

The experience between Greg and his roommate also spoke to the value of encountering difference in faith. Dialogue between them regarding faith has been a growth experience for Greg. He described being afraid of talking with his roommate about faith because he was afraid that he would not be able to fully stand up for his perspective. He stated,

I guess they were times of me kind of like passing my own test of being willing to talk about it with someone who had no . . . doesn’t, doesn’t believe it and, like, and with someone who is very good with, like, probably knows more about the Bible. Well, probably not so much anymore, but knows more about the Bible than I did, and was just very good at, like you know, getting his opinion into your own head, and like, so I was scared to go into conversations with him ‘cause I was, like, “I won’t be able to,” like, “I won’t be able to hold my ground.”
The conversations Greg did enter into with his roommate enabled Greg to reflect deeply on his faith. Justin described his experience at Mid-Atlantic as filled with opportunities to relate to people with different faith perspectives. In these relationships, he found himself challenged to rethink his own faith, as is evident in the following interview text:

Like, just in relating to people in, you know, ‘cause so many of my friends don’t believe in God . . . don’t believe in Jesus. So like, even in just, you know, everyday interactions with them, like, because they don’t have the faith that I do, like, it challenges me to think, like, “Well, why am I doing all this? Why am I believing all this stuff?” and so, like, I think it’s a pretty constant process of, you know, trying to rethink through, like, I believe and why I believe it. I would say I do it a lot. Like, any given week, I think I’m doing it a lot. Like, just in been “hanging out” with people, like, reflecting back and hanging out with people, like, I’ll think through things and then I’ll think to what I have studied in scripture and, you know, just try and make sense of it all, and so I would say I do that probably everyday.

Encountering different perspectives on matters relating particularly to lifestyle provided participants opportunities for clarification of their faith along with associated challenges. Renee recalled an activity in an education course where students were required to make their views on various lifestyle issues public—issues such as homosexuality and the availability of condoms in schools. The course participants were given scenarios and asked to stand on sides of the room that represented their agreement, disagreement, or neutral position on the respective issue. After individuals chose their stance, the professor asked them to comment on the reasons behind their selection. The students were free to move to different areas of the room, representing alternate stances on the issue, as they listened to others articulate their perspectives. This process encouraged Renee to make her ideas public and to reflect on her rationale for these commitments. In this context, Renee found herself examining her faith commitments in
comparison to divergent faith perspectives. Her perspective was that her professor embodied a highly liberal political orientation. She described the classroom scenario in the following manner:

I think that was one of the hardest experiences I’ve had ‘cause it happened this year, this semester. My professor’s very liberal, like, my whole class is. . . . Like, the college scene is very liberal on things—liberal about sex, liberal about. . . . What were we talking about? We were talking about sex, abortion. Yeah, condoms, abortion, and homosexuality [were] the three things where we had to stand in different positions so no one would feel alone and so people could do that, but then they had people volunteer from each of the groups to speak about something, and people were just so mixed. Like, one person would say something and some of the group would just move to the neutral category. So many people are neutral because they really don’t know.

Renee recalled being asked by friends also taking the course to reflect further after class on why she believed what she believed. She described the experience as forcing her to take a stand on issues related to faith, which presented a challenge for her. However, the challenge was not confined to differentiating between those with perspectives outside the Christian tradition and those from within her Christian faith. Renee was also challenged by the perspectives of a student in the class who identified himself as a Christian, but who exhibited conflicting lifestyle views. She disagreed with him on things such as whether condoms should be available to those who do not subscribe to abstinence. This experience caused her to wrestle with divergent portrayals of Christian faith. She reflected,

You know, we all believe the same thing, but the way we approach it is so different, you know, so I think that’s been really hard, but challenging, but I haven’t even really gotten to talk to anyone about it. Like, I want to talk to, like, one of the leaders or, like, Dara or somebody else, like, just about, like, how to really explain it. Like, I don’t think I’ve ever really challenged myself on. . . . I know where I stand on it, but I don’t know how to. . . . Like, where I stand on, like, should condoms be allowed in the nurse’s office? Like, things like that that I have
never really thought about, you know. Should, like, I don’t think abortion’s right, you know, but. . . . Just. . . . I can’t explain the. . . . They were asking different questions in different ways. . . . “Well, is [abortion] OK if a person is, like, going to die?” He. . . . I guess I would say that was probably—now that I think of it—the biggest challenge, and I didn’t even really. . . . I didn’t stand up and say much because I was so. . . . It really challenged me to think.

For Erica, what enabled her to rethink her faith commitments were lifestyle questions outside of class. She stated,

I guess some of the drinking, or just the lifestyle of what they were doing, definitely made me think ‘cause I came in knowing that I really wasn’t going to be into the party scene. You know, I don’t enjoy the drinking; I don’t enjoy, like, dancing that much, and so I think, especially like, seeing people that, when they were drunk, they weren’t really as bad off as I had always imagined them to be. I think. . . . Not that that made me want to drink, but it made me think, “OK, why is it that I don’t want to drink?” It was just me being able to sit down and say, “OK, this is what I think and this is why,” and just sort of, like, just I guess realizing even more, like, what I had set out for myself, being what I wanted it, that I really didn’t want that.

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Being Set Apart

The participants referred to conversations with others and decisions in multiple contexts that made them realize they were different from others in and out of class. It was a challenge to experience themselves as set apart. Keisha recalled how her peer girlfriends during her first year who were not professed Christians pointed out her differences. She explained,

So I was, like, in our group, I was like the religious one ‘cause I, like. . . . I went to church, and every time we ate together they’d be like, “OK Keisha, you say grace,” like I was the spiritual, religious one.

Being set apart, however, forced students toward associated faith commitments amidst the perceived pressure to make different choices. The self-perception of difference also prompted conversation entailing defending their own position, which required rethinking
and reaffirming faith. Dara summarized the epiphanies associated with being set apart:

I think that I’ve gotten a much bigger perspective of what faith means beyond myself . . . of what it means for Christian community. I think my faith has gotten a lot stronger, has been challenged a lot more. It has just been something that, either I was going to go down this path or I was not. And I was gonna accept that it was going [to] call me apart if I was gonna go down it, and so I feel like, while my faith is stronger, I’ve been more called apart than ever in my life.

The academic setting presented many avenues toward a status of “set apart.” Dara described this outcome as a sense of feeling very alone, as she experienced when no other first-year students selected the foundations course on religion and faith as their first choice:

I was the only person in the entire 800 and so class members of my freshman class that put that as their first choice, and not a single other person put that class as their first choice, and that, that was really discouraging when I found that out in the beginning of the year, and so, I mean that was really discouraging ’cause I had put that in hopes that I would find in that class an immediate connection to people who were interested in pursuing their faith in college. So I just remember being kind of down, and I remember being one of the facts that made me be, like, “Why the hell bother trying to find this here?” You know, I may as well just “go with the flow,” you know. It just seemed like it was going to be such this “uphill” thing, to pursue my faith here, and it kind of has been.

Similarly, living in campus residences provided contexts of being set apart. From the first days of their college experience, opportunities consistently arise for students to set themselves apart from the larger university population. Both Renee and Erica signed up to participate in a substance-free residence hall program their first year in college to avoid the drinking scene anticipated on campus. The program involves student residents committing to not drink or smoke within the residence environment. In Erica’s case, she discovered before arriving on campus that she had been assigned to the area of “overflow” for the substance-free program, and approximately half the students had
sought this commitment and the others had not. For Erica, this served as an added
challenge as she found herself living among what she had hoped to avoid. She described
the scenario in the following interview excerpt:

You know, like, our lifestyles were so different, that that didn’t really work, but
for the most part, I would “hang out” with them until, you know, 10 o’clock on a
Friday night, and then they’d go out and I’d just stick around and, you know, go
to a movie or something. So that’s pretty much how that worked.

Choosing not to go out and drink made students feel different. Even going to bed early on
Saturday night to attend church set students apart from their peers. Justin affirmed this by
stating,

It was a lot harder to say, “Well, I’m going to go to bed now because I want to get
up for church in the morning.” Like, that was harder because I was “hanging”
with my friends in the hall and none of them were going to go, so they could stay
up as late as they wanted.

These experiences were challenging to the faith of the participants in several ways,
beginning with the need to decipher what was indeed important in their lives. Justin went
on to describe this process in the following manner:

I guess it was just at that point, like, certainly, this challenged me, like, over
what’s more important to you. Is it, like, you know, this God thing, or is it just
having friends on your hall, you know. At that point, I was, well, you know,
having friends is a good thing so there’s bad about just “hanging out” with people
in my hall and being friends with them. So I mean, it’s challenging just, like, you
know, “What am I going to choose deeply into? Is it,” you know, “going to be
God?” Is [it] going to be, like, “Am I going to pursue God and faith or am I
gonna,” you know, “just kind of go by and do my work and hang out all the time.”
Just by hang out not, like, not pursue deep relationships, just kind of have fun.

The participants found it awkward to be a person of faith while living in a
residence hall from time to time, particularly during the first year on campus. Justin
described it as a lonely experience. He was the only person on his floor participating in
InterVarsity events. He conveyed the following details, thoughts, and feelings:

And fortunately for me, there was a Bible study in my dorm, and so I started going to that, like, you know, the very beginning of the semester, but it was hard, like, a lot of nights because other freshmen, you know, is definitely most of my friends were on my hall, and so I would be, you know, spending all my time with the people in my hall and “hang out” with them and then, you know, every week, you know, a certain time, like eight o’clock, “Yea guys, I gotta go. I’m going to Bible study,” and none of them were interested at all in the Bible study or God or anything like that. So, I mean, I invited some of them sometimes, you know; there’s no interest. So it is pretty hard just to always be leaving, like, those people who were pretty much everyone I knew. So that was hard, like, just having to step out from my hall and, you know, walk to the other side of the dorm by myself. I don’t know; it was kind of a lonely thing.

Conversations with roommates forced participants to consider how they were different, as well as to defend their positions. Renee recalled being challenged by her roommates over lifestyle issues and, in turn, feeling alone in her residence hall room. She described the experience in the following transcript:

They all knew my standing on, like, sex and things like that, and . . . ‘cause they’d be, like, “Oh, are you and [boyfriend named] having sex?” and I’m, like, “No, I don’t believe in sex before marriage,” and they were, like, “Well, do you not like me now because I’m having sex?” I’m, like, “Well, it’s not an issue of me liking you. Do I agree with it? No, but do I like you? Yes, you’re my friend, but I don’t think it’s right,” and that was it. Like, it wasn’t “OK, now you gotta go repent.” Like, I was trying to explain it to them, and they could talk to me about it, but it wasn’t . . . They didn’t want to deal with it. They knew where I stood and, like, sometimes they would be, like, “Oh, should we not talk about this in front of you?” It’s, like, “You can talk about it.” They’d be, like, cursing or something and they’d be, like, “Can we curse around you?” I was, like, “Yeah, I don’t do it, but you know, if you’re going to do it, you don’t need to, like, leave the room and, like, ostracize me because you’re going to curse or, like, ‘Oh, my gosh, you cursed; Renee’s here,’” you know. Like, things like that. Like, I tried to make myself more available to it, but they were much in their own little own worlds.

Because Greek involvement is a strong characteristic of Mid-Atlantic, this was a particular challenge described by participants. Involvement presented a lifestyle with aspects in direct conflict with their Christian values. While four of the students indicated
involvement with the Greek system, only two were members and one of those eventually disaffiliated. Dara was in a sorority and found herself relating well to “those kind of people,” by which she meant:

people that do party, that do go out on the weekends, that are OK with being a homogenous population, that are OK with, you know, that aren’t like, you know. . . We should be more diverse, you know. They’re just kind of who they are, you know, and I would say I fit in with more of the typical Mid-Atlantic student.

Ultimately, however, it was questions of lifestyle—notably relating to alcohol and body image—that led to Dara’s disaffiliation from the sorority. She stated, “The sorority thing didn’t work out just because I don’t drink, and it’s very difficult to be in that situation.”

She continued by describing the isolation she felt while involved in the sorority:

I mean, sororities here on this campus are essentially a place to provide drinking companions and a source for social life and partying, and so, for somebody like me that made a decision not to drink . . . that was so hard, mostly because I wanted to drink really badly. Like, I just, every time I went in there I was fighting in my head. The whole time I was there, it was just this constant battle in my head of knowing that I had made this decision not to drink, and that I really needed to follow it with my family history, and yet I was standing there looking like a social idiot, a “bump on a log,” and I knew that, if I would just take a drink, I would be just like everybody else in that room and people would like me, and I mean, it was just really, really presenting a difficult thing for me. So I stopped going to mixers.

Students fear being perceived as “weird” as they make lifestyle commitments that align with their faith. Greg was a social drinker and casually smoked marijuana during his first years on campus. He decided to stop smoking and drinking after renewing his faith commitment. He recalled one particular week with his fraternity in which he felt awkward as others noticed this life change. He stated, “I remember I had, I’d made very intentional choices that made me look really weird . . . to, to not drink that week and to not, and it was just, it was weird cause they were like, ‘Huh?’” It was not giving up the
alcohol and marijuana that was difficult. Greg identified the pressures to articulate his faith, as a result of being identified as different, as the source of challenge in the following interview comments:

It was just like, like what came along with it was hard. Like, what people thought and, like, “OK, well, how am I going to explain this to people?” Because I didn’t want to be, like, “Hey yeah, I found Jesus; I gave up drinking so all of you are going to hell.” You know, like, I’d, I found, I found ways to talk about it and, you know, and just saying this is, like, kind of what I need to do for me at this moment, like, at this time in my life and to not be, like. . . . I didn’t want to be, like, judgmental or, like, “come off,” and like, give this like pompous air about it or anything. I think most, most of all, I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to give this, like, kind of like “bad rep” for like. . . . Like, Christians I think, because I was just still very much trying to, to, like I mean, I, I didn’t feel like I was capable of, you know, backing up what my, my decisions and my beliefs in, like, conversations with some people, and a lot of it, I think, it was also, I was just scared. I mean, I didn’t want people to think I was weird and it was just scared to talk about it, especially with, like, you know, your fraternity brothers and stuff like that.

Renee also described an experience of feeling set apart in the process of sorority rush. She explained,

I had put a cross on my nametag. I still have my nametag, too, because I couldn’t throw it out ‘cause I, like, designed it. It was really. . . . Like, you had to make a nametag and it has your name, and you can draw little pictures to describe yourself so it’s like a conversation starter, so I put a cross on it and I wrote InterVarsity and stuff, and people would ask me about it and I would talk about it ‘cause I was, like, “If I’m going to get in any of these, I want it to be. . . . I’m not going to hide.” I’m not going to hide who I am; this is a part of me. This is a big part of my life; this is what I would describe myself as, so even that, was a total change from the year before. . . . I sat down and really thought about it. I was like, “Am I going to put this on or not?” you know, and, like, I don’t drink in those things. Like, I wanted them to be aware of who they were getting, so then I didn’t get in and I was just so, “Oh, my gosh; maybe it was ‘cause of that,” you know?

Choosing Into Faith

Epiphanies of faith occur in the context of personal commitment to faith. The participants described different levels of commitment during their college years. The
critical element of this epiphany among students seems to be the opportunity to choose in the first place, as well as the opportunity to make that choice public. Renee specifically described the notion of “choosing into” in the following manner:

That’s a phrase we use a lot here, like, “choose into it.” There’s a different levels of where people are choosing into, just in IV. People are choosing the level that I chose freshman year. They’re very, “Well, I came, but I can’t help with that” or “Oh, I don’t really want to commit to another Bible study; I’m doing one,” you know, and then there’s people who are really seeking more and want to know more and they’re choosing into more. It doesn’t mean you have to choose into helping or choose into cleaning up, but like, choosing into God more. When you get to choose, you appreciate the choice more, when it’s your option. I think if I had to come to TNF and had to do these things . . . . Like, now I have to lead a study, but I’ve chosen that, but if it was mandatory that I had to go to every Bible study, had to go to every Well, in order to be in this group, I don’t think I could have made that commitment. It’s choosing into it; it’s wanting to come. It’s like an “open-door policy,” you know? I think that’s how God is. God’s, like, “I’m here waiting. You just need to choose into Me.”

In Renee’s description, she clarified that students are choosing into their relationship with God. The voluntary nature of this decision leads to personal ownership and greater commitment. The experience of choice takes on new meaning in an examination of her following reflections on choosing into the Fellowship versus choosing into the life of the world:

I feel like I’ve definitely been growing more, and there hasn’t been really many setbacks. I think freshman year was definitely a big challenge to that . . . because I was trying to do it in two different worlds and it wasn’t working, and I wasn’t understanding why it wasn’t working. I was just, like, “What is not. . . . What’s not right here? Like, something is not right.” I felt, like, stuck. I think that’s a good way to explain it. I felt stuck between the one world and the other world. Like, I wasn’t totally wanting to follow Jesus, but I wasn’t in what you would consider “the world.” I wouldn’t consider myself in the world because I was trying to follow, but I wasn’t wholeheartedly. . . . I would say I was a Christian and I would try to do the right things, or do what I thought. . . . I tried to do what Jesus would want me to do or what God would want me to do or what is considered the right way to go about things. I thought I was doing the right . . . you know, not drinking and, like, not having sex and trying not to hurt anyone and
trying not to associate with, you know, “sketchy” people and stuff like that, but I think that was the year I was just really challenged and I had to make a choice. It was kind of like I couldn’t stay in that, like. . . . It was marginality—there’s a nice word from Education class. I was stuck in, like, a “zone of marginality” ‘cause I wasn’t in the one world and I wasn’t in the other world, and I didn’t understand how people kept trying to pull me over to the, like, the more God world.

Choosing into a life of faith is a dynamic process. Renee recalled being torn between two worlds, particularly her first year. More importantly, she described herself as reaching a deeper understanding of her own faith through her college years. Specifically, her faith demanded more than simply good behavior and surface-level distinctions. She recalled being invited to Fellowship activities and she would “pick and choose” what she wanted to do. Even when she was present, she does not describe herself as committed. Greg recalled being affirmed in his faith by his parents. His father had a long talk with him during his first week on campus that solidified the importance of Greg’s personal relationship with God. Greg stated, “My parents have definitely affirmed me. You know, choosing to follow Jesus for myself and, and not because of their upbringing, you know.”

The participants reflected on pivotal moments within the IVCF when opportunities to “choose into” faith were experienced. Activities typically generating such moments within the context of the IVCF are the retreats and camps, specifically Big Love, Spring Fling, and Chapter Camp. These events commonly provide participants an opportunity to make a public commitment to their faith or to following their faith in renewed ways. For Renee, her moment occurred at Chapter Camp:

It came to the point, at the end of the year, that it was either one or the other. Like, and just standing up and saying that, you know, “I really do want to follow. Like, I really. . . .” and I made, like, that conscious outward expression, like, to say, like, “God, I really do want to do what you want,” you know?
Greg described making a public commitment to his faith during Big Love:

And then Saturday night, I, I, I stood up and like, like when for the . . . you know. . . . “Do you want to follow Jesus?” and, and like, he had a couple different ways you could stand up. Like one was, if you know, for the first time. . . . One was, like, you know, if you just need to recommit or something like that, but I stood up for the first time 'cause I felt like it was kind of like me making it my own for the first time.

The public commitment associated with making faith one’s own is evidenced in Renee and Greg’s words as a critical moment. Keisha described choosing into faith in the following manner:

So I think my freshman year was more like just choosing that for myself, choosing to want to be in that for myself. So InterVarsity was good, like, helping me stay in the Word, in the Bible studies. We didn’t really have much of a large-group worship until this year, but that’s been really helpful, too—taught me a lot about community, which I had no sense of, just having people really care for you and show you the love that Jesus intends—how Jesus intends for us to love each other—and just being there and just really being blessed by the community and the people and the relationships.

As Keisha spoke of her process of choosing into her faith, she also described the characteristics and experiences of the IVCF that facilitated her ongoing commitment to faith. Specifically, she mentioned Bible study and relationships with people.

Affiliation of Faith

Affiliation with others who share the same faith perspective provides opportunities for challenge, support, and growth in faith. The participants spoke of affiliation within the IVCF in four contexts. Personal involvement in the main Fellowship group is one context. The students were all involved in the Servant Team and describe it as a key affiliation. They also spoke of their involvement in small “accountability groups.” Finally, individual interpersonal relationships provided close affiliations of faith.
In each context, the participants often referred to relationships as being “in community” with others (i.e., having a sense of deep and honest relationships built around a shared faith). Personal involvement in the main IVCF group is an affiliation that Justin indicated as shaping his identity. He stated, “It really has influenced, like, who I have become, like at college, like just being with those people in InterVarsity. Keisha noted,

I think, when you join a Christian fellowship on campus, its hard to not live completely for Him because people watch you and challenge you, so its, like, when you do take a stand. It has definitely helped my faith grow more and more. It’s just no sense. I had never even heard the word community used like . . . and so having a Christian community really helped my faith in terms of accountability, in terms of having people who you knew loved God, same kind of common goals in terms of, like, ministry, or really excited about God. Just being surrounded by people like that . . . was really helpful.

As part of a campus fellowship group, the participants described relationships that were deep, partially due to the close proximity with others. Dara described the character of these college relationships in comparison to her high school experiences with a faith-based group in the following interview excerpt:

To suddenly be in a fellowship where I live next door to people, you know, and it’s ‘cause . . . and, and in high school, like, even if you have friends in, in [city named], where I’m from, you’d be able to, like, visit or spend the night or you’d go, but like, you be in constant . . . constantly be able to contact somebody, you know, like, be able to just run next door, run to a different dorm building. . . . It’s like the only time in life you’re really going to be in that much contact with people and really be able to be encouraging them and, and also receiving from them on such regular basis.

The overlapping IVCF experiences and events led to a deepening of relationships and strengthened trust among those involved in the Fellowship. There is a cycle of off-campus retreats and conferences throughout each academic year. Big Love is the regional fall conference. Spring Fling occurs off campus in March, and finally, Chapter Camp is a
week-long experience early in the summer term. More than any one conference, it seems to be the overlap and continuity of these experiences that shapes the faith perspectives of students, as well as their relationships within the IVCF community. Dara described the retreats and conferences as coinciding with the deepening of her relationships within the Fellowship when she said, “Well, I . . . it. . . . I feel like each one has kind of gone in this progression of me trusting those around me.” Greg recalled the opportunities for developing strong friendships at Big Love. Before attending the retreat, he had not been involved with the IVCF and did not know people within the group. The following transcript describes his experience in his own words:

The Mid-Atlantic group of IV was small enough that all the guys fit in one cabin, and I think all the girls fit in one cabin ‘cause they were pretty big cabins. So it was really “cool” to get to know, you know, what was it like [living with] 8 or 10 other guys, and that was fun.

The events and activities of the IVCF are opportunities for people to connect and build relationships with the potential to influence faith. In the following interview excerpt, Justin described his involvement in the IVCF and associated relationships in light of the benefits he reaped:

Yeah, InterVarsity has, I guess, sort of guided me there, like, through Bible study, lots of different Bible studies through Chapter Camp, through conferences, like, all these different things, you know, that InterVarsity has provided for me, and it’s also been a place where I’ve met, like, most of my really, really good friends. Like, I can walk around campus and I know so many people, and a lot of them are from InterVarsity, so that’s really neat. So yeah, I mean, just . . . but it’s been so good, I think even just the relationships has really been what’s challenged me, getting to know some really neat people, who you know, have a really deep faith. That has really challenged me and led me to where I am now.

It is the relationships that have made a difference in the lives of the participants, facilitating personal connections as topics recur amidst the activities of the Fellowship.
It’s the gestalt of the IVCF as an affiliation that makes the biggest difference. As Renee expressed,

So many things recur that it deepens my faith, I think, and there’s such a community that is trying. They’re trying so hard to go deeper that you know they’re there and you know that you can talk to them, but I wouldn’t say it’s any one thing. I would say it’s the thing; it’s like the whole thing.

Keisha affirmed this by saying, “InterVarsity has become such an integral part of my college life that I can’t go one day without thinking about my faith.”

Each of the participants is involved in Servant Team—the leadership group for the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter. This group meets regularly and builds deep and honest relationships with each other. It is a “safe place” where they can discuss the values of their faith and their expectations of the Fellowship and each other. The students indicate being very honest with each other about their personal struggles in the context of the Servant Team. Dara described these relationships as “real” and the group provided her a place to be honest about her struggles with her eating disorder. She was able to speak truthfully about her doubts related to faith in particular. In her interview, she commented,

They see through a lot more of the “BS,” and it’s just a lot more, like, just a lot more real, and I feel like I can talk to them more. I’m, I’m just. . . . I’m so much more honest with my peers about being, like, like last year, when I was just really struggling with what do I believe, and I was able to say to people, “I don’t know; I don’t know where this came from. I don’t know why all the sudden I’m in all these leadership positions for this thing that I feel so unsure about,” you know, and I could say that to people and the really “cool” thing was that most of those people around me had been in the same place or had been or would be. So, I don’t know, it’s just, you’re just dealing with the same life struggles and same life issues.

Servant Team is a place of encouragement and challenge for Erica. She described her involvement in the following manner:
Now that I’m on, I’m very excited to be able to have that community with them, and I think that really. . . . That encourages me. I don’t know that I exactly look at my faith. . . . I don’t know that it’s caused me to examine my faith just, like, just because I’m on Servant Team, but I think I’m definitely growing because of it.

Servant Team provides a place for students to observe as peers model their faith, as well as a context to build relationships with the staff advisers who oversee and coordinate the work of the team.

The study participants described involvement in small “accountability groups.” Renee defined such accountability as “group therapy plus God.” In this setting, students described sharing personal issues with each other and helping each other sort them out in light of their shared faith commitment. They meet regularly—often weekly—and their meetings consist of sharing and praying together. Dara described her accountability group as a place where she shares openly and can be her authentic self, as is reflected in the following interview excerpt:

My accountability group is a place, again, where I can be myself. Where, when I wanted to hide the things that were not good, that I thought were signs of weaknesses and all that stuff, I would still have that debate every time I went in there. “Do I want to share this, or don’t I want to share this?” and every time I went in there I would just be convicted, like, just share it, just let whatever happens happen, and every time, I mean, they would just extend so much grace to me, and it was just a really clear picture to me of the . . . what God intends, you know. Like, how He extends grace to us even when we don’t deserve it, and that sort of thing, and I think it, it was just really, it just. . . . They were three relationships that started on a deeper level already, and it was just really awesome and just, you know, like, there’s just no fakeness and they know me through and through and they still love me, you know, so it’s just encouraging, you know. It gives me a little bit more incentive to be myself other places.

Greg witnessed his faith change in the process of his involvement in an accountability group. He said he saw that “God kind of . . . started to ‘creep into’ all parts of my life.”
Keisha also credited accountability relationships with allowing her faith to impact all areas of her life. She explained,

> Like, having people hold me accountable for things has really helped me to live my whole life for God. Like, you can’t have a double life where you’re in community with people because they see you a lot. If you’re really in community with them, you’re not trying to hide anything from them, and if you know that they care about you and love you, they’re going to sometimes tell you things to help, to help you in your walk with God, but help you to clear out maybe some junk in your life that you’re trying to hide or that you’re ashamed of or guilty of and hurt from—all that kind of stuff.

Keisha ultimately described accountability relationships as the “best thing I could of ever done for myself . . . to help, just to help me grow.” Similarly, Renee gave a great deal of credit to her accountability relationships as she considered her own growth. Similar to Keisha, Renee viewed her accountability group as a critical experience in breaking down her tendency to live in two different worlds. In reference to her group involvement, she stated, “I would say, the greatest thing that I did sophomore year, the greatest thing pushing me more towards God, and those lines of two separate worlds started breaking down.”

Individual relationships based upon a shared faith provide challenges and support for faith. Greg’s faith commitment was precipitated by that of his girlfriend. Kyle, too, reflected upon the impact of his girlfriend, Dara, in shaping his faith when he stated,

> And through that, I was able to make my next, like, major, major strides . . . in getting to know Jesus more. Since then, she’s been still just the most influential person for me just because of the way that she challenges me, and the way that she has the ability to challenge me in a relationship, and so she was somebody that helped me take the steps towards realizing what I’m actually doing, what risk I’m at, what, what barrier that’s putting up for God, you know, and how much better it could be.
Dara described a close friendship as enabling her “to learn what it meant to be in Christian community with each other, seeking God in a very secular campus.” Developing close relationships with others enables such students to understand their Christian faith in new ways and from different perspectives.

*Mentors of Faith*

Faith mentors provided opportunities for the students to witness models of faith, whether the mentors were upper-class students or one of the IVCF staff advisers—John and Elaine. Elaine, in particular, is described as persistent in building relationships with IVCF student leaders. Keisha remarked that Elaine “hunted me down.” At first, Dara felt overwhelmed by Elaine’s pursuit; however, she ultimately came to view Elaine as someone who wanted to know her and who cared about her. From Dara’s perspective, Elaine pursued her intently after Dara shared her challenges with bulimia. Mentoring relationships are shaped in a variety of contexts. The staff advisers play an integral role in retreats and conferences. They lead Mark studies on campus and advise the Servant Team. The participants described one-on-one conversations with Elaine and John on a regular basis, often over a meal. These IVCF staff advisers helped participants rethink their faith in various ways. Renee described the value of such relationships she had experienced with other adult mentors in the following interview excerpt:

Being together with other people who believe the same way you do and who can challenge you and have been through those things and who are older, like John and Elaine, and you can ask them about those things and it just makes it easier. It makes “the road” a lot easier.
The staff advisers seemed to ask challenging questions of the students regarding their faith and its application in their life. Greg recalled conversations with Elaine about “real stuff” in his life that pushed him to ultimately allow his faith to pervade his life.

Keisha described how one of the two IVCF staff advisers was pivotal in influencing her faith. She stated,

> Usually it takes advice from the outside to affirm you because you don’t really see it all the time, but yeah, Elaine was someone who definitely affirmed me a lot in terms of my faith, like, in terms of areas of my faith.

Leanne described how Elaine had helped her with deep questions regarding the abuse Leanne had endured, as well as her struggles with body image. Elaine connected her to specialized support services when necessary, but also walked alongside Leanne, helping her to make sense of things. In essence, Elaine helped Leanne find her own answers. Leanne recounts,

> So she just started being . . . kind of like questioning me and helping me to see what’s going on for me and then, and then also helping me to figure it out for myself, but she would never tell me, “This is what you need to do.”

Elaine seemed to assist Leanne by identifying recurring issues that Leanne herself introduced, as the following interview transcript reflects:

> She’s really good at picking out themes . . . saying, “Well, I see this thing coming up” or “You’ve talked about this thing a lot. What is that like for you?” or, or asking me, like, so to have her know enough to be able to pick out things in me or to make me, like, really think about stuff and how I’m feeling, and she knows with me that, like, if Jesus shows me something, I’m gonna respond to it. So she’s not afraid that what she’s gonna do is turn me away from God or anything like that. I think that makes her feel really free to ask me the hard, really hard questions. When I think of Elaine, I think of her hard questions. She always asks me the kinds of things that make me say, “Darn it; now I have to do something about that.”
For Leanne, the challenging, personal questions were welcomed because of the larger context of the relationship. Leanne continued,

I’m OK telling her the answers ‘cause I know that she likes me. I’m OK with her asking the questions because I know she’s just out for my good and she’s not out to find the latest piece of gossip. She’s also, like, she’s also very good at telling, stating the truth in a way that makes you believe it.

Keisha also described being asked really tough personal questions before she had a close relationship with Elaine. Keisha appreciated the challenges presented by Elaine because of their relationship, as evidenced in her following comments:

Like one of the biggest things she helped me with was a relationship that I was in with a male, and it’s hard to. . . . She was trying to hold me accountable for things, but we weren’t quite at a place of trust, and I respect her so much for doing this. Like, she asked me really hard questions that. . . . The trust was not really there yet for her to be. . . . Like, she was really taking a huge risk to ask me, but I’m glad she took the risk to make us both feel uncomfortable because she was concerned about my spiritual growth, and to this day, I’m like, so happy that she did that. . . . She was really good on, like . . . and she still is, with like, asking hard questions and just calling me on things . . . holding me accountable.

Erica also described her relationship with Elaine as a “defining one.” She stated,

She’ll, like, ask questions to make me think. Like, half the time, she really doesn’t even, like, tell me things. She just. . . . She’s very good at asking questions and, like, getting me to focus on what the issues are, and so that’s definitely helpful for me.

Justin developed a strong mentoring relationship with John. John helped Justin process his parents’ divorce. Justin commented, “I’ve gone to him a whole lot as, you know, when stuff comes up and I don’t really know what to do. Like, I’ll go and talk to him and just, you know, hear his ‘take’ on it.” Justin pursued John’s perspective when he faced challenges presented in his Religion and Popular Culture class. John also challenged him to rethink how much of his identity depended on relationships with
women. Justin described John as having a huge influence on him. Greg also described his relationship with John and Elaine as a critical component of his personal formation during the college years. He stated,

They’ve, they’ve been huge in just, like, through watching them and through seeing and realizing what they’re doing here and what they kind of . . . have given up or whatever to come here, have just shown me how, I mean, just shown me how important they think it is to, you know, help people figure out what they think about like God and stuff like that, but in, in just . . . They, they’ve been, they’ve been big in, like, me seeing, like, like God is real and, like, and relevant. Like, not only is He real, but He’s relevant to our own lives. Like, you know, here. Like, so, I mean, it’s changed over time, like, I guess. Like, as I’ve gotten closer and closer to them and realizing, you know, they’re not perfect, InterVarsity’s not perfect, and like, like realizing, like, I can have different opinions than them too . . . has been, I mean, it’s, it’s been a change, but it’s been. . . . I think it’s good that I’ve realized those things too.

The IVCF staff advisers seem able to successfully challenge students to find their own answers to questions and their own solutions to personal challenges. Keisha affirmed this by commenting,

John and Elaine will tell me what I need to hear, and usually, they’ll give me . . . Like, I’m learning now that they are helping me with a lot of decisions, in terms of, like, job, where to get a car, furniture, like just life decisions, and a lot of times, they know a pretty good balance of, like, how much to tell you of what to do and how much to leave up to you. So, a lot of times, they’ll just give me . . . different options. They won’t even tell me, “Well, this is what I would do” because then that means it’s what you should do. They’ll just give me different options and let me choose. If it’s a spiritual thing, they’ll definitely take me to, like, Mark. “Well, in the book of Mark, I’ve seen that. . . .”

Students feel both supported and challenged by Elaine and John, and ultimately, the advisers develop students who can ultimately view things differently from the perspectives of their mentors. They somehow push students to own their faith.

Peers also serve as faith models. Greg described his relationships with Servant Team as a catalyst for his growth in following Jesus. After witnessing the challenges
other students faced and their growth after overcoming them, he realized that those observations held greater power for his own maturation than being told how growth occurs. Greg offered the following comments in his interview:

And through that scene, that . . . OK, following Jesus is hard and, like, a bunch of hard things came up, like, throughout the year, like, with either other people in Servant Team or with Servant Team itself or . . . just stuff like that and seeing that it’s still a good thing, like that following Jesus is still worth it and it is, for me to actually experience that, and not just you have it be, have someone tell it to me.

Erica was challenged as she experienced student leaders within the Fellowship who reached out to individuals beyond the boundaries of the IVCF. She explained,

It was definitely a process. Like, it wasn’t just a once and done sort of thing, but I think a large part of it was seeing the people. . . . Like, seeing the leaders in InterVarsity and how they weren’t just . . . just “hanging out” with each other all the time. You know, they were . . . they’re hanging out with. . . . You know, when I was a freshman, they would come and hang out with freshman and, like, they weren’t just trying to find one best friend and then spend all their time with that . . . they were definitely moving beyond. Like, sort of expanding their borders and that sort of thing, and so I think that was hard for me to see at first, and then the more I saw it, the more I was, like, “Yeah, that’s more the way things ought to be run,” and then just me trying to apply it to my life, which I’m still not very good at.

What Erica witnessed in her peers, and what she learned from watching her peers live out the values she was coming to understand in Bible studies, was pivotal in developing a faith that not only enabled her to enlarge her understanding of God, but also to engage across the borders of her faith community and the broader university community. She continued her interview comments with

I think, without InterVarsity, I just would have wanted to find a Christian group and then just totally, like, have that be my entire life, have that be the people I’d associate with, the people I “hang out” with all the time, and that would have been a very easy. . . . It would have been easy for me to do that, you know, if I’d have found that. I think, with InterVarsity, I’ve definitely been growing and seeing that God is. . . . Not that God is bigger, but just that I can . . . that I can reach out, that
I can . . . that I can be braver, that I don’t have to just rely on a Christian atmosphere at all times to feel comfortable, and I guess part of that being me becoming more comfortable, you know, leaving my “comfort zone,” and being more a part of the world of whoever I happen to be around. I think definitely caring more, caring more for people who aren’t just like me and being able to help them and want to get to know them, that sort of thing.

Summary

The student participants in this inquiry entered the university with unresolved issues in their lives. They evidence a faith commitment typically characteristic of Fowler’s Stage 3. The actual content of their faith understanding and related commitments widely varies. As first-year students at Mid-Atlantic University, finding a primary peer group with whom they can associate is important to them. Students typically seek peer-group affiliation within the Greek system, in residence halls, and within the IVCF. Many settings outside the IVCF were found to be uncomfortable for these students due to personal values and lifestyle conflicts. They tended to develop a dependency on the IVCF whether in lieu of other peer groups or alongside their involvement with other such groups. The IVCF challenges them and, ultimately, transforms them and their faith due to the internal process of the Fellowship and ethos of the group.

In various ways, Mid-Atlantic University had an influence on the faith of the students participating in this inquiry. However, in-class experiences typically presented little such influence. Some classes did challenge and facilitate faith development such as first-year seminars; capstone seminars; and courses in social science, religion, and education. At times, the content focus was on religion. At other times, course assignments enabled a choice. When students selected to focus on matters of personal
brokenness in these assignments, they typically drew connections to their life and their faith. Some professors demonstrated destructive processes, including ridiculing Christian faith in their classrooms, as evidenced by Chad’s professor who referred to Christianity as “this crap.” Others demonstrated productive processes in which the students were able to engage their questions in a safe atmosphere. Experiences external to the classroom affect faith as well. The ethos, particularly the peer culture, of the university campus challenges students on their standards and beliefs, specifically those surrounding money, alcohol, status, values, and achievement.

The Mid-Atlantic environment motivates students to “cling to” a primary peer group—in this case, the IVCF, which provides both challenge and support of faith. It offers an alternative to the broader campus environment. The group itself embodies specific characteristics that move students beyond group dependence. The ethos and processes of the IVCF provide avenues of nurture and challenge toward faith formation and maturation. The group processes share several consistent common characteristics that enable students to engage their own questions surrounding their faith. Activities and relationships within the Fellowship encourage students to be authentic. They are motivated to share real problems and issues, as well as talents. The ethos discourages them from denial of their difficulties or projecting their brokenness on others. Personal responsibility for addressing pivotal personal issues is encouraged. Staff advisers ask challenging questions, but do not assume responsibility for the problems of students; nor do they provide direct answers. They are there to nurture and provide resources enabling students to face their own problems and find their own answers.
Personal responsibility and authentic communication is also encouraged in peer relationships among the Servant Team and those among accountability groups. Participation in inductive Bible study facilitates this process, as does peer leadership of the studies. Retreats and conferences employ the same processes allowing greater depth and more focused time to reflect on personal issues in light of biblical principles. They offer regular opportunities for public expression and “choosing into” faith. Mission trips during the spring and summer breaks also facilitate in-depth relationships while focusing on key themes and modeling faith in diverse geographical contexts. These processes promote the transformation of genuine faith.
CHAPTER 6
Conclusions and Reflections

Inquiry Questions Revisited

One of the suppositions of this inquiry is that the IVCF within a secular university offers a critical nexus for examining the dynamics of faith. Does the IVCF community indeed provide a “socialization context” in which students learn to negotiate individual understanding of their faith within the dominant secular environment as supposed by Bramadat (2000, p. 21)? If so, is the IVCF appropriately described as an “alternative institution within an institution” (p. 21)? This research focused on understanding the dynamics of faith for students involved in the IVCF at a private secular university within the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Extending from this central inquiry focus, the following two specific questions guided the research:

1. How do IVCF students compose the dynamics of faith at a private secular university?

2. What experiences, such as academic experiences, interpersonal relationships, cocurricular involvement, vocational decisions, and IVCF experiences, reinforce faith, encourage questioning within the context of faith, promote analysis of faith, and transform faith for IVCF students?
Based upon the findings, a narrative model for the dynamics of faith in the IVCF within the secular higher education academy is presented. These findings are then discussed in light of the literature. Contributions of the inquiry are presented including implications for faith inquiry, the higher education academy, and holding environments for faith formation. Finally, both the benefits and limitations of the inquiry, as well as suggestions for future study, are considered.

**Narrative Model: Epiphanies of Faith Within the Academy**

Figure 1 illustrates an emergent model of the dynamics of faith for IVCF students within the secular academy. The model is constructed with circles to illustrate the fluidity of faith formation. Beginning and ending points blend together. Epiphanies of faith are the inner circle, and these epiphanies are influenced by overlapping experiences within the IVCF, which is represented by the middle circle. The university finally is represented by the outer circle. The dashed line of the middle circle illustrates the permeable boundary between the IVCF and the university. IVCF students are actively engaged in the IVCF environment while, at times, simultaneously immersed in the university setting in a manner that affects faith development. Examining either context without the other provides only a partial picture of the lives of IVCF students. The participants were involved in the university through experiences in residence halls, the Greek system, peer relationships and course work. They actively considered the implications of their faith within all of these contexts. They were involved in IVCF activities such as the Servant Team, Bible study, and retreats. They also associated themselves with staff advisers who
Figure 1. A model of the epiphanies of faith experienced by students within concurrent environments, activities, and relationships of the IVCF and the secular university.
helped them process life and faith issues. Experiences in each of these contexts, coupled
with the interdependence of these contexts, inform faith and its formation.

Nine phenomena that were found to influence faith formation are illustrated
within the model of Figure 1. Each phenomenon is placed within the context of its
predominant occurrence—the university, the IVCF, or the nexus between them.
Encountering difference within the university environment, experiencing personal
vulnerability in the transition to the university, and being set apart by others all facilitate
the examination and formation of faith. Students were challenged in the classroom setting
in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. The IVCF ethos facilitates growth and
development; processes used across IVCF experiences with mentors, Bible studies, and
retreats led students to internal authorship of their faith. Within the IVCF context,
students build affiliations of faith, experience faith mentorships, and have opportunities
to “choose into” their faith. These phenomena influence commitment, assist students in
negotiating questions of faith, and provide avenues for honest dialogue regarding
convictions, doubts, and personal challenges, all of which serve to further strengthen and
support faith development. Finally, at the intersection of the university and the IVCF,
students address questions, make connections, and study faith in ways that are highly
influential to their faith formation. Direct dialogue both in and out of the classroom
setting facilitates connections between personal life, academic life, and living a life of
faith. The students study faith in the context of religion courses at the university and the
inductive Bible studies of the IVCF. The phenomena at the intersection were shaped
within both the university and IVCF contexts. Students engage in IVCF experiences with both curricular and cocurricular university experiences reciprocally.

Epiphanies of faith lie at the center of the model (see Figure 1). These turning points are where new meaning is composed, and they are mediated by the contexts of the IVCF and the university. Participants encountered both challenges to their faith and life issues and support for processing the challenges in both contexts. As a result, within the nexus of these overlapping experiences new ways of making meaning were formed in the lives of the participants, new personal capacities for self-agency were developed, and faith was transformed.

The Dynamics of Faith Formation

The participants all confirmed experiences of faith change and growth during the college years. They typically described new understanding of faith that coincided with college experiences. The following sections examine the students’ faith constructions and their relationship to the orienting images of faith predominant documented in related literature. Participant perspectives surrounding the contexts of the university and the IVCF in light of related literature are also examined.

Faith Construction

Leanne appropriated a circle as a metaphor for her understanding of faith. This was consistent with the narrative model I presented previously and is helpful in illustrating how the students perceive faith as continually growing in connection to God and others. The metaphor sheds light on the dynamic notion of faith, and demonstrates
that the previous conception of life either “in or out” of faith became too limiting for Leanne, as reflected in her following comments:

I think my perception used to be that here, this little “bubble,” is the Christians and this little bubble is the non-Christians, and you define who a person is by which group they’re in, but really, it’s not defined like that ‘cause you can have a circle of people . . . let’s say the circle of people are in connection with God. You can have people in the circle moving toward the center, or inside the circle moving out. You can also have people outside the circle moving in or moving out. So it’s a much more vague, like . . . place that people are in than to say, “OK, you did A, B, and C, so now you’re in and you did not, so you’re out.”

Faith is not static. Faith involves relationships with God, others engaged in the community of faith, and those outside the faith community. As evident in Leanne’s interview excerpt, there are both similarities and differences between the faith constructions of the study participants and those identified in related literature.

As noted earlier, the faith development theory developed by Fowler (1976, 1981, 1987, 1996) is based upon a concept of faith that is grounded in the ultimate meaning constructed by individuals. Consequently, faith involves construction of meaning through connections between self, community, and the world. It is a holistic concept inclusive of affect, cognition, and action as well as a developmental concept. Based upon the review of participant perspectives of faith, the tentative definition outlined in this study involved an authentic relationship with God and others that influences identity and meaning, is relevant to all of life, and responds with actions modeled after the life of Jesus. Faith is an ongoing process toward a deeper understanding of Jesus and deeper applications of the life of Jesus. The constructions of faith offered by Fowler and the study participants bridge cognition, affect, and behavior and focus on the relationship of ultimate concern (i.e., God in this case) and related interpersonal relationships. Both constructions inform
the sense of meaning and illuminate the whole of life. Finally, each construction affirms the process dimension of faith in that faith evolves continuously. The faith of the participants evolves from a faith dependent upon previous authorities (i.e., family and church) to a faith that is authored within and nurtured by external authorities. Unlike the definition offered by Fowler, the construction expressed by the participants is content-laden; an understanding and application of the life of Jesus is evident. Further, the constructions move beyond cognitive structural foci to the psychosocial capacities for self-agency and internal identity. These constructions affirm the interplay of the cognitive and psychosocial dimensions of faith formation.

**The Academy Context**

This inquiry illuminates the potential of the secular higher education academy as a place of meaning making and faith formation (Parks, 2000) if groups with ethos and processes similar to this IVCF chapter are present. While many scholars have bemoaned the secularization of the academy and questioned the openness of the institution to matters of faith (Krammick & Moore, 1996; Marsden, 1994; Mitchell, 1996; Reuben, 1996), this study identified and described phenomena of the secular academy that may contribute to faith formation precisely because of its secular orientation rather than in spite of it. The findings, however, are generally consistent with the literature as it relates to understanding the impact of the organization of the university. Matters of faith within the specific lives of the participants must be pursued personally as their pursuit is not typically motivated by curricular requirements or compulsory chapel. Select courses in religion, social sciences, first-year seminars, and capstone experiences did provide
contexts for faith formation. Such pursuit is not however a marginal aspect of their lives. In fact, at times, it is a central dimension of their curricular, cocurricular, and interpersonal activities.

Cherry and colleagues (2001) found tentative support for their questioning of the “secularization perspective” in higher education (p. 6). They suggest that “pluralism of religious opportunity, as well as diversity of religious and curricular choice” is a more accurate description than the term secularization implies (p. 6). The lives of the students participating in this current inquiry do not fit the overall secularization perspective. This perspective generally points to an era of higher education that directed the ethos of the campus toward particular faith perspectives and primarily through involuntary means such as mandatory chapel and/or compulsory religion courses. Mandatory chapel or required religion courses were not evident in this study. The predominant questions of faith raised in religion courses and voluntary campus ministry groups indeed fit the secularization paradigm; however, matters of faith were addressed in multiple contexts on campus. As the students in this study processed their personal experiences, they examined and questioned their faith; opportunities to connect faith and life proved to be transformational.

The story of Mid-Atlantic certainly demonstrates that faith is addressed predominantly in voluntary arenas. Cherry and colleagues also found that religion was presented as predominantly optional within the secular university setting. The stories narrated by the participants in this inquiry suggest that the voluntary nature of faith
formation is valuable because it provides a place for genuine renewal, affirmation, and deepening of faith in a manner that, from the perspectives of the participants, would not occur in a mandatory context.

Transition. As Parks (2000) noted, the process of leaving home weighs heavily in the formation of faith during the college years. Conversations with parents upon leaving for college often encourages faith ownership in the lives of students, as was the case for Greg. Experiencing faith interpretations divergent from those presented in previous church communities provides opportunities to examine and transform faith, as is evidenced in Leanne’s narrative. The opportunity to engage questions of faith in a new environment, inclusive of new people and contexts, enables faith formation.

Encountering difference. Differentiating from others led to an examination of personal faith for the students in this study. Diversity of faith perspectives has been found to be a powerful source of learning (Light, 2001). Light noted that “for some students, living in close proximity to others of different religions, or of no religion at all, leads to reflection and insights that reaffirm their own religious faith” (p. 163). His finding is consistent with that of this current study. When the participating students encountered differences in others, they were able to notice their own distinctiveness. The presence of diverse religious perspectives can create arenas for conflict and a sense of being threatened (Cherry et al., 2001). This inquiry found that students tended to avoid “stepping on the toes” of those with faith perspectives different from their own. The conflict, as it related to faith perspectives, was primarily an internal conflict as the participants wrestled with how and when to share their own faith views and related
commitments. The value of encountering difference seemed to ultimately rest in the opportunity to reconsider the distinctiveness of their personal faith perspective. In these reflections, faith was examined and reformed.

**Being set apart.** For the students participating in this study, finding themselves set apart from others mirrored the experience of encountering difference in others. Cherry and colleagues (2001) found that campus ministers viewed campus religious organizations as offering students lifestyles alternative to “alcohol, sexual promiscuity, materialism, and careerism, which they believed characterized university culture as a whole” (p. 278). The IVCF chapter at Mid-Atlantic University offered support for these alternatives. The students also characterize the Mid-Atlantic culture in terms of the party and consumerist scene consistent with “worldly” values. In this inquiry, students indeed found this support to be effective; however, for these students, their lifestyle commitments existed prior to their involvement in the IVCF. IVCF programs and people provided venues conducive to student examination and reaffirmation of faith and related commitments. Students found themselves set apart from peers as a result of their convictions against alcohol abuse and premarital sex. The college context forced the students in this study to examine their commitments and faith more deeply to determine their true foundation and whether external rules of heritage would be internally adopted.

This inquiry supported the findings of Bramadat (2000) that “students recognize their difference and often essential estrangement from their secular peers and professors, [and] with the help of the IVCF, participants have developed creative strategies for managing and transforming otherness” (p. 71). Bramadat identified the nearly universal
experience of “social estrangement” of IVCF members within a secular, Canadian higher education academy. By “social estrangement,” Bramadat referenced “the experience of feeling excluded from significant elements of undergraduate socializing, especially those components associated with drinking and sexual activity” (p. 82). Participants in this current inquiry described the experience largely in terms of being set apart, which indicated their construction of meaning in light of the differences between themselves and the lifestyles of those around them. As a whole, the students did not speak poorly of those who did not ascribe to their same ideals. Further, unlike the student population in the Bramadat study, the IVCF students at Mid-Atlantic did not withdraw from relationships outside the Fellowship to alleviate this sense of social estrangement. However, similar to the findings of Bramadat, these students made meaning of their differences as an “implicit critique of the prevailing and relatively permissive norms” within the university setting (p. 86). They also made meaning of their personal decisions, viewing them as commitments and extensions of their own faith and opportunities to give voice to their commitments within a larger ethos offering something far more worldly and short term.

**The Community of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship**

The participants described the IVCF community as a mentoring environment consistent with the characteristics outlined in related literature. Parks (2000) noted the characteristics of a mentoring environment for faith to include recognizing individual potential and vulnerability, providing an appropriate balance of challenge and nurture, and inspiring the formation of a dream. The ethos and processes implemented by the
IVCF encourage students to be genuine regarding doubts surrounding their faith and concerns over life issues. These doubts and concerns were central to their experiences and conversations within the IVCF. Staff advisers asked questions to assist students in working through these issues; however, they did not solve problems for them or provide standardized answers. The locus of responsibility and authority always remained with the students.

The IVCF ethos emphasizes gender and racial equality, as well as social justice. Mentorships, Bible studies, retreats, and mission trips all consistently reinforced these themes. Through affiliations, mentors, and activities, IVCF students described being both challenged and supported, as well as recognized for both their promise and frailty. The students also described composing a vision for their lives that includes connections of faith and a life purpose consistent with that faith commitment. Renee, for example, reflected on why the IVCF has been so important to her during her college years in the following interview excerpt:

I think it reminds me why I’m here, where before, I think, without InterVarsity, I would kind of feel like I don’t have a connection to a community of believers. If I wasn’t involved in InterVarsity, I think I’d feel like I was just here for academics when I don’t feel like that now. I feel like I’m here to further God’s Kingdom and help other people get to know about Him. So I think it changes my whole purpose on this campus, a place where we kind of say, like, a place you can “plug into,” a place you can get involved and get deeper, you know?

Renee indicated that her connection to the community of faith provided by the IVCF enlarged her sense of purpose. Greg affirmed that all of his activities within the IVCF have led to an examination of faith, which he equated with supporting or encouraging faith. He stated,
I mean, all of them have, like, called me to examine my faith or to examine . . . but I mean, I guess that’s a lot more under the same category as supported, or encouraged, I guess, would be a good word.

In Greg’s perspective, nothing has challenged his faith in a way that has caused doubt, as his following comments reflect:

Nothing’s really, like, challenged my faith, like, in that way. Like, with what’s been involved with InterVarsity. Like, like the things that have. . . . I feel like the things that have come up that have been, like, hard, or just like making me, that have just been hard or things like that, have helped to kind of like “chip away” things that were like blinding, blinding, or that I just hadn’t noticed and just gave me a bigger, a bigger picture of, I guess of my faith or of following God and of realizing that, you know, not everyone. . . . Like, people aren’t perfect, you know.

Greg described the IVCF as supportive and nurturing of his faith. Nonetheless, he recalls conversations with a staff adviser wherein challenging questions regarding his lifestyle and interpersonal relationships were posed. An appropriate balance of challenge and support, as dictated by the precepts of cognitive development theory, is demonstrated by the IVCF staff advisers. In turn, the students realized autonomous, chosen identities; deepened faith; new ways of making meaning; and commitments to behave in manners reflective of Christ.

Choosing into faith. At Mid-Atlantic University, compulsory religious activity is absent. While the proponents of the secularization perspective bemoan the decrease of integrated faith activities in the life of higher education, this inquiry points to the value of internally motivated faith involvement. As Cherry and colleagues (2001) found, students are “free to choose whether or not to practice religion and, if they choose to practice, how deeply to become invested” (p. 293). The phenomenon of “choosing into” was a valuable experience for the participants in this current inquiry. As they chose into their faith, as
well as their level of investment, they became authors of their own faith perspective (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

*Affiliations of faith.* Richard Light (2001) asserted that “students of strong religious faith often forge a unique bond” (p. 168). As individuals of Christian faith associate with each other, these affiliations provide avenues of growth and change. Affiliations of faith served as contexts befitting the label of holding environments (Kegan, 1982). Consistent with the idea of holding environments as communities that draw individuals to internal authorship (Kegan, 1982; Parks, 1986a), the participants in this current study repeatedly gave voice to making their faith their own. Their faith embodied the internalized authority, personal responsibility, and commitment characteristic of Fowler’s (1976, 1981, 1987, 1996) Stage 4 individuative-reflexive faith. Consistent with Winnicott (1965), the IVCF offered a holding environment that nurtured relationships between self, other, and the larger context of the university. The IVCF challenged students while preserving responsibility in the hands of the students in a manner that facilitated development. The findings “beg the question” of which subcontexts within the IVCF may serve as primary holding environments. All of the participants were involved in the Servant Team—the leadership team for the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter. As a result, their connection to each other and to the advisers were likely enhanced. However, all IVCF events and relationships involve similar processes and values, which is the underlying growth dimension. A continuing cycle of events, activities, and relationships challenge and support faith formation.
Mentors of faith. Baxter Magolda (2001) articulated the qualities of those individuals who facilitate the promotion of self-authorship as “being in good company” for the journey. In this study, participants described mentors of faith as the facilitators of their faith journeys. The staff advisers evidenced “good company,” and these mentors “made space for participants’ selves to be central to meaning making, yet offered mutual partnerships to support the meaning-making process” (p. 331). The mentorships, Bible studies, and retreats provided encouragement and challenge with questions that kept responsibility in the hands of the students and facilitated processes of faith. These mentors served as excellent models of faith (Garber, 1996; Josselson, 1987; Parks, 1986a, 2000).

The Intersection

Studying faith. The students who participated in this inquiry examined their faith through religion courses at the university, as well as from within the context of IVCF-sponsored Bible studies. Just as identified by Cherry and colleagues (2001), they met to engage in biblical teaching for the “sake of their Christian development” (p. 280). They engaged in intense study of the Bible through inductive study of Mark in most cases and Genesis in one case. The inductive study method encouraged personal responsibility in identifying questions and understanding the text through observation and interpretation. The inductive study of Mark provided a shared understanding of the life of Jesus among participants and within the IVCF. Academic study of religion was also prevalent among participants in this inquiry, which was a very similar finding to that of Cherry and colleagues. These researchers stated,
One of the most apparent findings of our research is that a religious studies department seems essential if colleges and universities want to make the academic study of religion an important part of academic life on campus. And general education requirements and curricula that include religion provide large numbers of students with exposure to the academic study of religion. (pp. 283–284)

Participants in the current study purposely chose to enroll in religious studies courses in an effort to engage pressing questions in their own lives. Such courses provided avenues to consider the meaning of their faith and the overwhelming questions of life, as well as to seek adequate answers through their own faith perspective. Some faculty addressed faith in ways that facilitated growth while others conveyed such matters in a judgmental fashion. In turn, general education provided avenues for the students to enroll in these courses. Education, social science, and introductory and capstone seminars provided course contexts most conducive for faith formation. Participants with majors in applied disciplines, such as math, engineering, and computer science, repeatedly referred to the humanities courses as the only contexts where questions of meaning and faith were raised within the academic realm.

Addressing questions. The participants addressed questions from peers on campus that challenged the faith of these students as they simultaneously engaged faith questions of their own. These conversations with peers often persuaded the participants to “dig deeper” into their own understanding of faith in order to answer the queries credibly. As they addressed the deep questions and were honest about their doubts, these encounters enabled them to grow in, and internalize, their own faith. Moreover, the IVCF community and mini-communities used similar values and processes during Bible studies, retreats, and Servant Team experiences. In these environments, students were
challenged to be “real” about their personal doubts, questions, and issues. They were encouraged to avoid denying, projecting, or becoming dependent. This differs from the finding of the Religious Education Association (1987) that documented a prevalent experience among participants in their study who recalled clergy and church leaders who discouraged individuals from giving voice to the “very real questions of their faith” (p. 51). According to Fowler (1981, 1987, 1996), dealing with personal questions and doubts is a critical aspect of the transition from the Stage 3 to the Stage 4 level of faith. In other words, addressing questions is pivotal to maturation of faith. In this current inquiry, the mentoring community of the IVCF provided a safe place for students to verbalize their doubts and their deep questions and to face their personal struggles. The IVCF provided an environment conducive to seeking answers to those questions they were unable to answer. The students found the courage not only to face, but to also act upon, their personal challenges. The staff advisers of the IVCF, in particular, encouraged the verbalization and realization of deep questions of faith. This was a very encouraging finding within this study.

Making connections. Baxter Magolda (2001) argued that higher education should promote “self-authorship,” which she defined as “bringing the source of meaning making inside the self” (p. 331). She asserted that becoming the author of one’s ways of knowing, one’s relationships with others, and one’s understanding of self requires inclusion of “students’ own lived experiences and questions in exploration of knowledge and mutual construction among members of the knowledge community” (p. 328). Self-authorship is a dimension of Fowler’s (1981, 1987, 1996) Stage 4. Participants in this current study
reported that faith formation was dependent upon connecting lived experiences. Streib (1991) affirmed the need to engage in autobiographical reflection in the process of personal transformation. In his revision of a “con-text-ualist” model of faith development, Streib noted,

> Consistent with the hermeneutical feature of this con-text-ualist model, the individual comes into play in the role of “reader” and of “author” of his or her life narrative. The developmental transformation then appears as “writing” and “rewriting” one’s own life narrative. (p. 224)

In this current inquiry, transformations of faith occurred when the participants were able to examine and reframe personal experience in light of their understanding of their faith. This focus was central to the IVCF processes and values. The notion of self-authorship of faith gives voice to the value of making personal connections as an epiphany of faith. A renewed understanding of the self can affirm faith and, in the process, affirm self.

Consistent with the assertions of Palmer (1987), courses and course assignments enabled participants to intersect their personal story with the narrative of the larger world. While recognizing the inherent challenges, Light (2001) affirmed the value of students connecting the personal aspects of themselves with their academic experiences. He indicated, “When religious ideas come up in class discussions, students often perceive links between the discussions and their own beliefs and personal lives” (p. 169). The students themselves make links between their own beliefs, their faith, and their academic experiences. Noticeably, when a student is prompted or chooses to reflect on personal experience in a classroom assignment, their faith perspectives are often engaged. Additionally, when students learn faith perspectives different from their own, they are prompted to compare and contrast their learning with their existing faith perspective.
Contributions of the Study

Faith Inquiry

This inquiry affirmed the tension throughout the literature between faith as content and faith as structure. Scholars have long considered the polarities of faith as the objective content and the subjective response; this inquiry affirmed the described tension (Religious Education Association, 1987; Tillich, 1957). In terms of the “big picture” of faith inquiry, faith is multidimensional. In the lives of the participants in this study, it is a dynamic notion that involves moving in relationship to the content of personal faith and, in turn, to those who broadly share that content. Even more critically, faith involves a way of being in the world. In this current study, the faith of the students determined their way of being within the IVCF community and within the larger Mid-Atlantic environment. To focus on content without the human response provides only a limited and individualized image. Similarly, to analyze only the response without the content is equally inadequate. It is in this realization that the richness, as well as the challenges, of faith inquiry become apparent.

Streib (1991) proposed a reconceptualization of the faith development theory to render it more hospitable to the hermeneutical perspective while affirming faith development’s home within structural development. He proposed a con-text-ualist model, which refined the understanding of faith as responsiveness and made this distinction more specific. Streib also suggested a both/and approach to structure and content in faith inquiry by stating, “Besides to the constructive activity of the person, we need to pay attention to the impact of symbolic and narrative manifestations—the contents of faith-and
to the person’s receptivity, for listening as the origin of faith” (p. 224). This enables the inquirer to pay attention to the content of faith while maintaining a focus on composing and recomposing faith in their responsiveness to life events. This current inquiry enabled participants to engage their faith within the context of self—their own life history. It bridged the content of faith with the response to that faith in its design, analysis, and representation. Faith development theory, recomposed and enlarged in this manner, adds richness, specificity, and consciousness to questions of faith.

It is evident that narrative adds richness to the inquiry of faith. Consequently, this study sought to engage the question of faith development from a narrative perspective. Anderson (1995) utilized a narrative inquiry model to engage questions of faith and identity for college women within a state university. In articulating the purposes of her inquiry model, she argued that the faith development theory developed by Fowler (1981) was incompatible with narrative. This current study sought to bridge the faith development theory espoused by Fowler with a narrative conceptual orientation. A faith development interview protocol (Moseley et al., 1993) was used to gather some of the field texts in this inquiry. However, the analysis of the interviews diverged radically; hence, rather than stage each participant, the interview transcripts were interpreted using narrative analysis. Future study analyzing these same faith development interviews by applying the analytic method outlined by Moseley and colleagues (1993) could present a valuable contribution to the findings. However, in this inquiry, the Fowler model was not discarded to utilize a narrative model. It was incorporated solely to facilitate global judgments. The work of Fowler was found to be compatible with narrative in its
theoretical orientation and data-collection strategy. The question of narrative applicability remains for the analysis phase.

Narratives provided a unique view into the formation and reformation of faith. As the researcher, I was fully engaged in the stories and practices of faith narrated by the participants (Widdershoven & Smits, 1996). All forms of narrative share the “fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating meaning” (Chase, 1995, p. 1). In the articulation, hearing, analysis, and synthesis of narratives, both the inquirer and the participants make sense of experiences. Narratives portray individual perspectives. Narrative analysis enables the study of faith phenomena through a focus on their embodiment in personal experience. The process of narration is shaped and reshaped in the manner in which both participants and researcher make meaning of seemingly disorderly experiences (Riessman, 1993).

This inquiry sought to enlarge the base of existing knowledge surrounding the dynamics of faith for students within a particular college context. Faith development theory presents a perspective of faith growth that describes faith over the life span (Fowler, 1976, 1981, 1987, 1996). Parks (1986a, 2000) developed a framework specific to the college years, emphasizing the cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions of faith. This study highlighted the embodiment of this framework in the practice of campus ministry and identified nine phenomena that potentiate the formation of faith during the college years.

The greatest and most unique contribution this inquiry makes is its explicit examination of faith and faith transformation within a social context. The research sought
to make explicit the predominantly implicit interactionist paradigm that grounds the scholarship of faith. In so doing, this inquiry explored the faith dynamics of college students within the context of the IVCF, the university, and within the interrelationship between the two. Consequently, the inquiry addresses faith formation as both an individual and community story. Linkages made by individuals within and among social contexts impact faith formation. Josselson (1995) speaks to the power of connections in constructing meaning by stating, “meaning is constructed in discourse by the linkages the participant makes between aspects of her or his life as lived and by the explicit linkages the researcher makes between this understanding and interpretation” (p. 32). In this current study, faith provided linkages between potentially disparate aspects of the college experience; the classroom and the Mid-Atlantic IVCF chapter shared mutual experiences as environments generating questions of faith in the lives of IVCF students. At a different level of meaning, as the researcher, I made linkages between aspects of the college experience as it relates to the life of faith during the college years. I recognized “in the interplay of parts the essence of wholeness” (p. 42).

Narrative was invaluable in portraying the contexts of faith. The process gives voice to the entire experience of the participant and portrays the “dialogue of the individual with the social world of others” (Josselson, 1995, p. 42). Narrative made context explicit in a manner impossible for structuralist accounts of faith formation. Yet, narrative still allows for structuralist and psychosocial interpretation. In a structuralist account, the relationship of the individual to the larger world is described in underlying layers. In Fowler’s faith development theory, the foundation is Piagetian, which
articulates the interplay of self and world. Aspects of faith, including social perspective-taking, are facets of the theory of faith development. In the narrative accounts of this research, social contexts are explicit. They provide the overall view that depicts meaning as both individual and collective phenomena. Just as context influences faith, the manner in which stories of faith are told is “mediated by our culture” (p. 39). Both community and environment shape the narrative convention of participant perspectives. The IVCF and the university are cocreators of the dynamics of faith within the lives of students, and as such, each deserves an explicit place in the portrayal of faith during the college years.

This inquiry “walks alongside” the debate over stages in the study of faith. In so doing, it neither pushes the conversation forward or backward. However, as other researchers have engaged in the question of stages, this inquiry arrives at similar conclusions through narrative. The Religious Education Association (1987) reminded practitioners of the “big picture” of stage theory in faith development. Their report provides valuable advice for all of us engaged in faith inquiry. It reads,

Stage theory reminds us that there are not so much rights and wrongs in matters of faith as there are individual differences of development and interpretation, each of which may be valid for that individual. The role of the practitioner is to accept each individual where s/he is and to stimulate that person’s faith growth in whatever way and to whatever degree is appropriate for that person. (pp. 54)

Narrative gives voice to these evolutions of faith in ways that enlarge, rather than replace, the perspectives offered by structural-developmental theories. It is my ultimate hope that this study has affirmed this central idea. Faith inquiry must focus on the “big picture” of faith in the lives of individuals and as supported or hindered by the work of organizations and institutions. It is in this realization that narrative moves the scholarship of faith
forward in new and affirming ways, and at the same time, stimulates the questions of faith inquiry in a manner that reminds us of the “big picture.” As Givens (1999) asserted, “Ultimately, narratives need to be included in academic discourse because without them bodies of scholarship are incomplete and misrepresenting” (p. 56).

*Faith Formation in Higher Education*

New considerations for higher education and the legitimacy of faith perspectives are warranted by this inquiry. This study affirms the findings of Cherry and colleagues (2001) that religious perspectives are more diverse than historically true. As an extension of this pluralism, faith perspectives may be more easily advanced in scholarly venues as a “universal human phenomenon” (p. 293). The original contention of Fowler (1981, 1991) that faith is a phenomenon experienced by all human beings has tremendous value. However, in the lives of individuals, particularly during the college years, it is virtually impossible to separate the notion of overall faith from the particular faith perspective. This is true for the Christian students interviewed in this study. Each defines faith within the particularistic dimensions of Christian faith. *Faith* is a distinctly Christian term; the theological dimensions of faith, as defined in the Bible, complicate this. As highlighted in the literature, the distinction between content and structure is delicate.

Higher education should own the opportunity, in its contemporary pluralistic form, to influence the faith commitments of members of the academy. For members of the academy who espouse a particular faith commitment, the pluralistic dimensions of the academy may be a force toward greater personal commitment rather than a push on the “slippery-slope” toward greater secularization. Higher education may be more fulfilling
for faith development in its forms free of compulsory religious activity rather than less. Cherry and colleagues (2001) surmise, “The religious requirements of the past certainly implied the importance of religious conformity. But they probably also encouraged passivity with respect to inherited traditions and ignorance and intolerance of other religions” (p. 294). Higher education that supports the search for meaning in its pluralistic dimensions may ultimately create a new vibrancy for faith. As Cherry and colleagues conclude, faith perspectives were taken no less seriously in the lives of persons of faith within the secular academy because these pursuits were voluntary, and in fact, the “ethos of choice seemed to stimulate religious interest and religious enthusiasm” (p. 294). However, the values and processes used by a voluntarily selected faith group are critical dimensions. The methods and processes with which the IVCF works with students facilitate faith transition.

Creating Holding Environments

From a practice perspective, this study represents a pivotal link toward a clearer understanding of the faith perspectives of college students, particularly those involved in campus-based Christian faith organizations within secular institutions of higher learning. The guiding inquiry questions may contribute to understanding the issues students involved in the IVCF face and how they describe their experiences. As faith is reexamined, a holding environment provides a supportive and nurturing setting within which to assist the individual through the transition. The IVCF chapter of Mid-Atlantic University offered many of the characteristics associated with holding environments, specifically mentorships, Bible studies, and retreats that exemplify faith, as well as
authentic relationships that allow individuals to be “real” about their personal struggles. The IVCF encouraged students to be genuine. In fact, the study participants were encouraged by both mentors and peers to place their struggles and doubts “on the table.” This provided a foundation for enabling such struggles to serve as catalysts of growth rather than points of stagnation. The findings of this study may be of particular value to campus ministers and student affairs practitioners in secular colleges and universities. The inquiry affirms the promise and potential of environments outside the classroom as influential to faith formation.

Limitations and Strengths of the Inquiry

Czarniawska (2002) voiced a critical question of narrative inquiry. How is this more than merely an “interesting recontextualization” (p. 747)? Such inquiry indeed makes sense of the perspectives of participants by placing them within the context of individual histories and community life. In fact, recontextualization is a strength of this inquiry. As a hermeneutic inquiry, the best hope for this current study is that it will provide an “intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in the light of the constituent parts” (Bruner, 1991, p. 7). Credibility of the inquiry rests upon the narrative context. Narrative is appropriate for understanding the phenomenon of faith—a phenomenon ultimately of meaning.

The method of the interview involves both self and other in the journey of constructing meaning. Participant perspectives are represented in their personal narratives. Representation of participant narratives occurs at the individual level. The narratives of the participants in this study detail their experience of faith during their
college years and were reconstructed from the field texts. As a narrative inquiry, it was critical to first introduce the participants in a holistic manner. The collective narrative of faith in the secular context is then constructed and examined recognizing the personal stories that resulted in shared experiences. This inquiry focused on personal experience within a social context. Ultimately, narrative enabled examination of both self and other within a larger environment (Warren, 2002).

This inquiry demanded bringing coherence to seemingly disordered insights (Josselson, 1995). In narrative, the participants brought coherence to their own experience. As the researcher, I was able to bring coherence to their collective experiences. Both my own voice and those of the participants are present; however, the reader must recognize that the research text is ultimately a coherent narrative constructed from my perspective. Similarly, this inquiry contributes to the discourse on faith development during the college years by examining this phenomenon within a secular context. Interestingly, other examinations of Christian faith within the secular context have been completed by inquirers who do not share the faith perspective of the participants (Anderson, 1995; Bramadat, 2000). In these cases, the researchers learned the language and practices of faith from their participants through inquiry and, at some point, questioned whether a boundary between the participants and researcher existed. In this current study, I shared the faith perspective of the participants, as well as the particular experience of the IVCF within the secular higher education context. Consistent with the qualitative orientation of the inquiry, shared experience added richness and understanding to the research.
As a qualitative study, there are also clear boundaries for the inquiry. The study was based on nine students at a secular university within the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Five participants were women and four were men. Only one was a member of an underrepresented group; two were graduates at the time of the study, two were seniors, four were juniors, and one was a sophomore. The findings and related conclusions represent this context and these students. Transferability to other contexts and other students is based upon thick description of the participant stories and the characteristics of this particular university and affiliated IVCF group. Moreover, the examination of intensively involved students within the IVCF of a specific university must be carefully considered. This inquiry involved participants who had strengthened their involvement in the IVCF to the point of serving in a leadership capacity. One of the participants joined the IVCF voluntary staff postgraduation at the time of her interview. Three additional participants scheduled to graduate in spring 2003, intended to join the IVCF in volunteer capacities upon graduation. The outcomes would likely be quite different with students whose IVCF involvement is less extensive.

Benefits to Participants

The study participants gave voice to the value of the interview experience. Renee expressed a commonly communicated sentiment when she stated, “I feel like this whole interviewing thing has spurred a lot more conversation…reflection on my life. You know what I mean? I feel like I’ve been looking back more.” The opportunity for Renee to reflect on her college experiences as they related to her faith was intuitively valuable. Sanford (1967) emphasized that opportunities to reflect on experience were important to
development. This appears to be the case in this study. Additionally, one of the tenets of narrative inquiry is that individuals live their experiences as stories. Givens (1999) reminds us that “articulating one’s experience requires another person, a listener” (p. 56). It is my hope that, as the researcher in this inquiry, I was able to be a listener to participants, thus allowing them to give full voice to their experiences of faith. In sharing lived experiences, people often reaffirm and edit their narratives, as well as construct new narratives. In the process of telling their stories, the students in this study had the opportunity to affirm, modify, and construct new narratives of their experience. This process, while personally challenging, also provided participants an opportunity for continued examination and reaffirmation of their faith.

The participants conveyed their support of the research from the first meeting. I am particularly indebted to Chad who contributed so much enthusiasm for the study. I am told he conveyed this enthusiasm to the rest of the Servant Team who subsequently supported the participation of the IVCF chapter at Mid-Atlantic University. Rapport with the interviewees was enhanced by the succession of conversations with them, as well as the related experiences within my own personal history. Specifically, my undergraduate experience as an IVCF member at a secular college instilled further willingness on the part of the students to share their experiences. In my initial conversations with the participants in the collective setting of the Servant Team, as well as in individual conversations prior to interviews, I spoke openly of these personal experiences. We shared not only types of experiences, such as inductive study and retreats, but particular people had served as mentors both in my life and in the lives of the individual
participants. There were two IVCF staff members who worked with my undergraduate chapter and also provided regional oversight to the Mid-Atlantic chapter. As a result, the participants and I began on “common ground.”

The participants were honest about their perspectives of the IVCF—both positive and negative. At times, shared experience prompted them to assume my immediate understanding of their experience. At these points, I found it necessary to prompt them for clarity. For example, the participants typically assumed my knowledge of the inductive study method. In these cases, I asked them to “tell me as if I didn’t know,” which resulted in more detailed expressions of their experience. It was critical that I maintained awareness of the potential for assumed understanding, both on my part and that of the students, in order to elicit their clear descriptions without unintentionally relying upon my own assumptions.

The participants were aware of the topic of my research. I communicated that the focus of the first interview was on their understanding of faith and their personal faith stories. The second interview opened with the preface statement that my aim was to understand their experiences as individuals of Christian faith on a secular college campus from their own perspectives. The students were given the opportunity to examine their own reflections in the years following their interviews. The interviews occurred in the fall of 2001 and the transcripts were made available to the participants for their review in the fall of 2002. Finally, individual narratives and the collective findings of the study were reviewed by the students in the spring of 2003. This process not only confirmed the
credibility of the findings, but also provided new opportunities for the participants to reflect on their faith experiences.

Confidentiality was affirmed for the students in negotiating their participation. In the course of interviews, there were times when participants shared an experience and prefaced their statements with a confirmation of the confidential nature of the interview. At any point this occurred, I was particularly careful in documenting the experience to protect confidentiality of the interviews even further. One student described particularly painful experiences during college and these were not included in the research text as a result of our negotiation.

Benefits to the Researcher

Just as it is important to give voice to the benefits of this inquiry to the participants, it is also critical to give voice to the benefits reaped by the researcher. Throughout the inquiry, I was encouraged to inhabit the gap between faith and the higher education academy—through my examination of the literature, my design of the study, its implementation, in my conversations with participants, and in my own reflections throughout the course of the inquiry. As I explicitly engaged the question of the gap, my understanding of it was challenged, questioned, and enlarged (Givens, 1999). My initial assumptions as I entered the inquiry were closer to those ascribing to the secularization perspective. I anticipated that secular higher education would almost universally squelch the faith questions of individuals of Christian faith in particular. As I encountered the stories of the participants, I encountered a divergent perspective, and in the process, my own understanding of the academy was changed. In the lives of these students, questions
of faith undergird every aspect of their college experience. Fraternities and sororities, residence hall relationships, and room assignments were all aspects within which faith and its related commitments were examined. The academic context—in particular, the humanities and social sciences—was enriched in my understanding. Questions surrounding life philosophy and human understanding were explicitly engaged in these contexts; hence, faith was enlarged and enriched. I did not anticipate that the classroom on the campus of a secular academy would have such a profound impact on the faith journeys of Christian students.

As I examined the faith experiences of the participants, my own understanding of my personal journey of faith has been vastly enlarged and enriched. The meaning of my undergraduate majors in psychology and religious studies came to light in new ways. I have heard it communicated that all research is in some manner autobiographical; this was certainly the case in this inquiry. The meaning I place on my choices to be a psychology and religious studies major dramatically changed. These were areas to which I was likely drawn to in an effort to engage questions surrounding my own newfound faith. A most interesting finding for me was that I have been more apologetic than appreciative that my faith was shaped in a primarily secular context. I viewed my journey toward a more mature faith as occurring in spite of, rather than because of, my undergraduate experience in secular higher education. I now see this situation in reverse; my faith perspective was enriched by my experience within the IVCF in a secular context. Finally, my identity as a Christian educator has “become central to my definition of self” (Givens, 1999, p. 54), and my identity as an inquirer into personal narratives has
been influenced in a similar manner. The narratives of personal faith journeys and the narrative of the secular higher education academy collided in a rich discourse that has illuminated the very center of my inquiry interests.

**Recommendations for Further Inquiry**

The findings and conclusions of this inquiry suggest multiple avenues for future research most notably surrounding faith inquiry, faith in higher education, and holding environments. In terms of faith inquiry, this study laid a foundation for bridging a narrative orientation with faith development theory. A more in-depth analysis of narrative orientation and faith development theory regarding both shared and divergent suppositions would further the scholarly conversation. Such analysis must engage the question of whether stage models are compatible with the phenomenon of faith, as well as the suppositions of narrative. Further study that attempts to bridge narrative and faith development in new contexts would also enhance confidence in the compatibility of these arenas. Discerning parallels between the content of faith and its structure, particularly as these relate to formation and change, would provide a “common bridge” in the debate that is currently polarized by questions surrounding whether analysis based solely upon structure compromises the integrity of respective faith content. Further exploration of the con-text-ualist model posited by Streib (1991) offers a promising direction toward this end. Finally, furthering related scholarly dialogue necessitates deeper examination of the qualities of diverse social contexts that serve to nurture and/or hinder formation of faith within the lives of individuals and communities.
Formation of faith within the setting of higher education also offers a rich area for future inquiry. The current inquiry problematizes the secularization motif prominent within higher education literature. The shift surrounding the place of faith in the academy has often been promulgated as harmful (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996). However, this inquiry suggests that some of the qualities of contemporary higher education may indeed be beneficial to faith formation, notably the voluntary nature of faith and the presence of diverse perspectives. Future inquiry may advance related understanding to a more in-depth level regarding how these particular qualities of the academy impact the faith of contemporary college students. Finally, our understanding of the faith formation of college students may be enhanced by intense examination of negative case exemplars. In the current study, the participants described personal distress as their peers discounted their own faith commitment. To more fully understand faith formation within higher education, clarifying the dynamics of “falling away” from faith is imperative.

Finally, the scholarship of faith would be radically enhanced by further inquiry into the qualities of holding environments. Holding environments, or mentoring communities (Parks, 1986a, 2000), play key roles in the lives of individuals negotiating the larger environment. In an increasingly global and pluralist world, enhancing our comprehension of the qualities of interpersonal communities that nurture and challenge individuals toward internally authored commitments and the engagement of faith conversation in diverse settings is crucial. Within these environments, we would also benefit from enhanced understanding of the qualities of leaders that generate deepened
faith commitments in the lives of others. Moreover, the scholarly knowledge base would benefit from a clearer understanding of the life histories and experiences of effective faith mentors. Student affairs practitioners and campus ministers would particularly benefit from understanding the dynamics that influence effective mentors, as well as mentoring environments, within the context of faith. Finally, mentoring communities are constructed not only of leaders, but also of members. Members typically involve themselves at varying levels in the life and relationships of the community. While the current study offers an intimate examination of the experiences of individuals exhibiting intense community involvement, further inquiry should explore those experiences of members whose involvement functions closer to the mainstream or even to marginal levels of community involvement. Such research would undoubtedly expand not only our insight into faith formation within an organizational context, but would also serve to increase the documented case exemplars involving college students as the scope of scholarly understanding is dramatically enlarged.

Summary

Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) placed high aspirations for higher education as it relates to the formation of faith. She stated,

At its best, higher education is distinctive in its capacity to serve as a mentoring environment in the formation of critical adult faith. It does so most profoundly when it functions with clear consciousness of its role as a mentoring environment composed of mentoring communities. (p. 159)

In this inquiry, I have engaged this thought directly and focused on a specific mentoring community—that of the IVCF—within a specific mentoring environment—that of the
secular university. As the expression of narratives educates self and other (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I hope that the narratives of the participants, as well as this research text, educate the participants and all those associated with the IVCF and the Mid-Atlantic University. A key element of that education is affirmation of the value of the pluralistic characteristics of the academy as it relates to faith. Cherry and colleagues (2001) revealed that the “ethos of decentered, diverse, religiously tolerant institutions of higher education is a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching” (p. 295). Streib (1991), in closing his reexamination of faith development, in light of Ricouer’s hermeneutical considerations, returns the reader anew to a summative definition of faith offered by Fowler in hope that the reader will understand the faith development perspective in a new light. In this spirit, I return the reader to renewed perspective on the definition of faith in hope that a renewed understanding of faith in the academy has been reached due to the contribution of this inquiry. Faith is

A composing, a dynamic and holistic construction of relations that include self to others, self to world, and self to self, construed as all related to an ultimate environment (Fowler, 1991, p. 21)

College is a time when the individual experience of self, other, and the world are enriched in ways unparalleled in any other phase of the human life span. This is particularly evident in the lives of college students who enroll in residential, secular college environments. The individuals have transitioned to environments that have relocated them outside the family settings that originally shaped their faith perspectives, thereby causing the individuals to reconsider previous affiliations of faith and how their influence should be internally reauthored. These individuals are newly drawn into close
proximity with those who represent other faith perspectives. As a result, they are forced to examine how they are different and what about their faith commitments are integral to this status of difference. Within peer relationships, students of Christian faith are forced to be set apart, whether that equates to leaving the residence hall environment to attend a Bible study alone or whether it is “swimming upstream” in the college party scene to abstain from drinking and premarital sex. The participants in this study weighed the value of being set apart; it was difficult, and even exhausting to some, but ultimately, provided an avenue in which to examine and affirm their faith. Moreover, students reconciled self to self as they negotiated difficult personal matters in light of their faith.

Student experiences with mentoring communities of faith are also evolving from a place of full authority to a place of support as they engage in self-authorship of their own faith and related commitments. As individuals commit to faith internally and voluntarily, faith evolves. As faith communities and mentors offer living embodiments of how faith appears, including the authentic personal struggles addressed along the journey, the narrative of faith undergoes revision. It is in the study of faith and in the addressing of difficult questions and in the making of connections between self, communities of like-faithed individuals, and those who evidence a divergent faith perspective that faith is revised and strengthened. This has been the case in the lives of the participants in this inquiry and in my own life as well.

In closing, I return to Parks (2000) and her description of the process of transformation as it applies to this inquiry. “Conscious conflict” began for me when I became aware of tensions between faith and the academy and began to question whether
the predominant understanding of the relationship provided an accurate fit. The “period of pause” occurred over multiple years as I recognized the conflicting assumptions, but was unable to resolve them. In this period, I engaged in a wide variety of reading and conversation to wrestle with these questions. The new “insight” occurred in the later phases of analysis and interpretation of the participant narratives. This was indeed a moment of epiphany. I suddenly understood the potential value for faith formation within the academy context for the lives of the participants in this inquiry and, by extension, in my own life. I moved toward “repatterning,” in my effort to live out the application of the insight. Finally, this inquiry text represents the final moment of “testimony.” It is a joy to celebrate these interpretations by sharing them with a larger community. It is my hope that this new interpretation can now “take up full residence” within me and within the scholarship of faith (p. 121).
REFERENCES


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PART I: LIFE TAPESTRY/LIFE REVIEW

1. Reflecting on your life, identify its major chapters. What marker events stand out as especially important?
2. Are there past relationships that have been important to your development as a person?
3. Do you recall any changes in relationships that have had a significant impact on your life or your way of thinking about things?
4. How has your image of God and relation to God changed across your life’s chapters? Who or what is God to you now?
5. Have you ever had moments of intense joy or breakthrough experiences that have affirmed or changed your sense of meaning?
6. Have you experienced times of crisis or suffering in your life, or times when you felt profound disillusionment or that life had no meaning? What happened to you at these times? How have these experiences affected you?

PART II: RELATIONSHIPS

7. Focusing on the present, how would you describe your parents and your current relationship to them? Have there been any changes in your perceptions of your parents over the years? If so, what caused the change?
8. Are there any other current relationships that seem important to you?
9. What groups, institutions, or causes do you identify with? Why do you think that these are important to you?

PART III: PRESENT VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

10. Do you feel that your life has meaning at present? What makes life meaningful to you?
11. If you could change one thing about yourself or your life, what would you most want to change?
12. Are there any beliefs, values, or commitments that seem important to your life right now?
13. When or where do you find yourself most in communion or harmony with God or the universe?
14. What is your image or model of mature faith (i.e., an idea or a person)?
15. When you have an important decision to make, how do you generally go about making it? Can you give me an example? If you have a very difficult problem to solve, to whom do you look for guidance?
16. Do you think that actions can be right or wrong? If so, what makes an action right in your opinion?
17. Are there certain actions or types of actions that are always right under any circumstances? Are there certain moral opinions that you think everyone should agree on?

**PART IV: RELIGION**

18. Do you think that human life has a purpose? If so, what do you think it is? Is there a plan for our lives, or are we affected by a power or powers beyond our control?
19. What does death mean to you? What happens to us when we die?
20. Do you consider yourself a religious person? What does this mean to you?
21. Are there any religious ideas, symbols, or rituals that are important to you, or have been important to you? If so, what are these and why are they important?
22. Do you pray, meditate, or perform any other spiritual discipline?
23. What is sin to your understanding?
24. How do you explain the presence of evil in our world?
25. If people disagree about a religious issue, how can such religious conflicts be resolved?

**PART V: COLLEGE YEARS**

26. Have you found yourself contemplating your faith and sense of meaning during your college years?

*Part V has been incorporated specifically for purposes of this study and to provide a transition to the second interview.*
Faith Experience Interview Guide

Opening

The purpose of this second interview is to explore the dynamics of faith development—your story of faith—as a student involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. My intent is to understand your college experiences from your point of view.

Faith and the College Years

1. Please tell me about your experience of faith during your college years....[maybe you could start by telling me about how your faith has been important to you personally during your college years... what is it like for you to be a person of faith on campus?].

1a. Have any college experiences affirmed your faith? Tell me about an example of a college experience that affirmed your faith? [how did this experience affirm]

1b. Have any college experiences challenged your faith? Tell me about a college experience that challenged your faith? [how, with whom, did you work through this experience?]

1c. Have any college experienced led you to examine your faith? Tell me about a college experience that led you to examine your faith?

Faith Experiences during the College Years

2. I’d like to focus now on your academic experiences as they affected your faith story. How have faith and academics intersected for you? [Have you had any related faculty conversations? Can you recall your decision to declare a major? Tell me about that decision and what role your faith may have played.]

3. Let’s focus on your campus involvement outside the classroom (i.e., Greek, community service, residence halls). Share with me an experience where your faith was impacted outside the classroom. How was your faith challenged? What about this experience led you to examine your faith? What affirmed your faith?
4. Let’s talk about interpersonal relationships, specifically friendships and dating, as they have impacted your faith: Can you tell me about an experience that impacted your faith? What challenged your faith? What led you to examine your faith? What reinforced your faith?

5. Let’s focus on your family. Do you remember an occasion during your college years where your family has challenged, affirmed, or led you to examine your faith?

**IVCF Involvement**

6. Tell me about how you came to be involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at this university? *How did you first learn about this fellowship? What or who persuaded you to become personally involved?*

7. How do you think your involvement in IVCF has affected your faith? *Tell me about InterVarsity experiences that challenged your faith. What experiences led you to examine your faith? What experiences affirmed your faith?*

8. Imagine what your college years would have been like if you had not been involved in IVCF. Tell me how your faith might have unfolded during college?

**Reflections**

9. Given what you have shared about your faith in college, how do you now understand faith in your life? *What roles have IVCF and this university played in your understanding?*

Thank you for your participation in both phases of the interview. I genuinely appreciate your time and contribution.
APPENDIX C

Participant Invitation Letter

Date

[Name]
[Address]

Dear [first name]

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Policy and Leadership Program at Ohio State University. I am in the process of identifying participants for my dissertation research. The purpose of the research is to describe and understand the dynamics of faith development for students involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). It is my intent to select a small number of students from one IVCF chapter for participation. You were identified as a possible participant for this study by a staff member from your chapter.

After participants have been selected and confirmed, each participant will engage in a preinterview meeting and two phases of an in-depth interview. During the preinterview meeting, you will be able to ask questions about the study and will complete a written form indicating your consent to participate. The first phase of the interview will focus on faith development and should take approximately 2 hours. The second phase of the interview will explore the college experiences that have led participants to challenge, reinforce, and examine their faith in the areas of academic, social, interpersonal, and IVCF activities. The second phase of the interview should take approximately 90 minutes. With your permission, both phases of the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed to facilitate the gathering of accurate and complete data. Participants will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews.

All tapes, transcriptions, forms, and other documents will be coded and altered prior to discussion with the Chair and members of the dissertation committee to protect the confidentiality of the participants, as well as the IVCF chapter and institution.

Please indicate your willingness to participate in this study by completing the enclosed Participant Information Form and sending it back in the enclosed, self-addressed, stamped envelope by [insert date]. You may also wish to review the enclosed Participant Consent Form provided for information purposes. Please do not return the Participant Consent Form with the Participant Information Form.

Should you have questions about this study, please contact me at (717) 432-1365 (home) or wells_lilly@msn.com or call the Chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Robert Rodgers, at (614) 292-7700.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,

Cynthia A. Wells
Doctoral Candidate

*This project has been reviewed by the Office of Research Risks Protection at Ohio State University. Protocol #00E0232
APPENDIX D

Participant Information Form

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this form and return it in the enclosed, self-addressed, stamped envelope by [date]. If you have any questions about the form or this study, please contact Cynthia Wells at (717) 432-1365 or wells_lilly@msn.com.

Please note that your return of this form neither obligates you to participate nor indicates your inclusion in the study. Your return of this form simply indicates your initial willingness to participate. The information that you provide will allow the researcher to make initial decisions surrounding whom to contact for further discussion regarding participation.

Please be assured that no one other than the investigator will be allowed access to the information in the shaded box below. The remainder of the information will be shared in coded form only with the members of the dissertation committee.

| Name ______________________________ |
| Address __________________________ |
| ____________________________________ |
| Telephone (___)____________________ |
| E-mail____________________________ |

**Personal Information**

1. What is your gender?
   - □ Male
   - □ Female

2. What is your age? ___

3. How do you describe your race/ethnicity? ___________________________________

4. How do you describe your religion? _________________________________________
Academic Information

5. What is your academic standing?
   □ First Year
   □ Sophomore
   □ Junior
   □ Senior

6. What is your current grade point average? _______

7. Have you attended institutions of higher education other than your current university?
   □ Yes (When?) ___________________________
   □ No

8. What is your current academic major(s)? __________________________________________
   If you have previously declared different majors, what were they and what dates were they in effect?
   ____________________________________   ____/___/___ to ___/____/___
   ____________________________________   ____/___/___ to ___/____/___

9. What is your anticipated date of graduation? ____/____

Campus Involvement

10. What is your current campus residence?
    □ Residence Hall/University Apartment
    □ Fraternity/Sorority House
    □ Off-Campus Apartment
    □ Parent/Guardian Home
    □ Other _____________________________
11. In addition to IVCF, in what campus activities are you currently involved? Please check all that apply:

- [ ] Intercollegiate Athletics
- [ ] Fraternity/Sorority
- [ ] Student Club or Organization
- [ ] Student Government
- [ ] Volunteer/Community Service
- [ ] Other _______________________

12. Please indicate your involvement with IVCF activities while in college. Please check all that apply. For each activity that you check, please indicate the approximate dates of involvement.

- [ ] Student-Leadership Team  ___/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Bible Study Leader  ____/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Small-Group Bible Study  ___/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Conference/Retreat  ___/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Large-Group Fellowship Meeting  ____/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Mission Trip  ____/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Chapter/Training Camp  ____/___/___ to ___/____/___
- [ ] Other _______________________  ____/___/___ to ___/____/___

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APPENDIX E

LIFE TAPESTRY EXERCISE
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Calendar Year</th>
<th>Your Age</th>
<th>“Place”-Geographic &amp; Economic</th>
<th>Key Relationships</th>
<th>Uses and Directions Of the Self</th>
<th>Marker Events</th>
<th>Events and Conditions in Society and World</th>
<th>Images of God</th>
<th>Centers of Value and Power</th>
<th>Authorities</th>
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Using the Life Tapestry Exercise: Take a moment to look over the life tapestry chart in front of you, and then review this page for explanation of the categories at the top of the chart.

1. **Calendar Years From Birth.** Starting with the left column of the chart, number down the column from the year of your birth to the present year. You may number the columns in two or three year intervals if you’d prefer.

2. **Age by Year.** This column simply gives you another chronological point of reference. Fill it in with the same intervals you used for calendar years from birth.

3. **Place-Geographic And Socioeconomic.** Here you may record your sense of place in several different ways. It could be the physical place you lived in at different times in your life, including the geographic area where you lived, or it could be your sense of your position in society or in the community. Record your sense of place in whatever way it seems most appropriate to you.

4. **Key Relationships.** These can be any types of relationships that you feel had a significant impact on your life at the time. The persons mentioned need not be living presently, and you need not have known them personally. (That is, they could be persons who influenced you through your reading or hearing about them, etc.)

5. **Uses and Directions of the Self.** Here you can record not only how you spent your time but also what you thought you were doing at that time.

6. **Marker Events.** Here you may record the events that you remember which marked turning points in your life-moves, marriages, divorces, etc. Major events occur and things are never the same again.

7. **Events or Conditions in Society.** In this column, record what you remember of what was going on in the world at various times in your life. Record this as an image or phrase, or a series of images and phrases, that best sum up the period for you.

8. **Images of God.** This is an invitation for you to record briefly, in a phrase or two, what your thoughts or images of God—positive and negative—were at different times of your life. If you had no image of God or cannot remember one, record your images as such.

9. **Centers of Value.** What were the persons, objects, institutions, or goals that formed a center for your life at this time? What attracted you, what repelled you, what did you commit your time and energy to, and what did you choose to avoid? Record only the one or two most important ones.

10. **Authorities.** This column asks to whom your what did you look for guidance, or to ratify your decisions and choices at various points in your life?

As you work on the chart, make brief notes to yourself indicating the insights or thoughts you have for each of the categories. It is not necessary to fill out the columns in great detail. You are doing the exercise for yourself, so use shorthand or brief notes. Later, you can use the additional chart to make a copy of your tapestry to bring to the interview. After you have finished your work with the chart, spend some time thinking about your life as a whole. Try to feel its movement and its flow, its continuities and discontinuities. As you look at the tapestry of your life, let yourself imagine it as a drama or a play? Where would the divisions of it naturally fall? If you were to divide it into chapters or episodes, how would these be titled? When you have a sense of how you might divide your life, indicate these on the chart and jot down the titles on the reverse side of the chart.

This is the unfolding tapestry of your life at this particular time. In the coming days or months, you may want to return to it for further reflection, or to add to it things that may come to you later. Some people find that the Unfolding Tapestry exercise is a good beginning for keeping a regular journal or diary. You may also find that if you come back to this exercise after some time has passed, the chapters and titles in your life will look different as you look at them in light of new experiences. I hope you have enjoyed this exercise.
APPENDIX F

Participant Consent Form

Investigator:  Cynthia A. Wells                Home:  7 Montadale Drive
Doctoral Candidate                        Dillsburg, PA  17019
Ohio State University                       (717) 432-1365

I, ____________________________, consent to participate in Cynthia A. Wells’ and Robert F. Rodgers’ research. I understand the purpose of this study is to understand and describe the dynamics of faith development for students involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Furthermore, I understand that:

(a) information will be collected through audio-taped individual interviews that will be transcribed; transcripts will be kept confidential; tapes will be destroyed following completion of the study;

(b) excerpts from interviews may be quoted although participants will not be identified or identifiable and pseudonyms will be substituted for me and my institution in all phases and records of data collection and in the preliminary and final drafts of the dissertation;

(c) I will have the opportunity to review transcripts of my interviews as well as the overall findings before the final draft in order to confirm or deny the investigator’s descriptions and use of direct quotes or summarized statements. Should it be necessary, I may negotiate the above with the investigator;

(d) the information obtained during this study will be used in a dissertation that will be read by the members of the dissertation committee and will possibly be used in an article, each will be available to the public;

(e) my anticipated time commitment as a participant will include two interview sessions of 2 hours and 1.5 hours respectively, held within a three week time period;

(f) my participation in this study involves risk no greater than those encountered in daily life and that my participation may benefit me as a unique opportunity for personal reflection;

(g) there will be no financial compensation for participation in this study, that my participation is fully voluntary, and I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without harm to me;

(h) I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction and if I have any questions about the rights of human subjects of research, I may contact [actual name], Ph.D., Chair of [actual name] University’s Institutional Review Board, at [telephone number];

(i) I acknowledge that I have read and fully understood the consent form, that I sign it freely and voluntarily, and that a copy has been given to me.

In signing below, I agree to participate in this study having agreed to the above terms and affirm that I am 18 years of age or older; I agree to conduct and report this research according to the above terms.

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>or authorized representative</td>
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