

Growth in faith through participation in church small groups: a study of Evangelicals in the Irish context

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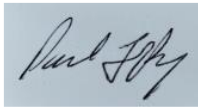
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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Paul F. Perry".

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Acknowledgements

When previously reading the theses of others, I must confess to regularly skipping past this section. However, having completed the study for this thesis, I can now easily understand the motivation behind such acknowledgements and the depth of thanks one feels for the many who provided support and help along the journey.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to three remarkable women:

My lovely mother, Elizabeth (Betty), who was such an example of love and faith to me and whose life continues to inspire me.

My fabulous wife, Caroline, who is a constant source of love, support and care to me, and a great friend and encourager to others.

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List of Abbreviations and relevant terms

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Cell group | A type of small group |
| COVID | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| DCU | Dublin City University |
| EAI | Evangelical Alliance Ireland |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation – a regulation in EU law on data protection and privacy |
| In-person or face-to-face | Refers to church meetings where people are physically present. These terms were used widely in Ireland when churches were legally forbidden to meet physically for periods of time during the COVID outbreak, and many church groups met virtually instead. |
| IPDA | The International Professional Development Association |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| NfRCE | The Network for Researchers in Catholic Education |
| PCI | The Presbyterian Church in Ireland |
| RTA | Reflexive thematic analysis – an approach to thematic analysis (TA) developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. |
| SCCs | Small Christian Communities (a preferred term by some, especially American writers, for various types of small groups) |
| SG | Small group |
| SGs | Small groups |
| TA | Thematic analysis – a method widely used for analysing qualitative data |
| ZOOM | Video Platform for Communication |

Abstract

Paul F Perry

Growth in faith through participation in church small groups: a study of Evangelicals in the Irish context

This research examines whether participation in Evangelical church small groups helps their members grow in their faith. Studies show that such groups (usually 3-20 people) are widespread in the modern Christian church. They generally meet at a different time than the main weekly church service and offer a place for activities such as prayer, Bible study, the building of community, and outreach.

This research is based on data collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 13) gathered from April to May 2021 from three small groups, each one connected to a different Evangelical congregation in the Republic of Ireland. It is framed as a qualitative multiple-case study. The data was analysed utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2021b) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis and in conversation with relevant educational, small group, and faith formational literature.

The analysis of the interview responses suggests that the small groups constitute a place to grow in faith through the community and supportive environment they created for their members, along with the approach to learning they pursued.

The results indicate that members grow in their faith through participation in the small groups and that this growth has a positive impact both within and beyond the small group.

Chapter 1: Introduction and rationale

1.1 Personal motivation

I worked as a pastor in a local Evangelical church in Dublin for over a decade from 2000, and since 2007 I have worked on the Irish Bible Institute (IBI) faculty. With over thirty-five years of experience in Evangelical churches, I bring an insider perspective to this research (see 3.6.2). While the IBI offers accredited BA and MA degrees in applied theology, there is no specific module wholly devoted to the practical leadership or purpose of small groups (henceforth generally referred to as SGs). However, a number of the courses are very relevant to the area. Of the courses I teach, the discipleship course has highlighted some pertinent areas to this research. Other courses I teach revolve primarily around understanding and utilising the New Testament. I continue to be an active member within an Evangelical congregation in Dublin, regularly ministering within this group and similar congregations in Ireland and abroad. Additional to this experience, I have enjoyed working in the wood industry in the past, as well as teaching in the secondary and adult education sector.

1.2 Irish cultural context

My initial interest in church SGs began almost twenty years ago, shortly after assuming this role as a Pastor. Much of this interest came from my work within such Evangelical communities, including being part of and leading SGs. I started reading practical SG literature to equip me for this SG leadership role better. While helpful in specific ways, I questioned how transferable some of this literature was to an Irish context, mainly as it primarily reflected experiences in a non-Western context (Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998; O'Halloran, 2002). For example, some literature reported on enormous Evangelical churches from South Korea and South America, which had hundreds or even tens of thousands of SGs (Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998, 2000, 2015). While I assumed the general principles like developing caring SGs where people could learn and grow together would transfer nicely, other areas, such as how quickly SGs could grow numerically and multiply in these regions, did not seem to align with the material I was reading from closer afield such as in the United Kingdom (Astin, 2002). Consequently, a desire began to emerge in me to engage first-hand with SG members in Ireland regarding their actual experiences of SGs.

This thesis seeks to capture Evangelical Christians' thoughts, feelings and experiences that are part and parcel of what Inglis (2014, 2018) refers to as their webs of meaning. These webs are spun in individuals' lives through their artistic interaction with other people, the shifting religious and social landscape of modern Irish culture, and the influence of other cultures experienced through both media and travel (Inglis, 2014, 2018). It is appropriate, therefore, to consider some of the cultural ingredients that form part of this spinning process, as these 'cultural ingredients and the ways in which people in contemporary Ireland spin webs of meaning are very different from those spun fifty or a hundred years ago' (Inglis, 2014, p. 186). In recent centuries Irish identity became so linked to the Catholic church that to be Irish was to be Catholic (Foster, 2007). In a seminal sociological work, Tom Inglis (1998, 2014) traces how the Catholic church became such a powerful and pervasive force over everything that Irish people did in nineteenth-century Ireland and continuing into the majority of the twentieth. 'Its symbols, beliefs, and practices became key ingredients in the webs of meanings into which most Irish people were born and suspended and the webs they spun afresh in their everyday lives' (Inglis, 2018, p. 123). Its power maintained significant influence over the schools, hospitals, social welfare systems, and, most importantly, the homes of most Irish people (Inglis, 2014, 2018).

However, Inglis (1998) also describes the breaking of the church's monopoly over the morality of Irish people and how its authority and institutional power over people's beliefs and practices have declined. While still a major force in Irish society, its power has been significantly reduced. It now constitutes 'one interest group among many others' (Inglis, 1998, p. 241) that affects and guides Catholics' decisions. Transparently its authority on non-Catholics is even less. The developments that led to these changes have been building since the 1960s and intensified in recent decades, not least being driven by the enormous influence of the media, the effects of industrialism, and globalism, as well as some internal influences from Catholic intellectuals in forums such as the *Furrow* (Inglis, 1998; Fuller, 2004; Foster, 2007). Other driving factors included the movements for change in the position and status of women and women's rights in Irish society throughout the 1970s (Foster, 2007). Opportunities for the priestly ministry of women reflect a similar and overlapping desire from some Catholics within the church (Inglis, 2014).

Additionally, the control the Catholic church exerted over the media was lost in the 1990s. Instead of the church being a watchdog to the media, the media began to hold the church to account. The sex scandals involving clerics, 'once hidden and silent' (Inglis, 1998, p. 229), and

the subsequent attempts of a cover-up by the institutional church were exposed. Such revelations added to the demise of the moral authority of the Catholic church (Inglis, 1998, 2018). ‘The media effectively began to replace the church as the social conscience of Irish society’ (Inglis, 2014, p. 124; see also Donnelly and Inglis, 2010) and became a predominant influence in the family and in shaping the values they ascribe to (Inglis, 1998, 2014).

The rapidly changing Ireland of today is epitomised by the decline in the Catholic church’s influence in the political, education, and social service arenas; the pitting of a fundamentalist or absolutist approach to truth and authority against a more secularised, modern, and individualist approach to the ethical life; and the loss of church vocations. The results of the latter, combined with an ageing clergy, have led to a significant generation gap between the clergy and the young people they wish to serve (Inglis, 1998, 2014; Foster, 2007). The vocation crisis has also resulted in conversations about what it means to live a religious life (Inglis, 1998). Therefore, while the Catholic Church still exerts significant influence in Ireland, her power has been vastly eroded, and the ‘lives of Irish Catholics are no longer lived within the rigour of religious seasons and holy days’ (Inglis, 1998, p. 205).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the spiritual inclinations of Irish people have disappeared. Rather, Catholicism has lost its authority to be the only arbiter of defining how people practice their spirituality and morality (Inglis, 1998). Foster (2007) notes that by the end of the 1980s, some of the distinctions between liberal Catholics and ‘protestantism’ were breaking down, with the former developing a growing number of the latter's virtues (Foster, 2007). A form of ‘pro-religious anti-clericalism’ was observed in some, especially urban and middle-class Catholics (Foster, 2007, p. 56). Inglis (1998) also highlights a ‘protestantisation’ in how people believe and practice their faith. People are becoming independent in defining their path to spiritual growth (Inglis, 2014). The central challenge to the Catholic church was that while it constantly told the laity that ‘the people were the church, the people had no voice’ (Inglis, 1998, p. 214). The growth of individualism and postmodernism led to the challenging of church authoritarian dogmatism that would require censor and the squashing of ‘debate and discussion as a means of reaching consensus’ (Inglis, 1998, p. 214). More disjointedness between what the Catholic Church was saying about spirituality and morality and the everyday practices of normal members ensued (Inglis, 1998). The ‘new’ Catholics’, Fuller (2006) argues, ‘re-defined Catholicism to meet their needs and accommodate their life situation’ (2006, p. 88).

In briefly tracing the development of Evangelicalism over a similar period of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland, it may be observed that Evangelicals in the nineteenth century often aligned with a Protestant identity and were deeply established within the minority Protestant ascendancy. They tended to be reactive and held a deep-seated opposition to what they saw as the errors of Catholicism (Mitchel, 2008). This hostility to the Catholic Church and ‘opposition’ to an ‘Irish Catholic identity’ extended even to the 1970s and 80s (Mitchel, 2008, pp. 161–162). Such manifestations of Evangelicalism made little impact in Irish society, and it is estimated that ‘less than 150 evangelical congregations existed in 1980’ (Mitchel, 2008, p. 164). However, modern Evangelicalism diverges significantly from this nineteenth-century picture. While maintaining central Evangelical theological convictions, it describes the Christian life:

in terms of personal fulfilment functioning within an egalitarian community entered into by personal faith rather than as part of any institutional identity structures. Far from operating from a position of social privilege and political influence, modern Irish evangelicals form a minor religious identity on the fringes of popular consciousness.
(Mitchel, 2008, p. 166)

Evangelicalism no longer pursues a rigorous opposition to Catholicism (no doubt partly resulting from the ecumenical advances since Vatican II). It seeks to tread a line between fundamentalist authoritarianism on the one hand and liberalism on the other. In the new diverse and pluralist Ireland, Evangelicals are no longer expected to abandon their national identity but are emerging ‘as one of a diverse range of minority communities existing within a broader and more inclusive Irish identity than that of the past’ (Mitchel, 2008, p. 167).

Evangelicals are found in a wide variety of Christian traditions and groups in Ireland. They are present in the four main churches Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Methodist. They worship in groups beyond these also: Baptist, Pentecostals, Mennonites, Brethren, Charismatic, and independent churches, for example (Mitchel, 2008; EAI, 2018). Their numbers have also increased substantially due to the immigration and development of many ethnic churches, not least made up of African and Romanian groups (Ugba, 2006; Davie, 2013; Maguire and Murphy, 2016; EAI, 2018; see also the story of Adenike Ajaya in Inglis, 2014). In 2017 the Evangelical Alliance Ireland conducted a census and survey of Christian churches beyond the traditional four main denominations (EAI, 2018). It identified over 500 non-mainstream Christian churches across Ireland. 58% of these had grown in size in the last five years. 46% of their members were under the age of 30, and 75% were under the age of 50.

Overall, the survey painted ‘a picture of a very active and growing church which is appealing to people of all ages and backgrounds’ (EAI, 2018, p. 3).

The prospering of the Evangelical church in today’s new Ireland starkly contrasts the meagre results of Evangelicalism as it expressed itself in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Transparently some of this results from changes within Evangelicalism, as noted above. The changing Irish religious landscape highlighted above has also presented more opportunities for Evangelicalism to prosper in recent decades. A more open and independently-minded seeker may be more receptive to the Evangelical message than has been the case before.

Ganiel (2016) highlights the increasingly diverse religious market in the Irish landscape that could benefit all Christian traditions and even be a catalyst for ecumenical unity. Opportunities are now present for people to ‘keep their faith alive, *outside or in addition to the institutional Catholic church*’ (Ganiel, 2016, p. 5). She conceptualises such opportunities as ‘extra-institutional’ spaces (Ganiel, 2016, p. 5), involving the range of strategies or methods people use to maintain a living faith. Perhaps SGs are an Evangelical example of ‘extra-institutional’ spaces where people can explore and build their faith. However, as Ganiel (2016) highlights, ‘extra-institutional’ spaces are not forums where people are simply ‘constructing a “God of one’s own”, quite unmoored from traditional religious institutions’ (Ganiel, 2016, p. 5). Based on the sociological research noted above, such an unmoored spirituality could constitute one of the avenues Irish (post)modern people might take in response to the Changing Irish religious landscape. This approach would be more akin to one of the outcomes noted by Cleary (2017), where people pursue a range of New Age religious experiences.

However, this approach does not necessarily represent the only outcome. Ganiel’s (2016) proposals are much more satisfactory for describing the desired purpose of Evangelical SGs in developing faith. SGs may present the space for individuality, expressions of feelings, open and frank conversations (Inglis, 2014), and an experiential style of learning (see Davie, 2013) that (post)modern people seek, as noted above. The desire for women’s (Inglis, 2014) and lay (Astin, 2002; Vella, 2002; Arnold, 2004) ministry could find an expression in these informal SG learning communities. Most importantly, they may constitute places where ‘webs that are based more on pure meaning, that is meanings that exist for the sake of bonding and belonging’ (Inglis, 2014, pp. 191–192) may be developed. SGs can be spaces that maintain a relationship with institutionalized religion, especially if they are the type that is part of a local Christian

congregation. That being the case, they may be ‘more “solid” than other forms of more free-floating modern religion’ (Ganiel, 2016, p. 5) as a locus for growth in faith.

Research shows that such SGs (usually 3-20 people) play a significant role in the modern Christian church (Wuthnow, 1994a; Walton, 2011; Hussey, 2020). Indeed, the proliferation of various kinds of SGs, both within and beyond the church and in both the Western and non-Western regions of the world (Wuthnow, 1994a; Donahue and Robinson, 2001; Vandenakker, 1994; Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998; O’Halloran, 2002; Arnold, 2004; Walton, 2014; Mack, 2014; Perry, 2021), has caused some commentators to speak of a ‘small-group movement’ (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 4; Arnold, 2004, p. 10; Donahue and Gowler, 2014, p. 118). In a survey of English churchgoers, 37% said they attend a weekly SG and only 1% reported that there were no opportunities to join such a group (Walton, 2011, 2014). Evidence of their popularity is also observed in churches from the Republic of Ireland (henceforth, Ireland). Within the Reformed and Evangelical churches, SGs of various kinds are well established (PCI, 2016; EAI, 2018). Likewise, the Catholic church has also developed a wide variety of such groups (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010; ‘Church Organisations’, 2018).

How might such SGs be defined? They generally meet at a different time than the main weekly church service (Astin, 2002; Beckham, 2005) and offer a place for activities like prayer, Bible study, the building of community, and outreach (Arnold, 2004). In a seminal study in the area of SGs, most members said they joined with a desire to ‘deepen their faith’ (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 6). Therefore, an important consideration is the place played by church SGs regarding the growth in faith of their participants (Wuthnow, 1994a; Rynsburger and Lamport, 2009; Barentsen, 2013; Byrne, 2013; Knabb and Pelletier, 2014; Gallagher and Newton, 2009; Walton, 2011, 2014; Otero and Cottrell, 2013; Wuthnow, 1994b). While studies have been conducted elsewhere in this space (Wuthnow, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b; Icenogle, 1994; Vandenakker, 1994; Davie, 1995; O’Halloran, 2002; Bielo, 2009; Rynsburger and Lamport, 2009; Walton, 2011, 2014; Hussey, 2020), a significant lacuna in such research persists concerning the Irish context. To understand the place such groups are playing in the growth in faith of their participants in the Irish context, the actual experience of their members must be heard and engaged with. This study aims to add critical evidence in this regard.

1.3 Identification of the research topic

As noted, this research project emerged from a longstanding interest in church SGs. In wondering about the experiences of Christian SG members in an Irish context, my initial proposal was to compare several Irish church's SGs representative of Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical traditions. As the project developed, it became increasingly clear that this approach was too broad and the questions I sought to answer would benefit from more focused research of one Christian tradition. This 'funneling' down of my ideas also took into account 'sensitizing concepts' to which I am 'most attuned' (Tracy, 2020, p. 29), primarily involving my long experience within Evangelical churches. Additional support for a narrower focus came from the practical consideration of the access opportunities (Creswell, 2014) that my relationships in Evangelical groups afforded me. Evangelical believers represent a small but growing subset of Christians and Christian groups in Ireland (Dunlop, 2004; EAI, 2018). Their distinct emphasis will be discussed below, including their desire to experience community within their churches and how this aligns with developing SGs.

In 1994, a key researcher in this area, social scientist Robert Wuthnow estimated that in the USA alone, 40% of Americans 'belong to a SG that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members' (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 4). Almost 'two-thirds' of these groups had 'some connection to churches or synagogues', many initiated by clergy and involving prayer and/or Bible study, with the majority of their members saying they joined with a desire to 'deepen their faith' (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 6). A later UK study in 2001 of English churchgoers highlighted the significant role SGs play in the modern church (Walton, 2011).

Nevertheless, Wuthnow's (1994b) study suggested that such involvement did 'little to increase biblical knowledge' and rather encouraged a more pragmatic and subjective faith (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 7). So, what was driving such a large-scale movement? In a modern society where family breakdown and community structures are changing, Wuthnow highlighted the strong sense of community that such groups offer as a key factor in drawing people. People can find support and help in such a tight-knit group and even experience some spiritual development. Notwithstanding this, Wuthnow questioned the level of such community when one's involvement is optional and suited to one's whims with the weakest of obligations. Therefore, he contended that the SG movement was following the culture in *adapting* American religion and creating a type of American secularity that often reduces and domesticates religion to gratify one's own need(s) (Wuthnow, 1994b, pp. 6–7).

However, another scholar, John Paul Vandenakker, published his doctoral thesis in the very same year. His thesis was completed at the Gregorian University in Rome and focused on various kinds of SGs, which he calls small Christian communities (SCCs) (1994, pp. 98–99). Like Wuthnow, Vandenakker (1994) highlighted the exponential growth and the wide variety of SGs operating in Western and non-Western countries. However, unlike Wuthnow, whose undertone of reservation regarding the positive discipleship potential of SGs came through from the beginning of his book, Vandenakker generally speaks in glowing terms regarding SCCs. They constitute ‘an ecclesiological phenomenon of major theological, pastoral, and institutional import’, which have ‘proven to be, for the most part, an effective means of both personal and ecclesial renewal’ (Vandenakker, 1994, p. xii). He quotes Paul VI referring to SCCs as “a great hope for the universal Church” and John Paul II calling them “a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a ‘civilization of love’” (Vandenakker, 1994, p. xiii).

Wuthnow’s (1994b) and Vandenakker (1994) both researched SGs, both published in the same year, yet both reached contrasting views regarding the benefit of SGs to Christian formation. Such different research findings further underscore the need for specific research in the Irish context to question if Evangelical SGs promote growth in the faith of their members.

1.3 Purpose statement and research questions

This research is framed as a qualitative multiple case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) of SGs from the Evangelical church tradition, focusing on whether participation in such groups affects the growth in faith of their members. Three different Evangelical SGs in Ireland were chosen for research. While the three groups were similar, they each conducted their SGs slightly differently, generating a valuable cross-comparison. The study ultimately seeks to understand better and thickly describe the nature of the experiences of these groups of adults. Participants in the study were interviewed and asked to talk about their experiences of engaging with SGs, how they interpreted this for themselves, and how it influenced their lives and growth in faith. Thus, I followed a more inductive approach, ‘looking for patterns’ that could be ‘used to generate theory or explanation’ rather than a deductive approach of beginning with a theory or hypothesis (Pope and Mays, 2020, p. 18).

The research aims to determine whether Evangelicals grow in their faith through participation in church SGs. The following questions guide me in this:

1. Why did the members join the Evangelical SGs?
2. Does their involvement in the SG help them grow in their faith?
3. If so, how do the members describe the impact of such growth?

1.4 The scope of this study

This research is framed as a case study of several SGs from the Evangelical church tradition based in Ireland. These groups all operated during the significant time period of the COVID lockdown restrictions in Ireland and were conducted virtually during all the periods considered in this thesis. The SGs were similar in many other respects. Each group was mixed-gender and part of a larger congregation. They all involved teaching, discussion and some form of prayer ministry in their meetings; however, they varied in the way they attended to each element. Finally, they all involved their members in some form of Christian education. Consequently, this research is situated in adult religious education and formational practices, especially as they relate to the church context, and I examine SGs from these perspectives to better understand Christian growth through SG participation.

In considering literature, academic literature is supplemented by literature that relates the on-the-ground experiences of church SGs, and the so-called practical theology often used in Evangelical churches. The latter form of literature is beneficial in ensuring that ‘the lived experience of the participants is an integral part of the theological framing of the project’ (Singleton, 2020, p. 11). However, different forms of theology are seen as equally valid sources of information in the sense that they can complement one another to provide a fuller interpretation of the participants’ experiences (Ward and Dunlop, 2011; Creedon, 2021).

1.5 Definitions

This thesis’ overarching question, do Evangelicals grow in their faith through participation in church SGs, contains several words that require definition. The main words are Evangelical(s), SG(s), and the verbal phrase ‘grow(th) in faith’.

1.5.1 Evangelical/ism

While it is difficult to provide a concrete definition for Evangelical/ism (Hindmarsh, 2017, p. 290), a widely used and accepted summary of its key qualities comes from the British historian David Bebbington (1989). The Bebbington (1989, pp. 2–17) quadrilateral suggests four prominent marks Evangelicals share:

- Conversionism: a belief that humans need to be changed through the preaching of the Gospel
- Activism: an emphasis on expressing the gospel, especially by mission but also through social reform
- Biblicism: a particular devotion to the Bible and a ‘belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages’
- Crucicentrism: stress on Jesus’ atoning work on the cross and a cross-centred theology

The Bebbington (1989) Model is not without its critics. The definition is criticised as being too vague, ahistorical, and not accounting for the variety within the Evangelical movement (Silliman, 2021, p. 625). Hindmarsh (2017) contends that these core convictions have never encapsulated the fullness of Evangelicalism, and Evangelicals are concerned more with bringing people to Christ, than converting them to the Evangelical church (2017, p. 292). Additionally, the modern Evangelical movement draws upon earlier Reformed and Catholic spirituality to find a basis for renewal in the living word of the Bible as well as the life of the church (Hindmarsh, 2017, p. 292). Indeed Evangelicals exist within the four main churches represented in Ireland, and the name covers a wide array of other Christian groups outside of these four churches, from Brethren to Pentecostals (EAI, 2018; see also Noll, 2004, pp. 421–438 and Bielo, 2011, pp. 7-10). Nevertheless, the quadrilateral provides a valuable starting definition.

In further defining Evangelicalism, J.I. Packer (2010) covers the same four points as Bebbington (1989) but adds two other marks as significant in defining Evangelicalism: ‘the lordship of the Holy Spirit, giver of spiritual life by animating, assuring, empowering and transforming the saints’; and ‘the fellowship of believers (the faith-full) as the essence of the church’s life.’ (Packer, 2010). The addition of these two points related to the work of the Spirit and the importance of the Christian community proves extremely helpful when considering the ongoing growth of the believer beyond initiation into the faith.

Packer (2010) notes:

Maturer Evangelicals, however, have always recognized that though personal conversion is the starting-point Christians must learn a biblical God-centredness and seek after ‘holiness to the Lord’ in all departments of the church’s worship, witness and work and in every activity and relationship of human life.

(2010)

The work of the Holy Spirit, as well as the supportive community of the church, are two vital facets for the believer’s growth in faith, and consequently, they will be noted in this thesis. In addition, the outward-directed ‘activism’ or service that such growth produces. These inner and outer dynamics of growth are summarised by Bruce Hindmarsh, who equates Evangelicalism to Ignatian spirituality, which cultivates its interior devotion to Christ through the spiritual exercises and its outward work of activism through its engagement with mission. Likewise, a ‘centripetal dynamic’ within Evangelicalism has drawn its members inward to ‘intensive interior devotion to Christ and intense experience of Christian community in small groups, just as a powerful “centrifugal dynamic” has driven them out in sacrificial service’ (Hindmarsh, 2017, p. 292). These two dynamics are significant in this thesis as it considers the believer’s experience of inner growth through engaging in the life of the SG and how such growth is expressed in loving service.

1.5.2 Small group(s)

The term ‘small groups’ often serves as an overarching designation (Bunton, 2014; Atkinson, 2018) and will be preferred in this thesis, even if now problematic to some early pioneers (Mack, 2014). However, the range of church SGs can vary wildly, from two-person discipleship groups to Bible study groups, to various expressions of the cell group movement, to name a few (Atkinson, 2018; Wuthnow, 1994a; Bunton, 2014; Creedon, 2021). Walton (2014) suggests that the focus of such church SGs developed since the 1900s, from educationally focused study groups (1900-1940s), to pastorally focused house groups (1940s-1970s), to discipleship and outward oriented missionally focused groups (1960-2000). However, as Creedon (2021) observes, a SG may aspire to all three objectives. Recommendations for what constitutes a group to be a ‘small’ group have ranged anywhere from 2 to 30 members; however, most writers suggest a median of 10 to 15 as an optimum upper limit (Richards, 1975; George, 2013; Creedon, 2021). More important than numbers is that the group allows for the development of ‘intimate relationships’ and permits the involvement of each person in the proceedings (Richards, 1975, p. 263; see also, Creedon, 2021).

1.5.3 Grow(th) in faith

Generally, Evangelicals insist on distinguishing between spiritual birth and growth in faith and the indispensability of the former for the latter (Graham, 1989, p. 201, see also Carlson, 2010 and Stott, 2004, pp. 105-129). This emphasis on conversionism (Bebbington, 1989) and the gift of salvation has, at times, led to an underemphasis on sanctification or the transformational aspects of the Gospel message (Armstrong, 2009). Hull (2016) bemoans the two-tiered view of salvation that separates conversion from discipleship growth (Hull, 2006, p. 41; see also, Cox and Peck, 2018, pp. 244–245; Bonhoeffer, 1995). Hull (2006) still distinguishes between justification, which he defines as ‘the reality of the new birth’, and sanctification, which he defines as ‘the process of becoming like Jesus’ (2006, p. 42). However, he argues that Evangelicals have made this line of demarcation into a wall of division (Hull, 2006, p. 42). Nevertheless, the call for professing believers to grow in faith is accepted as normal within Evangelical spheres, even while they maintain the distinction or demarcation just noted (Steele, 2001).

To fully elaborate on any one of the several phrases regularly used in defining the meaning and aims of this growth, such as spiritual growth, discipleship, formation, et cetera, would constitute a serious study in and of itself (for concise overviews see, Astley, 2018; Gallagher and Newton, 2009; Longenecker, 1996; Bekker, 2001; Steele, 2001; Armstrong, 2009; Buschart, 2011). My aim here is not to produce exhaustive studies for each of the various phrases used but rather to achieve two things. Firstly, I want to indicate that in Evangelical writings, many of these phrases are used more generally and often with the same or very similar meaning, even at times interchangeably. Secondly, I want to provide some straightforward working definitions and justification for the terms I use and how I use them in this thesis (Astley, 2018, p. 13).

The key terms of interest for this thesis are discipleship, formation and growth (henceforth called terms). The place of education in relation to such terms also requires consideration. Discipleship is an older yet still used term. In Evangelical circles, formation is usually pre-fixed with the word spiritual. Similarly, the term growth may be pre-fixed with spiritual/Christian (Hockridge, 2021, p. 13) or qualified with additional words such as growth in faith/Christ. Evangelicals regularly use terms such as growth, spiritual growth/maturity, discipleship, growth in faith/Christ/maturity, formation, et cetera. These terms speak of the growth of a believer, and while detailed studies will occasionally highlight nuanced differences

between each term, in the general parlance within Evangelical communities, they are often connected or used synonymously as Hockridge (2021) notes:

The term *spiritual formation* is often used as a synonym for Christian growth or discipleship, referring to the ongoing development of Christian character and maturity which takes place in both the wider Christian community and in theological education.

(2021, p. 13)

Even when Evangelical writers provide a detailed definition concerning their use of any of these terms, it often greatly overlaps with the other terms defined by alternative Evangelical writers. Consequently, rather than providing numerous definitions for each word which would inevitably lead to considerable reduplication, I provide a harmony of aspects drawn from the various terms, which will form a basis for a workable definition for this thesis. Many of these aspects could be endorsed by all the Evangelical writers noted; however, only a sampling of authors are cited for each. Naturally, while I speak of Evangelical understandings concerning these terms, this is not to imply that such definitions are unique to Evangelicalism but rather to give a sense of the emphasis within this tradition, whether this emphasis may or may not be shared by other Christian traditions.

Within Evangelical literature, the terms discipleship, formation and growth generally:

- involves ongoing transformation or development in faith and are consequently seen as lifelong (Steele, 2001; Hockridge, 2021);
- value the place of teaching or Christian education in the process (Richards, 1975; Higton, 2005; Bramer, 2007; Walton, 2014; Hockridge, 2021), including critically reflecting on life experiences in light of scripture (Bramer, 2007);
- entail cognitive learning (Downs, 1994, p. 18; Maddix, 2010; Pazmiño, 2010; Astley, 2018, pp. 15–16) yet cannot be limited to that alone (Downs, 1994, pp. 18–21) as essential as this is. ‘It includes not only the way we think, but the kind of persons we are [...] at its core, spiritual formation means something like growing in grace, becoming more like Jesus, learning to live a holy life, increasing our love for God and service to others, or practicing the Christian virtues’ (Senior and Weber, 1994, p. 24). True teaching must be efficiently transmitted; thus, Wilhoit (2022) highlights the importance of churches emphasising learning rather than teaching when developing ‘educationally based spiritual formation’ (2022, p. 132) strategies. He defines learning as ‘integrating our awareness into our behavior in ways that influence and shape our

decisions and actions’ (Wilhoit, 2022, p. 135). In this, he highlights the ‘experiences of individuals and communities’ over ‘informational presentations’; however, ‘there is a need for both informational teaching (teaching that helps ground one in the content of the Christian story) and formational teaching (teaching that helps one live out the truth of the Christian gospel)’ (Wilhoit, 2022, p. 132);

- envisage holistic transformation, viewed as traversing different domains of the believer leading to cognitive, emotional, and behavioural growth (Downs, 1994; Steele, 2001; Bramer, 2010, p. 334; Greenman, 2010). The domains are often said to concern
 - the inward domain related to character, mind, and heart (which is sometimes used synonymously to refer to one’s spirit and or will);
 - the outward domain, which may refer to
 - a. habits and skills. These can refer to the expression of transformation or, in some traditions, the means of transformation/God’s grace.
 - b. one's vocation, usually related to outward-looking ministry to other believers or wider society.

Consequently, growth entails ‘the development of mind, heart, character, spirituality, habits, and skills within community’ (Gin, Lester and Blodgett, 2019, p. 73) or engaging the head, heart, and hands (Shaw, 2014; Astley, 2018, p. 16). Its ultimate goal is Christlikeness, reflecting His example, service, love, patient endurance and mission (Stott, 2010; also, Steele, 2001; Bramer, 2007).

Such growth:

- has Godward and human dimensions (Maddix, 2010, p. 242; Wilhoit, 2022, pp. 257–258), with different Evangelical traditions placing a stronger emphasis than others regarding the human role in the process (Steele, 2001);
- requires a work of God's Spirit and grace. All Evangelical traditions emphasise this divine requirement (Steele, 2001, p. 660; Greenman, 2010, p. 24; Maddix, 2010, p. 240; Stott, 2010, pp. 40–41; Wilhoit, 2022, p. 13). Thus, for Maddix (2010, p. 240), ‘Christian spirituality refers to those who are living by the presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit’;

- despite the emphasis on the last point, it requires an ongoing relationship with Jesus and stresses personal responsibility, especially by Evangelicals informed by certain traditions (e.g. Wesleyan) (Willard, 1990; Steele, 2001; Wilhoit, 2022). However, Evangelicals generally insist that such personal responsibility is a response to God's gift of grace (Steele, 2001; Greenman, 2010);
- is highly influenced by a believer's involvement in the Christian community (Pazmiño, 2010; Astley, 2018; Wilhoit, 2022).

Wilhoit (2022) concisely joins up many strands when he states that Christian spiritual formation is the 'intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.' (2022, p. 13). Wilhoit focuses particularly on the intentional or deliberate side of such formation, 'what is taught and sought rather than merely caught', albeit while acknowledging that much of 'the most effective formation takes place through the quiet care extended by godly Christians' (2022, p. 13). Others, such as Greenman (2010), make explicit something clearly implied by Wilhoit (2022, pp. 16–17, 257–258) that while spiritual formation requires a response, it is a response to God's grace. Thus, Greenman (2010) states that 'Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.' (Greenman, 2010, p. 24).

In sum, for this thesis, I will mainly use the term growth or growth in faith. Unless expressly noted otherwise, these terms are used synonymously with other terms, such as formation or discipleship. It is generally assumed that such growth refers to a lifelong process in a person who is already a professed Christian, is a response to God's grace, and is empowered by that grace and God's Spirit. It is holistic, involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural growth. The goal of such growth is that the Christian would be shaped into the likeness of Jesus Christ, which includes both inner and outer personal transformation and a focus beyond themselves to others. In such transformation, the context of the community of faith, especially related to SGs, is emphasised, as is the importance of both informational and formational teaching.

1.6 Contribution of this study

This study aims to add critical evidence regarding the growth in faith of individuals participating in church SGs. While this vital area has received scholarly attention in other

countries, there is a paucity of critical research on the subject in Ireland. Churches and church authorities will benefit from this investigation of the practice of the SG phenomenon in Ireland, which is evidence-based rather than merely anecdotal. It is hoped that the research will lead to a greater understanding of diversity and ecumenical issues among Christian groups in Ireland, especially concerning their awareness of Evangelical expressions of faith. The findings will be made available to fellow scholars, providing an increased understanding of SGs and Christian formation fields. Various groups from church or educational settings may find encouragement and creative ideas for religious formation through this study. Other researchers in the areas of sociological trends may also find the data to be of significance in their work. Thus, its conclusions will be of great multidisciplinary benefit within religious education and beyond.

1.7 Overview of chapters

1.7.1 Chapter 1: Introduction and rationale

This chapter reviews the emergence of the research question and the reasons why this is pertinent in the Irish context. It notes that despite significant research on SGs globally, this thesis is necessitated by the paucity of research in the Irish context concerning this crucial area. This study's scope and contributions are provided, along with working definitions of three key terms: Evangelical/ism, small groups and growth in faith. The chapter finishes with a final reflection on the contribution this research makes.

1.7.2 Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature for this thesis. It outlines the procedure taken to survey and access such relevant literature. The heart of the chapter develops several themes from the literature that reflects on SGs concerning 1) the environment SGs can create to promote support and the growth in faith of their membership; 2) important characteristics SGs can possess to encourage support and growth in faith of their membership; 3) pertinent religious education principles that can be observed in the operation of the SGs. These are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter, with a summary of the findings presented in the conclusion section.

1.7.3 Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology adopted for this thesis. I consider my ontological and epistemological commitments and outline the design choices, and research processes followed, including the approach to sampling selection, data collection and analysis. I provide a rationale for the use of a qualitative multiple-case study. The considerations I used to acquire data are also discussed, as is the approach I took to the research and research questions as I progressed through the process. Other important factors for producing quality research are noted, including my analytic and transcription approaches, adaptations made based on the initial pilot study, and the attention given to ethical considerations for this research.

1.7.4 Chapter 4: Presentation of findings

This chapter presents the research findings. It explains the sample using relevant quotations from the interview data and my commentary. It notes that key themes and sub-themes based on this interview data revealing the interviewees' experiences that the SGs constitute a place to grow in faith and that the supportive environment for growth created within the SG was a significant factor in this. Additionally, two other vital areas are noted from the analysis: that growth took place through learning with others and that this growth significantly impacted the members themselves and beyond.

1.7.5 Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

This chapter discusses the findings in chapter four, starting with a brief overview of these findings and the research questions that guide this thesis. Following this, it locates the findings in reference to the broader scholarly literature they are situated within, as outlined in my literature review. The findings are explained using a thematic map and several tables to give the reader a concise overview of significant findings and contributions made by this thesis. The chapter concludes by offering some practical suggestions based on these findings.

1.7.6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the thesis by presenting a broader summary of the key findings. This chapter also involves an opportunity to reflect on the approach I took to research this thesis—including choosing a qualitative case study approach and personally preparing a detailed transcription of all the interviews. I also highlight some further contributions that this research makes to the field. These include my critical engagement with some SG theorists and my ultimate divergence in some respects from them. As with all research, there are limitations

to my thesis, which are noted in this chapter. I also highlight that many of these limitations present possibilities for future research and outline these. The thesis finishes with some closing comments.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The overarching question guiding this research is, do small groups help Evangelicals grow in their faith? Outside of Ireland, the potential for SGs to provide a supportive and transformational space for growth has long been recognized both within the religious and educational spheres (Richards, 1975; Harris, 1989; Bielo, 2009; Packer, 2010; Walton, 2011; Shaw, 2014) and in adult education in general (Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005; Davidson, Major and Michaelsen, 2014).

Numerous studies have been produced in various locations relating to such groups' theory and practical running. To understand the experiences of the Irish participants, studies as closely related to their background as possible are preferable when selecting the most pertinent literature. There is research that primarily considers non-Western contexts, the results of which are not replicated in Western countries and therefore are in some ways less helpful. Nevertheless, these studies can provide a broader overview and global context of the SG phenomenon (Vandenakker, 1994; O'Halloran, 2002; Kleissler, LeBert and McGuinness, 2003). There are several helpful research studies of SGs in the United States (Wuthnow, 1994a; Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009). They address a Western context; nevertheless, they are conducted in environments that are very different from the Irish context. Wuthnow's (1994a, 1994b) research, while dated, is a seminal work entailing a massive mixed-method study, and Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009) are ethnographic in their approach. Several other works, while reflecting on theory, also emphasise the frontline praxis of Evangelical SGs (Comiskey, 1998, 2001; Astin, 2002; Arnold, 2004; Hull, 2006, 2010; Walton, 2014; Ogden, 2016b). These were chosen as they provide a valuable glimpse into SGs as understood and experienced by the average Evangelical congregant. Despite the wide-ranging discussion on SGs in the literature, there is a paucity of published data-based research studies in this area in the Irish context.

2.2 Literature review approach

My literature review involved the 'highly interactive' process of repeatedly switching between the literature to the phenomenon of interest (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 90). While reading widely, I sought to be self-reflexive and hold 'loosely to favorite concepts, analyze data as it

is collected, and let those musings guide future sampling and data collection choices' (Tracy, 2020, p. 63).

2.3 Types of the literature surveyed

Outside of an Irish context, there is an extensive body of literature on church SGs covering such diverse areas as the history of their use (Bunton, 2014; Comiskey, 2014, 2019; Perry, 2021), quantitative and/or qualitative academic-level research studies (Wuthnow, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b; Davie, 1995; Wuthnow, 2003; Bielo, 2009; Walton, 2011, 2014), church testimonial literature concerning their use (Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998; Astin, 2002), and practical 'how to' literature (Comiskey, 2001). Each area is helpful in different ways, and some works combine several such elements in informative and valuable ways (Arnold, 2004; Hull, 2006, 2010; Walton, 2014; Ogden, 2016b). For example, while the quantitative/qualitative literature is helpful regarding its findings and methodological approach, church testimonial literature provides an excellent glimpse into the praxis of SGs in local congregations expressed in ways relatable to the average congregant. Additionally, there is relevant literature related to Christian education in general (Richards, 1975; Westerhoff, 1976, 2012; Harris, 1987, 1989; Everist, 2002; Shaw, 2014) and/or education specifically utilising SGs (Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005). To make sense of such a wide amount and type of literature, I began by looking for purposeful samples from each area.

2.4 Accessing the literature

My first step in locating appropriate literature involved linking the Google scholar search portal with the DCU library search (Vinyard and Colvin, 2022); I utilised Boolean search operators (AND, OR, NOT) to enhance and narrow my search (De Brún and Pearce-Smith, 2014, pp. 46–48) to areas such as church and SGs, or SGs and Evangelical and Ireland et cetera. However, specifying 'Ireland' drew minimal results, highlighting that modest scholarly work has been done in this area thus far. Generally, I sought the most up-to-date research, except where the work was considered pivotal. I also used a snowballing search technique (De Brún and Pearce-Smith, 2014) by noting references cited by authors, which confirmed vital works in the area or highlighted important overlooked literature to pursue. The DCU general library

search portal revealed relevant journal articles, print books, and eBooks. In addition, I explored specific databases aligned under the DCU library ‘Subject Guides’ (Smyth, 2022) for education, philosophy, sociology, theology, and religious studies. Searching Perlego, an online digital library, and the physical library of the Irish Bible institute, an Evangelical college, gave me a sense of the ordinary and professional level SG literature used within Evangelicalism.

2.5 Developing themes

Braun and Clarke (2021a) note that in thematic analysis (TA), ‘the analytic process involves immersion in the data, reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning’ (2021a, p. 5). Thus the literature review involved many returnings and ongoing conversations with the developing themes from the interview data and the theoretical writings on SGs, as well as my identification of relevant correlations between both. I began a general review of the literature based on my research questions. However, I later reexamined the literature from a thematic perspective, specifically considering themes congruent with areas highlighted by my ongoing analysis of the interview data.

Accordingly, my thematic review intends to aid in the practical understanding and analysing of the interview data from the SGs in this particular thesis and not necessarily to predict or generalise theory to all settings (Irby, 1995, p. 899). With this focus and based on my review of the literature, I developed three general themes outlined below, yet invariably there is some overlap between the three. The themes reflect on SGs in relation to:

- the environment small groups can create to promote the support and growth in faith of their membership;
- important characteristics small groups can possess to promote support and growth in faith of their membership;
- educational principles pertinent to small group learning.

2.6 Theme one: The environment small groups can create to promote the support and growth in faith of their membership.

The importance of the environment for discipleship growth, the potential of SGs to provide this environment, and the promotive conditions are recurrent themes in the relevant literature (Everist, 2002; Hull, 2006; Ogden, 2016b). Smaller-sized groups, where relationships can develop, lead to people sharing their lives more transparently and finding support. This sums up much of the appeal of Christian SGs (Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). However, as Richards (1975) observes, ‘while the smaller groupings of believers in the church have the potential of providing a context for transforming ministry, smaller groups will not necessarily have this impact. Size is no guarantee of intimacy or warmth’ (1975, p. 266). Consequently, he warns against ‘a formal, impersonal atmosphere’ and encourages instead intentionally taking the time and effort to develop a ‘warm and sharing climate’, where people feel free to ‘share’ (1975, p. 266). Safety and trust must be present in the SG for such an ideal environment to develop community. These qualities provide the foundation for support, sharing, and transformational growth in the lives of SG members.

2.6.1 Community

The deliberate relationship-building or fellowship (Harris, 1989) is seen as providing the context for the deep and meaningful conversations necessary for support. The confidentiality that the SG offers also create a safe and trusting environment where people feel open to sharing their life and find support in struggles and encouragement in their journey of faith. Astin’s (2002) experience of introducing cell meetings (type of SG) into an established Anglican church in Bradford, UK, illustrates this point. Noting, what he calls, the ‘British convention of saying ‘I’m fine,’ regardless of the truth!’, he explains how this was often the experience in his congregation also (2002, p. 47). However, Astin continues, ‘membership of a cell group provides an environment for deepening friendships and relationships’. Through the influence of the cell groups, he says, ‘our relationships have become more real as people have gradually gained the confidence to speak of what they are facing in their lives, how they are coping and how they are feeling’ (2002, p. 47).

The growth that takes place in a relational SG environment is also highlighted by Bielo (2009) and Hull (2006). Bielo’s (2009) research on a mixed-gender home group showed that the members not only sought to understand the Bible but demonstrated an attempt to cultivate and increase their intimacy. This overarching relational framework influenced the structure of the

meeting, the ways it operated, the personal prayer opportunities it offered to members, and even the approach it took to Bible interpretation (2009, pp. 73–92). The desire for such a close intimate bond with God and fellow church members is thus a notable characteristic among Evangelicals (Bielo, 2009, pp. 75–76; also Davie, 1995, p. 74; Singleton, 2020, p. 382). The intimate spirituality they seek with God is a model for their relationships with one another. As the SG has a ‘reputation’ in Evangelical life ‘as a site of active, open, and reflexive dialogue’, it provides an ideal space to cultivate such intimacy (Bielo, 2009, p. 76).

2.6.2 Safety

To facilitate such intimacy, one’s ‘Christian family is ideally a safe haven, a place to reveal the utmost private triumphs, concerns, and problems without fear of ridicule or exile’ (Bielo, 2009, p. 76). A feeling of safety in an environment (Davie, 1995, p. 74; Everist, 2002; Bielo, 2009, p. 76; Walton, 2014, p. 113) is established through slowly building deep trusting relationships (Harris, 1989; Everist, 2002), and is essential in enabling effective support to take place. What such a safe environment implies for learning can differ and thus requires definition. Everist (2002, pp. 64–69) acknowledges the strengths and limitations of various words to capture this optimum environment for learning. ‘Safe’, or ‘comfortable’, may suffer from the drawback of signalling ‘a lack of challenge’, acceptance to change, or the misunderstanding that Christians are kept safe from the world and their responsibility to it (Everist, 2002, pp. 64–65).

For example, in Davie’s (1995) study of a women’s SG, the ‘safe’ environment was mediated from the outset through an agreement that everyone was invited to speak but that what was said in the group should remain private and there should be no fear of ridicule, embarrassment or any sense of competition among group members. It is safe because it ‘forbids confrontation’, and since spiritual growth was envisioned as an individual process, this prohibition even extended to members challenging differences between other members regarding their set of beliefs or views of God (Davie, 1995, p. 52). Davie judged this privacy as an aspect of the Presbyterian and Protestant culture that this specific group belonged to (1995, p. 74). That the SG merely provides a safe non-challenging environment to develop community is emphasised even more forcefully by Wuthnow (1994b). He asserts that the ‘formal structures’ [of the SG] merely ‘create a space, as it were, for people to get to know each other’ [...] the ‘fundamental reason for their [the SGs] existence is quite often to provide deep, intimate interpersonal support–period’ (1994b, p. 159). Reflecting on what he calls ‘the contemporary redefinition of

spirituality' (Wuthnow, 1993b, p. 1239), he argues that this promotes an unbalanced focus on the individual's comfort and feelings, with the primary goal of helping them get along and be happy, over and above focusing on goodness, reverence of God and 'taking the risks that may be necessary for true growth to emerge' (1993b, p. 1239).

However, that safe communication automatically implies the limited and non-challenging approach Davie (1995, p. 52) reports or that SGs merely involve 'intimate interpersonal support-period' (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 159) is minimalistic on several fronts. Davie (1995) recognised 'participation in a viable spirituality and community' within her research group and that it provided 'emotional and spiritual satisfactions' and created a shared 'bond' in learning together (Davie, 1995, p. 74). Wuthnow (1993b) noted that SGs enabled people to cope more effectively with everyday life and acknowledged that they 'sometimes challenge their members to undertake painful processes of spiritual growth', albeit that this is the less 'common pattern' in his judgement (Wuthnow, 1993b, p. 1240). In comparison, the meaning of the word safe is defined by Everist (2002) as a needed physical and emotional space for openness, honesty, and the probing of new ideas, results that already move beyond the idea of simple interpersonal support or shallow sharing (2002, p. 85). This depth in sharing aligns with Bielo's (2009) judgement of SGs as settings for 'active, open, and reflexive dialogue' (Bielo, 2009, p. 76).

2.6.3 Trust

Everist (2002) goes further and suggests that for some, 'trustworthy' is a better word, as this describes building a SG environment that provides a foundation for 'security and risk-taking' (2002, p. 66). Everest's (2002) broader understanding of safety encompasses a supportive and challenging environment that engenders discipleship growth (see also, Vella, 2002, pp. 71–83). Members feel cared for while also hearing and being challenged by the scriptures and one another to 'be equipped to be sent out, to follow Jesus by serving in the world' (Everist, 2002, p. 69).

Thus, building a trusting environment enables members to receive the truth of the scriptures from one another and is, therefore, the first prerequisite for learning (Hull, 2006; Ogden, 2016b). Hull (2006), in seeking to expound on 'the best environment for spiritual formation', highlights 'trust' as the first of five areas, followed by 'grace', 'humility', 'submission', and 'affirmation' (2006, p. 154).

Hull (2006) writes:

The shell-shocked people who ask, “Can I trust me with you?” reveal the most important requirement for spiritual development [...] When you find someone you can trust, then you can be vulnerable. [...] Trust is key, because we only take in the truth we trust. [...] This is where transformational traction takes place.

(2006, p. 156)

Likewise, Ogden (2016b) argues that ‘a trustworthy environment’ promotes ‘ever-increasing openness and transparency’ in relationships and is a ‘key ingredient for continual transformation’ (2016b, p. 145). His rationale is that while Bible studies are a mainstay in Evangelical churches, they often produce ‘limited life transformation’ focusing on increasing ‘information without life application’ (2016b, p. 153). Therefore, Ogden (2016b) notes:

This is why the atmosphere of transparent trust is so vital if we want God’s Word to take root deeply in the soil of our lives. This application of the Word to life is what I call truth in community. We bring our open lives to the Word of God and allow it to do its work in us as we share our stories and journey together.

(2016b, p. 153)

Ogden (2016b) posits that people are more open to receiving the truth from those they trust, highlighting the importance of trust being developed in the community if the scriptures are to exert their transformative power. Naturally, however, trust requires development, as is seen in Everist’s (2002, p. 66) advice for teaching in the church community:

Trust builds slowly, deliberately. One becomes trusted by being consistently trustworthy. [...] when one trusts the learners and gradually helps them trust themselves and each other, individuality flourishes, and, thereby community. [...] Being simplistically trusting, in a shallow, hesitant sense is not helpful. A trustworthy environment provides a foundation for both security and risk-taking.

(2002, p. 66)

Ogden (2016b, p. 146) agrees that members need to ‘listen’ to one another, keep ‘confidences’, be ‘full of grace’, and humility with one another for an atmosphere of ‘trustworthiness’ to develop. Taken together, it can be observed that a warm, gracious and affirming atmosphere, where people feel there is a grace-filled, safe and confidential space to share and listen to each other, will enable members to trust and receive input from one another, all leading to spiritual growth.

2.7 Theme two: Important characteristics small groups can possess to promote support and growth in faith of their membership

Small groups contain additional characteristics that promote intimate, supportive, and learning environments. These include *small talk, participation and mutual ministry, prayer and other spiritual practices* among their members, as well as the *small numbers* in the group.

2.7.1 Small talk

An intimate, supportive, and learning environment can even be encouraged by casual chatting before, during, or after the formal aspects of the SG meeting. The importance of small talk (chit-chat; idle chatter, superficial banter), including nonverbal cues (such as smiles, gestures, bodily postures, emojis, written affirmation, et cetera) for communication, has been highlighted in computer-mediated educational settings (Malley, 2013; McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014; Beins, 2016), and in-person Christian SG environments (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 159; Day, 2005).

Malley (2013, p. 10) notes that such small talk ‘is anything but [...] secondary, or irrelevant’; instead, it establishes bonds between people and ‘fulfills initiatory, propitiatory and exploratory functions’. This aligns with Abby Day’s study (2005) on the importance of informal chatting in a women’s prayer group in which she:

Argue[d] that what participants dismissed as inconsequential ‘chatting’ was a powerful mechanism which allowed them to maintain order and meaning in potentially chaotic situations [in their case] arising from unanswered prayer.
(2005, p. 343)

Small talk develops relational bonds and mutual support of members within a SG but also aids their spiritual transformation by affecting their construction of theological ideas. Their ‘chatting’ enabled them to expand ‘their view of God’ and construct ‘theological response[s]’ to their experience (Day, 2005, p. 351). Consequently, Day’s research, along with others noted here, highlights the importance of the various sections of the SG time for people’s spiritual growth, from formal teaching to informal chatting and deeper conversations.

Outside of times when COVID restrictions were in place, SG meetings were generally conducted in face-to-face settings. This more easily afforded space for informal chatting, especially before and after the meeting. The challenge of providing this when SGs are conducted online mirrors Beins (2016) description of online distance education, which ‘can impede such informality since it is difficult to produce spaces, like those before class, that are hospitable to small talk and peripheral to instruction: not quite class, not quite not-class’ (2016,

p. 163). Beins (2016) promotes these moments of informal communication by purposefully building into her online classes ‘introductions’ activities and ‘video chat’ times (2016, p. 163). ‘During the small-group component of the introductions activity’ she observes ‘relationships starting to form through nonverbal cues like smiles and bodily postures that show people becoming more engaged with the conversation’ (2016, pp. 160–161).

Beins (2016) highlights the importance of learning as a social process and the place emotions play in developing learning communities. For her, the opportunity to express one’s emotions in an online format helps communicate one’s social presence, leading to more effective learning. Social presence is ‘the extent to which someone is perceived by others as a real person and to which someone recognizes that others perceive them as real’ (Beins, 2016, p. 160). Consequently, providing space for informal communication aids in learning, as Beins (2016, p. 163) observes:

Moments of informal communication are socially valuable because they allow students to get to know each other independent of the instructor’s guidance or direction and, ideally, to cultivate their social presence, since strong social presence correlates with the development of a strong learning community, as scholarship in both areas has established.

(Beins, 2016, p. 163)

Again the value of small talk and the importance of creating space for it to develop can be observed in Beins’ (2016, pp. 168–172). Intentionally building into online learning times for such SG conversations and interaction proves beneficial to deeper trust building and learning, as McGarrah Sharp and Morris (2014) observed. In their online pastoral care class, they combined one-to-one ‘partner chats’ alongside whole-class discussions (2014, pp. 251–252). The chats (six sessions in all) were scheduled every second week of the thirteen-week course and were fifteen to thirty minutes long, with a report of the conversation emailed to the professor at the end of each session. The purpose of the chats was to practice pastoral care role-play exercises. The students were separated into SGs on alternate weeks from these role-play practices. The transcripts of the ‘practice lab’ chats were made available to and discussed in these SGs. It was found that this added layer of discussion enabled ‘accountability’, ‘trust-building’ and ‘deeper reflection’ to take place among the students, leading to ‘in-depth comparison and focused mining’ of each other’s ‘role-play exercises’ (McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014, p. 252).

The studies of Beins (2016) and McGarrah Sharp and Morris (2014) reflect another significant feature that correlates to this thesis: they both relate to group learning in an online format. The

studies highlight the significance of learning in SGs, informal communication, and small talk. These factors aid in relationship building, learning, accountability, and growth.

2.7.2 Participation and mutual ministry

Conversations in SGs also support people struggling with life issues by creating a forum where members can learn to minister to one another. Such mutual ministry or church ‘body life’ (Richards, 1975, p. 276ff; Arnold, 2004, p. 33) is a valued aspiration in scripture (Ephesians 4:11-16; Romans 12:4-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; 1 Peter 4:10) and church practice (Astin, 2002; Arnold, 2004). Church members can be reluctant to practise their gifts or share in a larger setting but more willing to take a risk in a SG context (Arnold, 2004, pp. 33–34; Richards, 1975, p. 265). That every member is a minister or has a contribution to bring is a familiar rallying cry in SG literature (Richards, 1975; Astin, 2002). Comiskey (1998) argues that the training of the ‘laity to do the work of the ministry’ should be the goal of church leadership (1998, p. 54). He does not dismiss the potential of such training taking place outside the SG. However, he emphasises the importance of leaders modelling training on the job in the SG, noting the ‘best learning is caught, not taught’ (1998, p. 55).

Comiskey (1998) visualises the SG as a place where ministry is ‘decentralize[d]’ with everyone ‘encouraged to participate and use their spiritual gifts’ [...] (1Peter 4:10)’(1998, p. 56). Teaching, serving, sharing, praying for and encouraging one another captures only some of the many ways the Evangelical church encourages believers to minister to one another and counteract the ‘depersonalization’ often experienced in churches (Richards, 1975, p. 276). Deep personal needs can go unnoticed in a larger group yet come to attention and receive emotional and practical support in the intimate setting of a SG (Arnold, 2004, pp. 35–36). Again, Richards (1975, pp. 279–280) contends that such sharing and mutual ministry can develop ‘far better in small groups’, and these, in turn, constitute the primary flow into the larger meetings of such personal ministry values.

Involving ‘each member as a teacher of and learner from one another’, is also a strategy for SG ‘education’ promoted by Richards (1975, p. 272). Likewise, Everist (2002, p. 85) asserts that such elements are conducive to growth and religious education as ‘effective educational ministry connects all ages in the parish in mentoring, serving, teaching, and learning relationships’. Additionally, active participation helps retain the learning created together (Ulrich and Glendon, 2005; Carlson, 2010).

2.7.3 Prayer and other spiritual practices

The activities that take place in SGs regularly involve the practices of prayer and other spiritual disciplines. In Wuthnow's (1994a, p. 4) research, 'nearly two-thirds' of the groups had 'some connection to churches or synagogues', many initiated by clergy and involving prayer and/or Bible study (1994a, p. 6). Hull (2006, pp. 193–207) highlights the role that practising prayer and other Holy Spirit-empowered spiritual disciplines has on transformation. In this, he explicitly aligns with and mentions several influential Evangelical writers who have also emphasised classical spiritual disciplines drawn from the wider Christian Church. Richard Foster was an early Evangelical pioneer in this area with his seminal work, *Celebration of discipline: the path to spiritual growth* (1978). While Dallas Willard's, *The Spirit of the disciplines: Understanding how God changes lives* and *Renovation of the heart: putting on the character of Christ* (Willard, 1990; 2002) are but two books from his significant literary output, in both number and impact among Evangelicals, in this area.

Foster, Willard, and others highlighted the lack of such spiritual disciplines among Evangelicals. This lack partly derived from the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s-1950s, which, in an attempt to defend doctrine, came to 'identify the Christian life with cognitive belief' (Armstrong, 2009, p. 114). What that meant, says Willard, was that: 'if you believe the right things, you go to heaven when you die—and in the meantime, there's not much to do' (Willard, in Armstrong, 2009, p. 114). Such ideas led to a situation where 'discipleship, or growth in spiritual things, took a back seat', or as Armstrong (2009, p. 114) observes, there was a 'sanctification gap'.

With Evangelicals finding little in their heritage to fill such a void, writings on spiritual formation such as Foster's and Willard's emerged, with inspiration drawn from Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions, among others (Armstrong, 2009, p. 116). These and other similar resources are widely used and adapted within the modern Evangelical church (Bramer, 2010, p. 335; Greenman, 2010, p. 23). For example, Scazzero (2015; 2017) offers a whole range of discipleship resources in his emotionally healthy series, some of which utilise classical practices such as 'the daily office' (Scazzero, 2014). Another course Evangelicals use is 'The Prayer Course' created by 24-7 Prayer (Greig, 2021). Harris (1989) includes *leiturgia* (praise and prayer) as one of the forms that, working together with the others, create the whole curriculum for the church. The small-group movement raises the level to which prayer and Bible study are 'planned, calculated and coordinated' (Wuthnow, 1993b, p. 1239). Members give and receive care by ministering to one another. They continue the mission of

Jesus as the whole church actively engages in the work of ministry, which involves caring for ourselves, one another and the world (Harris, 1989; see also Richards, 1975, p. 44).

2.7.4 Small numbers

Davie (1995, p. 27) claims that ‘clearly smallness is a virtue where matters of personal spirituality are at issue’. The size of the SG is seen as promotive of spiritual growth. At the same time, Harrington and Absolom (2016) propose that different groups of varied sizes lend themselves to accomplish different goals. They draw upon the work of Joseph Myers (2003) and specifically his adaption to the Evangelical SG context of Edward T Hall’s thesis regarding ‘social and personal space and man’s perception of it’ (Hall, 1966, p. 1). Extrapolating from these writings, Harrington and Absolom (2016) argue for varied discipleship groups to be used at different times and for different purposes in a person’s growth in Christian maturity. The five groups they suggest are:

- *Public Relationships*: The church gathers corporately for worship.
- *Social Relationships*: Networks of smaller relationships where believers engage in mission and live out their faith in community.
- *Personal Relationships*: Small groups of six to sixteen people where believers challenge and encourage one another on a regular basis.
- *Transparent Relationships*: Close relationships of three to four where believers share intimate details of their lives for accountability.
- *The Divine Relationship*: The believer’s relationship with Jesus Christ where they grow through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

These groups are presented in Table 1, which summarises the critical potential of each sized gathering. The chart also highlights their conviction that while they note social scientific support for their ideas, they ultimately seek to base their discipleship proposals on the ministry of Jesus.

Table 1: Five contexts of discipleship (Harrington and Absalom, 2016, p. 62)

| Context | Size | Focus | Distance | Learning from Jesus | Church Expression | Outcomes |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Public | 100s | Engaging with an outside resource | 12' | Jesus and the crowds | "Sundays" | Inspiration Momentum Preaching |
| Social | 20–70 | Sharing snapshots that build affinity | 4'–12' | Jesus and the 70 | Missional communities | Community Mission Practice |
| Personal | 4–12 | Revealing private information | 18"–4' | Jesus and the 12 | Small groups | Closeness Support Challenge |
| Transparent | 2–4 | Living in vulnerability and openness | 0"–18" | Jesus and the 3 | Deepest friendships; marriage | Intimacy Openness Impact |
| Divine | Alone with God | Being with your Creator and Redeemer | Inner world | Jesus and the Father | Personal walk | Identity Destiny Truth |

A crucial point to note from their approach to discipleship is their size demarcations for SGs, especially the two groups that are promotive of *Personal* and *Transparent* Relationships. The first involves four to twelve/sixteen people, a typical upper size for a church SG. The latter involves two to four people, a typical size for what Ogden (2016b) calls a *microgroup* (see next paragraph).

The approach of Ogden (2016b, 2016a, 2018) aligns closely with Harrington and Absalom's (2016) proposal regarding the size and purpose of transparent groups. Ogden (2016b) highlights what he sees as the serious deficiency of discipleship in the [American] Evangelical church, based on several relevant surveys and his experience of discipleship programs from various churches (2016b, pp. 21–57). For Ogden (2016b), the discipleship he envisions is based on key principles of '*relational life investment...multiplication...[and] transformation*' (2016b, pp. 115–163). He notes:

'Without question, the setting where I have experienced the most accelerated transformation in the lives of believers has been in the small, reproducible discipleship groups I have labelled *microgroups*'.

(2016b, p. 144)

Thus, Ogden's (2016b) vision for discipleship centres around these *microgroups*. They develop through a leader inviting two to three other believers (maximum group size five) to gather, mature together and ultimately multiply, which involves some of the members forming their own groups. For such transformative growth to occur in these groups, they require trust, the truth of God's word in community, accountability, and engagement in mission (Ogden, 2016b, pp. 144–163).

Ogden, and Harrington and Absalom (2016), are unambiguous in their conclusion that by limiting the number of members, SGs provide a context more conducive to transparent openness, leading to discipleship growth. However, Creedon (2021) argues that Ogden's (2016b) thesis is built on anecdotal evidence rather than research and that Biblical transformation can occur in various-sized groups. In this, Creedon (2021) aligns with Absalom and Harrington (2016), highlighting the importance of the various size groupings working together, albeit in different ways, to promote growth in the disciple's life.

2.8 Theme three: Educational principles pertinent to small group learning

The third theme will consider principles from educational theorists pertinent to SG learning. Many areas of SGs have been observed above that support Christian formation. While the focus of this research is ultimately on the experience of the growth of the members in the SG, theoretical literature aids in framing the later reflections on these experiences (Singleton, 2020).

2.8.1 Learning is viewed as lifelong and aimed at holistic development

Small groups align with the proposals of many adult educational theorists that learning should be lifelong (Harris, 1987; Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005; Walton, 2014). As the pastoral vocation of church members is lifelong, so must their education in the church. Consequently, education is 'ongoing and ought to become richer and more complex as we develop through adulthood' (Harris, 1989, p. 38).

A holistic vision for such adult education includes paying attention to cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Downs, 1994; Vella, 2002; Wolterstorff, 2002; Maddix, 2010). With a religious emphasis, such an approach focuses on the multiple aspects of the human person and cannot ignore or neglect any. The scriptures are replete with exhortations to grow through the

use of our body (Romans 12:1), our minds (Ephesians 4:23), and our love for God and neighbour (Mark 12:30-31) (Maddix, 2010, pp. 265–266). Indeed, an atomization of people that would split them up and divide the way they love God or people impedes growth.

Evangelical education for spiritual formation may be defined as ‘the ministry of bringing the believer to maturity in Jesus Christ’ (Downs, 1994, p. 16). The definition suggests three concepts: firstly, a ministry, implying a service of love to others and positively excluding any manipulative or coercive means (see also, Pazmiño, 2008, p. 59) of such education; secondly, this ministry is oriented towards believers. For the Evangelical, Christian education ‘begins where evangelism ends, helping believers grow in their faith’ (Downs, 1994, p. 16; see also, Richards, 1975, pp. 11–16; Carlson, 2010). A more centrist perspective is proposed by Groome (1998, pp. 482–483, n.142; and Westerhoff, 2012). Either perspective is built on the assumption that faith is firstly a gift of God; thirdly, a purpose, namely ‘to lead believers to spiritual maturity’ (Downs, 1994, p. 17). It is hard to provide a simple definition of what such spiritual maturity means. For Downs (1994), the purpose of education for maturity is a well-developed faith, which has cognitive, relational or emotional, and volitional components. This development includes the content of belief but also captures the believer's heart and affects their will—thus inspiring action based on their belief (1994, pp. 18–19). Consequently, in Christian formation, ‘we cannot separate our physical, material existence from our mental or spiritual life, nor can we regard one as being more “real” than the other’ (Estep Jr., 2010, p. 16). Examples of spiritual practices may include a focus on the inner domain of a person through scripture reading and prayer, the outward domain, such as personal sanctification or social action, or the corporate domain, such as practising accountability through community or public worship. Practising all three domains are means of the person ‘being formed and shaped holistically’ (Estep Jr., 2010, p. 261; see also, Greenman, 2010).

The vision of such holistic formation is pictured by others (Wolterstorff, 2002; Shortt, 2017, 2018) as ‘a relational education that aims at shalom’ (Shortt, 2018, p. 37). The Old Testament Hebrew word *shalom*, along with its New Testament Greek equivalent *eirēnē*, can signify wholeness, community, connectedness, justice, and well-being. It ‘embraces the idea of human flourishing’ and the common good. Seeking shalom connotes ‘a call to be outward-looking and inclusive, not inwardly and exclusively focused on fellow-believers’ (Shortt, 2018, p. 37). For Wolterstorff (2002), ‘Shalom is present when a person dwells at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature’ (2002, p. 101, in Shortt, 2018, p. 38). Consequently, shalom is relational, including the idea of ‘right and good relationships’,

and it goes to the heart of what Christ came to restore and continues to establish (Shortt, 2018, p. 38). It also goes to the heart of being faithful to the Christian vision for life and Christian education (Shortt, 2018).

Following the above, while different authors emphasise different aspects, I posit that spiritual maturity affects the growth of the whole person (Downs, 1994, pp. 18–19; see also, Lee, 1971, pp. 10–11; Groome, 1998, pp. 30–32; Richards, 1975, pp. 60–66). It has both relational (Groome, 1998; Shortt, 2018) and outward-looking aspects to it, whether some writers express this as mission (Wuthnow, 1994b; Walton, 2014) and/or social action (Harris, 1989) or seeking shalom in all one's relationships (Groome, 1998, pp. 15–16; Wolterstorff, 2002; Shortt, 2017, 2018).

2.8.2 Learning is centred around a shared teaching but focuses primarily on its application.

I have noted Ogden's (2016b) observations that while Bible studies are a mainstay in Evangelical churches, they often produce 'limited life transformation' focusing on increasing 'information without life application' (2016b, p. 153). Consequently, in his SGs, Ogden (2016b) encourages an atmosphere of trust where people can experience 'truth', which he defines as the application of the Bible to life, 'in community' (2016b, p. 153). Ogden's (2016b) reference to SGs seeking a balance between direct teaching or explanation of the Bible and applicational discussion is a balance that is often noted in SG literature (Comiskey, 1998; Astin, 2002; Arnold, 2004). However, properly carrying this off may involve instruction on correctly interpreting and applying the text. Singleton's (2020) qualitative study on several Irish Evangelicals draws attention to the danger of moving to a premature or simplistically functional application of Bible studies (2020, p. 382). He notes that such direct relevance of the Bible to the specific and present needs of those he interviewed tended to be exalted above understanding the meaning of the text and often bypassed this exegetical step (Singleton, 2020, pp. 385–386). He also observes the lack of local Evangelical church education programs to help their members correctly interpret and engage with the Bible, a need ameliorated for some interviewees through engagement in theological study. This is compounded all the more in that those interviewed, often 'inherited...the shared expectations and observed practices of the faith community they belonged to', which in regards to approaching the Bible was more devotional than academically driven (2020, p. 394). However, SGs did not feature prominently in the interviewee's comments, so this remains an unexplored area in Singleton's (2020) study

(subsequently confirmed in private correspondence with Singleton on the 22/02/2021).

Comiskey (2001) also reflects on the importance of understanding and applying Biblical text. He notes that ‘explaining the general context and meaning of the passage’ is essential to the SG. However, this should be followed by primarily open-ended questions with the ‘overall goal of the cell group [...] to transform lives, rather than take in knowledge’ (2001, p. 68; see also, *ibid*, chap 5). Comiskey (2001), contrasts ‘cell groups’ with ‘neighborhood Bible studies’. Quoting James 1:22 he contends that:

While the lesson time in cell groups is based on God’s Word, the focus is on the application of God’s Word in a participatory atmosphere, rather than on someone teaching Biblical knowledge.

(2001, p. 15)

Not all writers contrast SG types like Comiskey, and numerous SG options are available (Richards, 1975, pp. 263–264; Arnold, 2004, pp. 146–148). Arnold (2004) follows an approach of studying the Bible together and also warns against ‘jumping to quick conclusions’, before conducting proper ‘exegesis’ (2004, p. 151). Nevertheless, Arnold again emphasises that the group study should have a ‘definite application in the life of each group member’ (2004, p. 151).

Seeking direct and current applications for new learning resonates with proposals from adult learning theory (Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005). Knowles et al. (2005, p. 46) propose that adults are ‘life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning’. Their learning is motivated by perceiving that it will help them deal with tasks or problems they face. Consequently, learning that has application to their lives is especially significant, with new knowledge, skills, ‘values, and attitudes most effectively [learned] when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations’ (Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005, p. 46). Similarly, in promoting a dialogical approach to adult education, Vella (2002) highlights the principle of ‘immediacy’ in which learners need to see the usefulness or difference the content they are learning can make now. The instructor may, for example, break up a long teaching day involving learning numerous skills into smaller teaching events, where one skill can be learned and then practised in their work environment before returning for a second lesson. In this way, learners can experience the immediate difference the learning can make, and feel confidence in the course, their colleagues, and their instructor. Involving the learners by asking them to propose ways to apply the learning to their situation also honours them as ‘subjects’ of their own learning (2002, pp. 19–20, 161–176).

Tough (1979, in Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005, p. 37) found that adults overwhelmingly began a learning project because they ‘anticipated several desired outcomes and benefits’, whether benefits for the immediate or long-run. These adult learning principles relate well to learning in the SG setting, where the members are encouraged to seek application to their present life situations and take significant charge as subjects of their learning.

2.8.3 Learning takes place in a multifaceted way

While in ancient times, a communal context for this type of learning and formation was assumed, in today’s Western individualistic environment, this understanding cannot be taken for granted (Maddix, 2010). However, ‘the Christian life is best lived in community where worship, fellowship, small groups, and service are practiced’ (Maddix, 2010, p. 242). Consequently, the curriculum for formation goes beyond the schooling model and constitutes ‘*the entire course of the church’s life, found in the fundamental forms of that life*’ (Harris, 1989, p. 63). This multifaceted picture of learning involves *teaching, prayer/worship, fellowship, and service* working together to facilitate growth (Harris, 1989; Maddix, 2010; Walton, 2011, 2014). Harris (1989, p. 16) notes that the material for this educational work in and of the church is the set of ancient forms displayed in the earliest records of the church ‘that, taken together, comprise the curriculum of the church’. She draws this insight from the record of the first church in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 2 (esp. verses 32, 42, 44-47). Here she highlights the church doing key activities that will later come to be seen as classical activities of church ministry:

kerygma, proclaiming the word of Jesus’ resurrection; didache, the activity of teaching; leiturgia, coming together to pray and to re-present Jesus in the breaking of bread; koinonia, or community; and diakonia, caring for those in need.

(Harris, 1989, p. 16)

From this account, Harris (1989) proposes that the fashioning and re-fashioning of this group of forms is the central educational ministry or the primary curriculum of the church and, indeed the course of the church’s life. In ‘fashioning these forms’, she contends, ‘we fashion the church and because we are the church, the fashioning of the forms becomes the fashioning of us’ (1989, p. 17). We are educated not by attending to one of these in isolation of the others but through their ‘interplay with each other in the life of every one of us’ (Harris, 1989, pp. 42–43). To focus on only one, *didache* (teaching or schooling) for example, or even *leiturgia* (praise and prayer), will not do. It is only in the ‘constellation of related forms’ that the church can educate fully. All should be ‘full partners’ with none ‘down played’ or even exalted above

the others (Harris, 1989, pp. 43–44). ‘Working out the forms of church life’ is ‘seen as a whole curriculum’ (Harris, 1989, p. 13).

Walton (2011, 2014) similarly highlights that the various forms or what he calls ‘vital ingredients’ of church practice must work together in ‘the formation of disciples’ (2014, p. 13). For Walton, mission, worship, and Christian community are the three primary sources of this transformation (2014, pp. 3–40). However, the focus is on these happening within a community and all three working together (Walton, 2014, pp. 39–40). On the latter point, Walton (2014), like Harris, draws an analogy from an artistic craft, which for Walton is glassblowing: fire, breath and water – ‘all symbols of the work of the Spirit’ – are combined by the skilful glass-maker into ‘a thing of beauty’ (2014, pp. 39–40). However, the glass cannot be formed and moulded with any elements missing or not working in conjunction with the other. So, it is for discipleship formation where the elements or energies of mission, worship and community must work together for formation to occur.

The role SGs can play in providing a communal space for this formation process is widely noted (Maddix, 2010; Walton, 2014; Wilhoit, 2022). Maddix (2010) posits, ‘The Christian life is best lived in community where worship, fellowship, small groups, and service are practiced. In this context, spiritual formation takes place in and through the community’ (Maddix, 2010, p. 242). Likewise, Wilhoit (2022) asserts, ‘Other people are among the most important sources of God’s grace in our lives.’ (2022, p. 189). Therefore, we should ‘seek out spiritually enriching relationships of love and service. We should put ourselves in places such as small groups and service units where the formation and growth of these relationships are encouraged. We need to invest in community’ (2022, p. 190). While Harris (1989) is concerned with the broader field of education, her thesis lends itself to and finds a natural home in a SG context where the church community is formed as it joins together. Indeed, this fact has not gone unnoticed by Harris herself who specifically references SGs in her thesis (1989, pp. 49–51).

Additionally, most SG proponents (Vandenakker, 1994, p. 5; Arnold, 2004, pp. 21, 85–86; Comiskey, 2015, p. 84) align with Harris by drawing upon the account of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2 for theological support concerning their approach. They seize upon the first major summary (Fitzmyer, 1998) of the believers in the early Jerusalem church, recorded in Acts 2:42–47, as presenting a model and basic set of values that their groups should follow (Vandenakker, 1994; Icenogle, 1994; Donahue and Robinson, 2001; Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Beckham, 2005; Comiskey, 2015; Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010; Arnold, 2004).

Beckham's (2005) 'two-winged' church model argues that a local church should join together for a weekly service, but also divide into SGs that meet again at another time outside of this service. He argues that it is only as the two groups work together and complement each other that a full expression of church life can be experienced, basing this view on Acts 2:46, 'Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple' [larger joint meeting], 'and breaking bread from house to house' [SG community meeting]. Drawn on such scriptures, many theorists see SGs as not merely practical or organisational utilities but rather constitutes a restoration of an original and valuable dimension of the early church, long ignored in large sections of the modern church. In this view, the theology of SG communities emerge firstly out of the theology of the oneness or community among the Trinity of the Godhead and people as His image bearers (Icenogle, 1994; Bilezikian, 1997; Donahue and Robinson, 2001). People created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) are not called to be alone and more fully reflect 'God and Jesus when [they] live in harmony' O'Halloran (2002, p. 15) writes.

At least four components are identified to which the Jerusalem believers were 'continually devoting themselves' (NASB, 1995) to:

1. teaching (cf. 2:42; 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42);
2. fellowship, which likely highlights the concept of the group or community of the believers built together by the Spirit (Brown, 1997) or 'spiritual fellowship' (Pervo, 2009, p. 92);
3. breaking of bread, presumably indicating the Eucharistic celebration (Brown, 1997; contra, Dunn, 2008) as it is not a normal term for a 'nourishing' meal (Pervo, 2009, p. 93 n.37), which nonetheless may have been combined along with it (Cwiekowski, 1988; Barrett, 1998);
4. prayers (pl.), likely both formal and informal in nature (Cwiekowski, 1988; Brown, 1997; contra, Barrett, 1998).

One should also note the minor summary (2:47b) at the end of Luke's Pentecost narrative, especially considering the importance attached to it by many SG practitioners regarding evangelism (Arnold, 2004) or mission. Surratt draws three expectations for SGs based on the model of the church in Acts 2:42-47, namely, discipleship, community, and evangelism (2015, pp. 7-9). However, Walton (2011) contends that an emphasis on evangelism in the SGs is often left wanting.

2.8.4 Learning is social

While the previous point has highlighted the multifaceted forms of learning, including community, working together to produce transformation, some highlight the communal or social component even further. In approaching the question of how teaching for spiritual growth is best achieved, a prominent answer historically has been through instruction, with the resultant setting up of classrooms, teachers, and formal educational programs (Downs, 1994). However, while ‘truth’ is communicated through this method, many theorists have bemoaned the transformational effects of such an approach in ‘bringing about changed lives’ (Downs, 1994, p. 156). Walton highlights the Gospel texts as evidence for his three primary sources of transformation: mission, worship and Christian community (2014, pp. 3–40). However, he also draws upon situated learning theory, social learning theory, and social constructivism to explain *how* communities affect such formation. He argues that a community’s knowledge, language, skills and behaviours are developed and co-created through participation with others in a group. The individual aligns, both consciously and unconsciously, his/her outlook and attitudes as they operate and engage with others, often being strongly influenced by the modelling of leaders in their midst (Walton, 2014, p. 31; see also, Hockridge, 2021, pp. 23–24). For Walton (2014), this is where the Church comes in: ‘The Church *is* a social ethic, and the Church *is* a particular form of education’ (2014, p. 32, drawing upon Stanley Hauerwas). Harris (1989) makes a similar point referencing the ideas of Westerhoff, among others (1989, pp. 61–64).

Westerhoff’s community of faith-enculturation theory highlighted an educational paradigm broader than schooling (Westerhoff, 1976), and emphasised how experiences in the life of the community’s life and the church’s liturgy ‘*are curriculum*’ (Harris, 1989, p. 62). Thus, Westerhoff (1976) and others, such as Richards (1975; 1998), strongly criticised such a formal approach to education and offered an alternative approach based on social learning theory. Generally, social learning theory emphasises the role of relationships and modelling in passing on the faith. While Westerhoff (1976) roots this approach in the faith community, Richards (1975; 1998) focuses more on individual relationships (Downs, 1994, p. 156), yet both emphasise the social, as well as nonformal and informal aspects of religious learning. The church promotes spiritual growth in its members ‘through speaking the Christian language and beliefs, expressing the Christian attitudes and affections, and practising the Christian behaviours in its worship, witness and service’, while only secondarily through direct formal instruction (Astley and Francis, 2013, p. 51). According to social cognitive theorist Bandura

(1986) ‘most human behavior is learned by observation through modeling’ (1986, p. 47). People incorporate information from models through observation, ‘which takes place in a variety of ways: conscious or unconscious, ad hoc or systematically pursued within a community context’ (Oman and Thoresen, 2003, p. 154).

In a SG setting, one of the ways that this happens vicariously is through testimonials from other members. Members are encouraged to share thanksgiving and gratitude for answers to prayer or the benefits received. These stories may include how adherence to certain practices or one’s understanding of God plays a part in such testimonies. ‘When accepted, such information transmits vicarious incentives that can enhance spiritual persistence’ (Oman and Thoresen, 2003, p. 155). Extracting underlying rules from the judgment and actions of others can elicit new forms of behaviour that go beyond what has been seen and heard in their example (Bandura, 1999). However, Wuthnow (1993b) expresses concern that the lack of focus on explicit creeds and doctrines in the SG leads to the development of implicit norms by the group itself, which often take place through discussions of the personal application of small portions of scripture or religious texts. In such discussions. ‘Personal testimonies carry enormous weight’; however, these are influenced by the norms and implicit assumptions of the group. ‘In the telling of personal stories, one gradually becomes a different person’ their identity ‘depends in subtle ways on the feedback given by other members’ (Wuthnow, 1993b, p. 1240). However, the Christian Story can be made accessible through many means, including the ‘living witness’ and experience of individuals to that Story (Groome, 1998, p. 242). Testimonies of one’s activity, inspired by Christian faith, can be engaging and form a ‘praxislike method of making the Story/Vision accessible’ (Groome, 1998, p. 242). Such experiences need not be seen as representing an exhaustive understanding of the Christian Story or implying that one should not continue to grow in their understanding and outworking of their faith throughout life (Groome, 1998, p. 244). However, it can form part of the dialogical process of learning involving members’ experience and the Bible or sacred tradition in conversation within a community of believers (Groome, 1998). Indeed, with a little bit of coaching or advice from the SG leader on structuring testimonies, they can form one of the most influential and compelling means of teaching (Wilhoit, 2022, pp. 144–148).

Religious ‘socialisation’ is further defined by Sherkat (2003) as ‘an interactive process through which social agents influence individuals’ religious beliefs and understandings’ (2003, p. 151). Sherkat outlines several agents of influence: parents and family, spouses, denominations and education. These have socialising influences on individuals when the source is trusted, is a

valued connection and is salient for religious faith. Despite Wuthnow's (1993a) contention that 'Over the past half-century, denominationalism has declined seriously as the primary mode of identification in American religion' (1993a, p. 156), Sherkat (2003) contends that it continues to exert a socialising influence on individuals 'through their particular orientations toward beliefs and offerings of opportunities for religious action' (2003, p. 158). The church message is passed on to the congregation through various roles, from the Minister, youth-worker, to the Sunday school teacher. It also comes in letter form, through published material within the group that is often provided by or at least approved by the group's leaders. Congregations provide a context where friendship or kinship relationships and networks can be developed and consolidated. Collaborative activities can channel 'peer influences on religion' (2003, p. 159). Westerhoff's observations are germane here:

a community of faith must be small enough to maintain meaningful, purposeful interactions among its members [...] we need to interact within the intimacy of a closely knit community in which fellowship and care for each other can be experienced, and in which the struggles of faith and life can be shared.

(2012, p. 52)

All these ideas are relevant in considering the SG approach to learning. An approach that highly values the modelling of leaders (Arnold, 2004, pp. 42–60) and members alike (Richards, 1975, pp. 44–45, 251), as well as the participation of all the members in the key activities of the group. As noted earlier, SGs can be highly trusting and relational environments. They regularly share other vital characteristics for Christian nurture, indicated by Westerhoff (2012): a common life shaping story; agreed authority (in Evangelicalism, the Bible features significantly here); common rituals; familial type community; a commitment to a common end beyond itself. Consequently, SGs provide an ideal setting for such socialisation. Indeed, Malley (2004) notes concerning one of the cornerstones of Evangelicalism that: 'Evangelical Biblicism is cultural inasmuch as it is a pattern of beliefs and practices inherited by individuals as part of their membership in Evangelical communities' (2004, p. 2).

2.8.5 Learning requires voluntary active participation and reflection on experience

Of course, individuals and even collective groups within any given denomination may have unique religious preferences (Sherkat, 2003, p. 159). While communities 'socialize people into their values and practices', the individuals 'active participation and 'cognitive engagement are required' (Walton, 2014, p. 31; see also, Carlson, 2010). Individuals retain a strong ability to reject such 'socialization pressure and to choose which connections guide their religious preferences' (Sherkat, 2003, p. 151; see also, Westerhoff, 2012, p. 136). Socialisation need not

imply a simple ‘transmission of ready-made patterns’ or a permanently sealed curriculum that is passively taken in. Indeed, Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi’s (2019) research based on 18 (the youngest generation) out of 48 in-depth interviews of young adults concluded that ‘when religiosity is transmitted successfully or partly successfully, reconstruction and adaptation to the individual’s needs is more common’ (2019, p. 9). In SGs (as elsewhere), such interactive engagement is essential to maintain, as otherwise, SGs could widely drift from the moorings of the Christian message they were intended to inculcate. For this reason, the enculturation model of Christian education:

needs to be supplemented by an ‘Interpretation Approach’, in which individuals or (preferably) small groups self-consciously and explicitly seek to relate the Christian tradition to their own perceived beliefs, and their reflections on their own practices and situations.

(Astley and Francis, 2013, p. 51)

This reflective model engages in an interactive discussion between the member's experience and the Christian tradition (Groome, 1998, pp. 100–106; Astley and Francis, 2013). A Christian education that encourages disciples to be critically reflective and think for themselves about their faith. A model of critical education where learners come to possess the Christian faith for themselves through a dialogue between their experience, the scriptures, the Christian tradition, and the input of others. Importantly, individuals must have their say, evaluating and discerning for themselves and in the context of their own experiences and culture, aspects of the Christian faith in order to truly accept and embrace them (Astley, 2018, pp. 23–24). Experience provides a rich resource to draw upon, and ‘engaging in, reflecting upon, and making meaning’ of experiences, whether they ‘are primarily physical, emotional, cognitive, social, or spiritual’ (Merriam and Bierema, 2014, p. 104), is at the very core of adult learning. Using and ‘adapting’ such experiences ‘to new situations’ helps understand present learning and apply new learning in the future (Merriam and Bierema, 2014, p. 105). However, presuppositions, hardness, or biased convictions that naturally develop over time can also prevent learning. Adults sometimes need to unlearn past learning to avoid being unresponsive to new information or approaches (Merriam and Bierema, 2014, pp. 105–106). Therefore, experience, while a great resource, needs to be reflected upon and informed by the content of the Christian story and engaging with a reflective community can add a critical perspective to the process.

Listening to and being challenged by other people’s perspectives can help in this regard and has resonance with aspects of Mezirow’s (1978, 2009) transformative learning theory. A key part of this theory is to encourage learners to revise their meaning perspectives, often acquired

uncritically through socialisation, and to facilitate ‘perspective transformation by providing both alternative discourses and interaction-based learning opportunities’ (Langan, Sheese and Davidson, 2009, p. 48). Such alternative viewpoints and learning opportunities can come through being exposed to the perspectives of others. Perspective taking can challenge deep-seated assumptions one has and, at times, may lead to ‘recognize[ing], reassess[ing], and modify[ing] the structures of assumptions and expectations that frame our tacit points of view and influence our thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions’ (Mezirow, 2009, p. 18). Perspective taking involves a person putting themselves in the position of another person. The other person may be from a very different background or hold different beliefs, yet the goal of perspective taking is to understand them, which may include the use of imagination, as highlighted by Southworth (2022):

Before we can effectively consider alternative perspectives, including potentially disconfirming evidence to our own view, we need to first understand the perspectives of others. By imagining what it is like to be in someone else’s position, to understand how they think and feel about the issue under consideration, we can better appreciate their alternative view.

(2022, p. 50)

Perspective taking is helpful in critical thinking, challenging cognitive biases, and understanding the viewpoints of others. Such understanding holds the potential to lead to transformation in the learner engaging in it, as before a person can critically assess an alternative viewpoint, he needs to understand it clearly. This understanding may confirm or disconfirm the meaning perspectives of the learner or broaden their horizons and understanding of others. Understanding the perspective of others may be facilitated through face-to-face interaction or in other ways, such as interacting with autobiographies or novels that expose the learner to alternative experiences. When joined with critical reflection and dialogue perspective taking can engender significant transformation (Southworth, 2022).

Westerhoff (2012) updates his earlier writings (1976) by describing three pathways to God. The first ‘experiential’ pathway involves participating in the life of a faith community and more closely reflects the socialisation model we have observed above. The second, ‘reflective’ way, involves individuals taking personal responsibility for their own faith and life. They pursue the intellectual knowledge that derives from reflection on their experience and the community’s story, which involves testing the community’s story and internalising it but also reshaping it where necessary. The third ‘integrative’ path holds in tension and combines the approach of the other two, involving conserving tradition while also maintaining a reforming, prophetic

spirit to re-tradition where necessary. It also requires that one remains dependent on God and interdependent on one another within the faith community while traversing this pathway (2012, pp. 102–105).

Groome (1998) has written on what is involved for a community to grow in true wisdom, which he describes with the word ‘conation’ (1998, pp. 26–32). Conation goes beyond cognition, the former involving a more holistic vision of growth ‘as conation engages the whole “being” of people—their corporeal, mental, and volitional aspects’ (Groome, 1998, p. 116). Groome’s (1998) shared Christian praxis approach to education involves a process of five movements that interact and overlap with one another. His key argument ‘is the necessity for a Christian to live reflectively, in community with other people and God, and in dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision’ (Ireland-Verwoerd, 2015). Consequently, the approach has a dialogical and participative style; hence it is shared. The word praxis signals that it engages a community of people in common discernment and decision-making based on their present experience and in conversation with the Christian Story/Vision.

Additionally, it is Christian in that it ‘makes accessible to participants the Story/Vision of the Christian community over time and enables them to appropriate it to their lives’ (Groome, 1998, p. 133). Following Groome’s approach group participants:

1. Express their own or the group's present action or experience.
2. Critically reflect on this present action, which might include their reasons, assumptions, prejudices, and their preferred consequences for such praxis.
3. Make the Christian Story and Vision accessible to the group. This includes the present and historical faith life of the community, expressed through the scriptures and traditions, and contains a visionary element that promises, calls, and empowers the members in their Christian calling
4. Critically dialogue between their present praxis and the Christian Story/Vision. This includes questioning how this Story affirms, questions or calls them beyond their present praxis and critically appropriating that Vision to their own lives and contexts
5. They are provided with an opportunity to holistically respond and live their faith in the world in line with the claims and values of the Christian Story (Groome, 1998, pp. 175–293).

2.8.6 Learning goes beyond simple socialisation

Groome (1998) is clear that socialisation alone is insufficient for a deep development of a personally owned faith and may only serve to maintain the status quo. As agent-subjects in a dialectic relationship with the social context we inhabit (1998, pp. 101–106), we should purposely encourage personal and social self-reflection ‘in a community of authentic discourse and thus heighten the dialectic with our social context’ (1998, p. 102). To do this, group members must voluntarily engage in such a process. People eventually recoil against demands or social pressure to participate. However, an invitation with a welcoming disposition, together with reasonable justification regarding the potential common good of participation, proves productive (Groome, 1998, pp. 99–100; see also, Westerhoff, 2012, p. 136; and, Felten, Cook-Sather and Bovill, 2014, pp. 148–149).

For Groome (1998), the Christian Story/Vision that he calls participants to dialogue with has a broader meaning (1998, p. 216) than Evangelicals might generally be used to (Downs, 1994). However, in utilising his approach within Evangelicalism, such dialogue might imply that people think critically about their lives in light of the Biblical message (Rynsburger and Lamport, 2008). This simplification of Groome indicates the tendency towards *Biblicism* among many Evangelicals (Bebbington, 1989) and the hesitancy they would have with a dialogical hermeneutic that would ‘critique the Bible on the basis of [their] experience’ (Downs, 1994, p. 191). Notwithstanding this, Evangelicals are receptive to critiquing their experience in keeping with their growing understanding of theology and even reconsidering theology when it does not account for their Christian experience, and in such a dialogue, Groome’s approach is highly valued (Downs, 1994, p. 191). For example, Walton (2014) notes that in the context of engaging the three areas of mission, worship and community, Christian education is essential to critique, strengthen and extend each area, and change their practice where necessary to reflect Christ’s calling more accurately. Such education is ‘centred on the practice of Christian living’ and distinguished from simply learning about religion. This is important for, as noted above, a SG that is only forming people in a socially constructed manner runs the risk of simply perpetuating the present status quo even if this runs well short of the standard desired (Walton, 2014, pp. 57–60; see also, Astley and Francis, 1994, p. 225; Rynsburger and Lamport, 2008). Christian education ‘harnessed to the three formative energies’ is required to ‘challenge and change [...] practices’ and ‘deepen discipleship’ so that believers can ‘faithfully live out the calling to follow Christ’ (Walton, 2014, p. 43). Faith communities themselves require reinvigoration, ongoing transformation and the

encouragement of prophetic voices to keep them from drifting from the Christian message and alert to the new things God wants to develop among them (Pazmiño, 2010, pp. 360–361; see also, Astley, 2018, p. 25, n.6; Rynsburger and Lamport, 2008). Consequently, Pazmiño (2010) emphasises the importance of discerning and undergirding an individual’s or community’s spiritual formation with Christian education/information. This, in turn, ‘provide[s] a platform for spiritual transformation as persons, communities, and structures are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ’ (Pazmiño, 2010, pp. 364–365). Likewise, Rynsburger and Lamport (2008) emphasise the importance of leaders teaching in the SGs and the need to train leaders for this role. Similarly, Harris (1989) highlights the role of *didache* in raising questions and challenging assumptions (1989, p. 118).

Discussion and dialogue in SGs can help individuals critically reflect and explore their experiences in context, in conversation with one another, and the Biblical message, ultimately leading to growth in faith. Participatory discussion methods are widely accepted among adult educationalists, albeit such methods require attention so as not merely to be used manipulatively to meet the predetermined needs of the leader (Brookfield, 2004; Pazmiño, 2010, pp. 361–362). Additionally, an atmosphere of competition among the group members regarding their contributions should be guarded against, as should the misguided interpretation that silence is ‘equivalent to intellectual inactivity’ for it is, in fact, often ‘an essential contemplative element in the praxis of reflective learning’ (Brookfield, 2004, p. 213). However, adequately conducted discussion can usefully expose members to diverse perspectives and help them see the world as others see it. It helps members externalise their assumptions regarding their values, beliefs or actions and to be introduced to complexity and ambiguity on issues (Brookfield, 2004).

2.8.7 Learning involves reliance on God

The importance of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines in SGs have already been discussed above (2.7.3). However, a more pointed reference to the Spirit’s role in transformational learning is appropriate. For while spiritual formation requires intentionality and includes human effort, it only takes place through the presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit (Wilhoit, 2022). Correspondingly, Harris (1989) sees the fashioning of curriculum as a holy work in which God dwells with His church in, His hands holding her in the process and His Spirit and grace enabling her to become all she is called to be. The work is a united labour of God and his people created in his image, fashioning even as they ‘are being fashioned’

(1989, p. 16). Facilitators of such work should see themselves as artists and poets firstly, ‘colleagues of the brooding, hovering, indwelling Spirit’, ‘and only secondly, if at all, as technicians’ (1989, p. 171). Similarly, Walton (2014) stresses that the ultimate ‘key’, without which activities will not form disciples, is the presence of Jesus. The believers’ ongoing relationship with the living Christ accompanying them into mission, worship, and community is vital for formation (Walton, 2014, p. 13). Likewise, Westerhoff (2012, pp. 141–142) notes that a full catechesis must combine instruction, critical reflection, and formation and that this is ultimately a model derived from how Jesus taught. His life was an example of his teaching, his parables engendered reflection, but ‘mostly he invited people into relationship with him and into a community of practice’ (2012, p. 142). Similarly, Arnold (2004), while not negating the important role of the leader (2004, Chap 3 and pp. 151-154), warns against ‘underestimating’ the role of the Holy Spirit ‘in applying the Word to our lives’ (2004, pp. 144–145). He also highlights the role of communal learning, noting that ‘Christians are most effective when they meet together and learn from the Word of God’ (2004, p. 145).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter proposes that learning is lifelong and holistic, impacting the whole of people’s beings. It is multifaceted, taking place through the many vital aspects of church practice working together to form disciples. These include, but are not limited to, scripture reading, prayer, worship, and service. It has been further observed that the SG community provides an excellent format for attending to these aspects, thus becoming a socialising force by its very nature. The approach to multiple forms of learning working together in a communal context is supported by scriptural examples, especially in the Gospel accounts and the summary of the first church in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 2. The approach is also well attested to by adult learning theorists. Adult learning principles also highlight the value of providing opportunities in SGs for members to seek application to their present life situations and take significant charge as subjects of their own learning.

However, two underlying principles are noted. Firstly, while teaching is essential, it is only secondary to God, who is always the first instrumental cause of faith which is a gift from Him (Eph 2:8) (Groome, 1998, p. 18). Hence, the importance of the Holy Spirit in teaching is reflected above. Secondly, regarding socialisation, it is emphasised that while ‘we are bound by relationships that make influence possible’, this is not ‘determinative’ (Westerhoff, 2012,

p. 137). There is a dialectical relationship between people and place in education, and this requires active participation from individuals in the process, critically reflecting on their context (Groome, 1998, pp. 101–104). At their best Evangelical SGs approach this dialectic by critiquing their experienced faith and present praxis through their member’s reflective conversation with one another around the Biblical text (Maddix and Estep Jr., 2017). That such a critique is facilitated in the context of a small and trusted group of fellow believers lends support to the process and aligns with the preferred approach highlighted above. Such a group helps members accept certain influences from their social contexts while ‘refusing or adapting some, and forging a synthesis that reflects new life for [them]selves as agent-subjects and for [their] sociocultural situation’ (Groome, 1998, p. 101). Thus, individuals retain a responsibility to actively participate in the learning process and remain open to the process of change.

Similarly, the groups they engage in may require reforming input. The importance of interaction with the Christian story and the alternative perspectives of others is highlighted to engender such reform and growth. Listening to and critically engaging with others from diverse backgrounds aids in challenging bias, highlighting problem areas, and preparing learners to seek transformation. Christian education and the dialogue of a Christian community in conversation with the Christian Story are essential for individuals and SGs to experience growth in Christlikeness.

Chapter 3: Methodology and research design

3.1 Introduction

The chapter discusses the research methodology, considering my ontological and epistemological commitments, and outlines the study's design choices and processes followed, including the approach to sampling selection, data collection and analysis. The chapter also outlines strategies for ensuring quality in research and a detailed rationale for the analytic and transaction approaches adopted in this research.

3.2 A qualitative study

This research seeks to understand the place regularly attending an Evangelical small group has on the growth of an individual's Christian faith. Developing such a dissertation requires understanding the use of social scientific approaches in research. These methods enable the researcher to explore theories, discover truths about the world of those researched, and empirically validate one's findings (Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017). Such social scientific research in education follows two general approaches: quantitative and qualitative (Castellan, 2010; Punch, 2016; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017). Researchers disagree regarding the *use* of quantitative or qualitative approaches (Castellan, 2010; Bryman, 2012), and it should be noted from the outset that there are problems drawing general and rigid distinctions between both research methods and their presumed epistemological and ontological stances (Bryman, 2012, pp. 614–625). Nevertheless, the approach (qualitative) choice for this thesis and the type used within that approach (case study) necessitates such general considerations to be engaged with below.

The strategy employed by quantitative and qualitative approaches broadly differs in several key areas. While necessarily general, it is helpful to outline three such areas as an overarching framework for this thesis: 1) Their position regarding the '*role of theory* in relation to the research', whether it is deductive or inductive. 2) Their *ontological* orientations 3) Their *epistemological* orientations (Bryman, 2012, p. 36, italics added). The first point concerns the purpose of data. Under this point, the nature and collection of data will also be considered. The second and third points relate to the researcher's philosophical perspectives.

Quantitative research tends to be *deductive*. Its work with data is especially useful to validate an already constructed theory or test a hypothesis (Salomon, 1991; Castellan, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Johnson and Christensen, 2012; Creswell, 2014; McCusker and Gunaydin, 2014). However, it is not as helpful in discovering or exploring a theory as qualitative research (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Qualitative research often generates a theory through a more inductive approach (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2014). Qualitative research values the insider's viewpoint and is strong at understanding people's personal meanings, rich worldviews, and perspectives of their lived experience (Johnson and Christensen, 2012), studying a phenomenon intensively and in-depth (Swanborn, 2010, pp. 1–2).

In quantitative research, data is generally collected using formal instruments (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2014; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017), which lend themselves to the empirical nature of a quantitative framework. The researcher is seen to stand at a distance and therefore be objective about the data collected (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2014; Atieno, 2009 and Sefotho, 2015 challenge this view). However, the weakness of such distance is the loss of understanding of people in their natural settings—an example regarding this thesis is understanding growth in faith in the natural context of SGs. While statistics are useful for yielding generalisations, they are less helpful for analysing new phenomena or understanding the meaning and personal perspectives of how such phenomena affect individuals (Castellan, 2010; Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Such weaknesses can be readily overcome, and the lived experience is exposed more fully through utilising a qualitative research approach (Walliman, 2011), and for these reasons, I took an inductive, qualitative approach for this research.

3.3 Philosophical assumptions

Beyond and underlying (Sefotho, 2015), the distinctive approaches taken by qualitative and quantitative research to collecting and using data are their respective philosophical assumptions about research and the world in general (Atieno, 2009). Two key aspects of these philosophical differences are the ontological and epistemological assumptions each makes. Such 'philosophical underpinnings' must constitute 'the driving force' guiding a thesis (Sefotho, 2015, p. 23).

3.3.1 Ontological assumptions

Neither quantitative nor qualitative research paradigms have a ‘greater claim to truth’; both approaches have aided substantially in studying educational research (Castellan, 2010, p. 2). Nevertheless, they do often work with a set of different elemental assumptions (Castellan, 2010).

Quantitative researchers generally identify with the ontological position of *objectivism*, the theory that social and physical reality is external to the social actors (Castellan, 2010; Bryman, 2012). Consequently, reality exists separately from one’s ‘practices and understandings’ and is entirely independent ‘of human ways of knowing about it’, an understanding often referred to as ‘realism’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). This is in contrast to social ‘constructionism’ that instead sees social entities as ‘social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of [the] social actors’ (Bryman, 2012, p. 32). Consequently, reality ‘cannot be separated from human practices, and so knowledge is always going to reflect our perspective’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). Hence, reality ‘depends on human interpretation and knowledge’, an understanding often referred to as ‘relativism’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). Even ‘the researchers’ accounts of the social world are constructions’ rather than ‘one that can be regarded as definitive’ (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). Of course, ‘this does not mean that the world is not real’, but as non-neutral observers who are part of society, ‘we can only experience it personally through our perceptions which are influenced by our preconceptions, beliefs and values’ (Walliman, 2011, p. 22). The ontological continuum is graphically illustrated below.

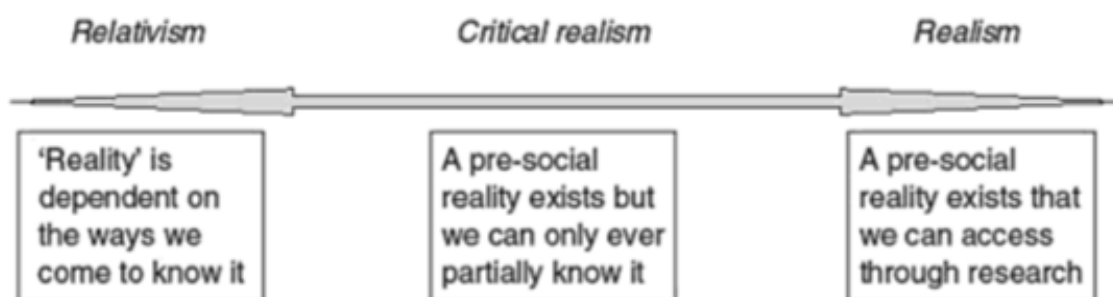


Figure 1. The ontology continuum (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 26)

The reader will notice another ontological position that sits somewhere between realism and relativism, called ‘critical realism’ (Archer et al., 2016). This is becoming more popular in qualitative research and may be viewed as a reconciliatory approach (Easton, 2010; Walliman,

2011, p. 24; Braun and Clarke, 2013, pp. 31–32). Critical realists acknowledge ‘a real and knowable world which sits “behind” the subjective and socially-located knowledge’ accessible to the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). Utilising Bhaskar’s terminology, an ‘intransitive’ world ‘that objectively exists’ and the ‘transitive world’, which is a ‘human construction of that reality’ (Houston, 2014, p. 220). Thus as ‘knowledge is viewed as socially influenced, it is thought to reflect a separate reality that we can only *partially* access’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). However, the claim that ‘some “authentic” reality exists’ is necessary ‘to produce knowledge that might “make a difference”’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). Further, critical realism argues that the underlying reality can be ‘discovered’, at least partially, utilising ‘the process of interpretation while doing theoretical and practical work particularly in the social sciences [...] Concepts and theories about social events’ can be ‘developed on the basis of their observable effects, and interpreted in such a way that they can be understood and acted upon, even if the interpretation is open to revision as understanding grows’ (Walliman, 2011, pp. 24–25, see also Levers, 2013, p. 5).

3.3.2 Epistemological assumptions

Positivism, constructionism and contextualism:

Another general assumption underlying quantitative and qualitative research concerns their epistemology. Quantitative research tends towards an epistemology of positivism based on a scientific model, whereas qualitative research towards an interpretivist epistemology (Kalof, Dan and Dietz, 2008; Bryman, 2012; Punch, 2016).

Epistemologically, positivism is the common corresponding position of an ontological position of objectivism, as sketched above. Positivism assumes an external reality that is the same and shared by all, ‘that does not depend on our existence’ and which can be reliably interpreted through our senses (Walliman, 2011, p. 20), the control of variables, and the removal of contamination and bias (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Since the essence of that knowledge is unchangeable no matter who studies it, it is considered ‘universally applicable’ (Levers, 2013, p. 3).

Constructionism argues that that which we know regarding ‘the world, and ourselves and other objects in the world’ is ‘constructed (produced) through various discourses and systems of meaning we all reside within’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 30). Consequently, the researcher will only ever present ‘a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded

as definitive' (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). While taking this epistemological position does not mean that knowledge is simply created or that no 'material of experiential reality exists', it does differ from positivist positions in that no singular reality provides a '*foundation* for true knowledge' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 30).

Again, sitting in the middle and 'somewhat akin to critical realism' is the epistemology of contextualism, which is sometimes seen as a light version of constructionism. While contextualism does not assume a single method to get to the truth or even a *single* reality, it does maintain an interest in the notion of the truth, rejected by constructionism. However, as its name implies, it highlights that knowledge emerges from specific contexts, reflects positions held by the researcher(s), and is consequently local, situated and provisional (Braun and Clarke, 2013, pp. 30–31).

3.3.3 A summary conclusion regarding my philosophical approach

It is now generally held that researchers need to explicitly state their philosophical positions (Walliman, 2011; Sefotho, 2015). The logical correlations between ontology and epistemology must be understood, as the researcher must consciously choose his/her research paradigm and aim towards harmonisation (Levers, 2013; Sefotho, 2015). The paradigm should be in harmony with his/her beliefs and values concerning the nature of reality (Levers, 2013). Ontological distinctions will influence how research is carried out and even how questions are formulated (Bryman, 2012). Indeed, in so far as ontology is the study of 'being' or what constitutes the 'reality' we want to study, *our* ontology is the first and essential presupposition we must define to start our research (Sefotho, 2015, p. 30).

In this thesis, I will be engaging with and utilising case study theorists whose approaches tend towards positivism (Yin, 2018), constructionism (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998) and contextualism (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, the open and adaptable approach afforded by constructionism and contextualism is more suited to my research. Philosophically Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) follow a constructivist approach, which gives scope for understanding an individual's growth in faith in relation to the specific contexts of SGs. However, I lean more towards a critical realist ontology than they do, and I couple that with a version of contextualism noted above. I feel that this adds to their approach providing a helpful heuristic to investigate the experiences of believers in SGs, and to accept that their representation of these experiences indeed reflects an underlying truth, a point especially

relevant concerning the experiences of God working in their lives (Archer, Collier and Porpora, 2004).

Consequently, my approach will primarily engage the model of Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2013). I will hold a constructivist/contextualist epistemology complemented by a relativist/critical realist ontology. My ontological and epistemological stance aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2013, 2021b) approach and is still congruent with Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998), albeit my philosophical assumptions diverge slightly from the latter two theorists, as noted.

3.4 A case study

Having settled upon a qualitative approach to this study, the next question I decided which type(s) of qualitative research to use. Under the overarching term of *qualitative research* or *qualitative inquiry*, various writers organise different types in different ways. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlight six of the more commonly used approaches (see also, Creswell and Poth, 2018).

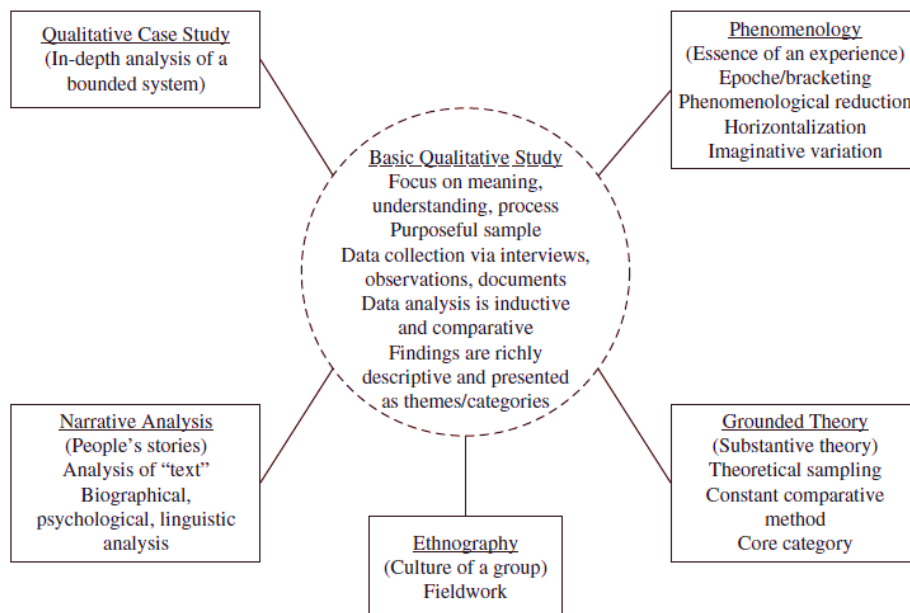


Figure 2. Types of qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 42)

In some ways, all these different forms ‘are trying to uncover participants’ understandings of their experiences’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 24). Additionally, they share the common qualitative characteristics of ‘the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). Thus, while each approach has distinctiveness (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018), they also have commonalities and can even overlap with one another (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 41; Yin, 2018, p. 13), as in Bielo’s research (2009), which combines both ethnographic and case study approaches. However, combining different qualitative research methods is not recommended for the beginning researcher (Creswell and Poth, 2018, pp. 65–66). Case studies are a preferred choice if the researcher has little or no control over the behavioural event(s) if the case is contemporary, and if it is answering a how or why question(s) (Yin, 2018, pp. 9–13), criteria that parallel the research parameters for this thesis. As with other research methods, they can be *explanatory, descriptive or exploratory* (Yin, 2018, pp. 6–9). Consequently, this thesis utilised a ‘*qualitative case study*’ (Stake, 2005, p. 443). Merriam’s (1998; 2015) outline for conducting a case study was generally followed and includes conducting a literature review, establishing a theoretical framework, clarifying the research problem, selecting a sample, designing questions, gathering data and analysing and reporting data.

3.4.1 Defining case study

Various definitions and approaches to case studies have been postulated (Merriam, 1998; VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). For Yin, a case study is a method to empirically and deeply investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (the case) and context are not obviously evident or easily distinguishable (2018, p. 15). The latter part of this definition already differentiates it from experimental research, which tends to separate phenomena from their context. Yin’s definition also (a) highlights that ‘understanding of complex social phenomena and real-life events’ are the goals of case studies (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018, p. 2); (b) views ‘case studies as a *research* method’ (2018, p. 15). Alternatively, Stake (1995, 2005) contends that case studies are ‘not a methodological choice’ (2005, p. 443) but rather a choice of what is to be studied, which generally involves people or programs. The confusion is partly ‘that the process of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (the case) and the product of this type of investigation’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). For Merriam, like Stake, ‘the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delineating the object of study,

the case' (1998, p. 27; 2015, p. 38). Again the case boundedness is emphasised and defined as follows, 'You can "fence in" what you are going to study' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 38). Assessing such boundedness comes by asking 'how finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 39). The case could be one child or a classroom, for example. It must be specific and be able to have a boundary. Thus, a teacher or an innovative teaching program could be a case, whereas teaching lacks the specificity or boundedness to be referred to as a case. A case is 'a bounded system', an object as distinct from a process, making people or programs prospective cases (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Additionally, a 'relevant social group, organization, or geographic area; the type of evidence to be collected; and the priorities for data collection and analysis' can all help clarify the boundaries of the case (Yin, 2018, p. 31).

The definition above ties into one of Merriam's (1998) quantitative case study features: they are *particularistic*, focusing on something particular (1998, p. 29; also Stake, 1995, pp. 1, 8). Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) suggestion that one could think about the case as 'a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context' (2015, p. 38) is helpful for this thesis, as this research seeks to understand how the phenomenon of discipleship growth occurs in a particular SG of adults (a bounded system). The second feature of quantitative case studies is that they are *descriptive*. The focus is on understanding a 'phenomenon or entity (the case)' as far as possible and providing a holistic 'thick' description and explanation (1998, p. 29; see also Stake, 1995, pp. 39, 42, 63–64, 102; modified by Yin, 2018, p. 18). Finally, the third feature of quantitative case studies is that they are *heuristic* in that they 'illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study' (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). This can lead to fresh discovery, confirmation, extension or rethinking of previous understandings and an expectation that previously unknown connections between variables may emerge (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). This research is bounded by involving the experiences of specific individuals from specific Evangelical SGs operating at a given period in Ireland. The results are thickly described and illuminative.

Case studies can also be single or multiple (Yin, 2018, pp. 17, 47–64; see also Merriam, 1998, p. 40), as indicated in Figure 3, which outlines Yin's (2018) basic types and designs. For this thesis, our interests align closely with Yin's (2018) holistic multiple-case design.

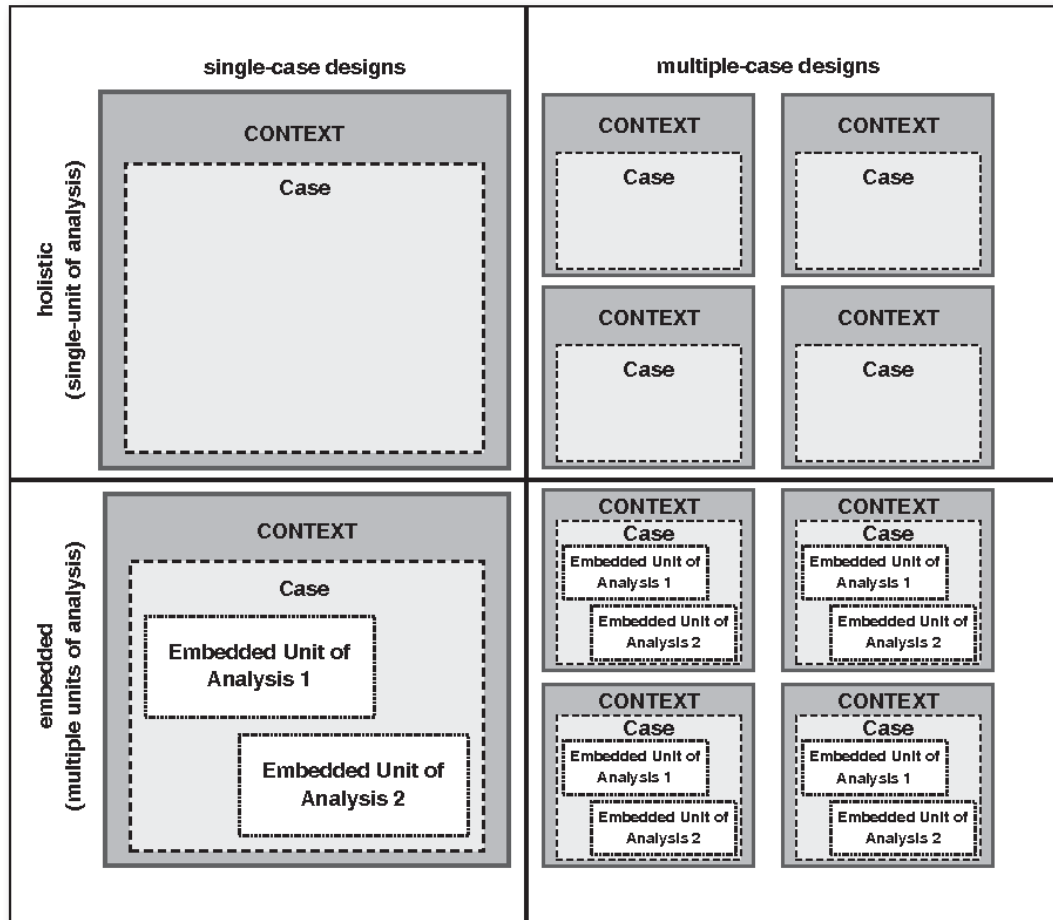


Figure 3. Case study research designs (Yin, 2018, p. 48)

However, Stake (1995) further clarifies to the approach this research takes, helpfully identifying three types or categories of case studies (Stake, 1995, pp. 3–6, 2005, p. 445). 1) The *intrinsic case study* has an intrinsic interest in the particular case itself; 2) alternatively, when we have ‘a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case’ (Stake, 1995, p. 3), an *instrumental case study* form of inquiry can be used. While this type of study gives detailed attention to the particular case, such interest is used in a secondary and supportive way to facilitate the main focus of the study, which is to understand something else beyond the case itself. Thus, in an instrumental case study, different interests are working together, both particular (in the specific case) and general (in using the particular to understand the wider question). Such a focus on an issue of external interest will also influence the choice of case studied, which may be typical, although sometimes not, depending on the information sought; 3) finally, to understand a ‘phenomenon, population, or general condition’ (Stake, 2005, p.

445) several instrumental case studies can be coordinated together with each case study adding to the overall answering of the question or information sought. This type is ‘even less interest[ed] in one particular case’ and is referred to by Stake as a *multiple or collective case study* (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Various cases are purposely chosen and may be similar or different. The extent that they may manifest some common characteristic may or may not be known beforehand. However, they are chosen with the belief that they can provide a better understanding and even theorise about the larger phenomena of interest (Stake, 1995, 2005).

Table 2. Case study categories (Personal collection, based on Stake, 1995)

| | Stake’s case study categories | |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| | <i>Intrinsic case study</i> | <i>Instrumental or Multiple/Collective case study</i> |
| Purpose | Intrinsic interest in the particular case itself | Interest in the case(s) to understand something else beyond the case itself |
| Choice of Case | Rarely chosen as it is something already identified (usually in advance) for its particular interest Embedded cases: choices within the case – persons, places, events to observe | For the phenomena to be understood as fully as possible requires specific and well-chosen cases. A varied and purposive sample |
| Good selection is also helped by: | Training, experience and intuition | Training, experience and intuition |
| Considerations: | Time Budget Access Hospitality | Time Budget Access Hospitality |

Points from Yin are germane here: firstly, ‘the same case study can cover multiple cases and then draw a single set of “cross-case” conclusions’ (2018, p. 17; see also Merriam, 1998, p. 40); secondly, even having two cases in a study makes it more robust and this should be the

goal, to have three makes it even more compelling (Yin, 2018, pp. 61–62); finally, multiple cases can ‘blunt [...] criticism and scepticism’ that a single case may evoke (Yin, 2018, p. 62).

Consequently, this thesis uses a multiple/collective case study approach (Stake, 1995) involving a varied and purposive sample of three Evangelical SGs. Each group is from a different location in Ireland and has a slightly different program of learning for their meetings. Collectively they are studied to build an overall understanding of the phenomenon of an Evangelical’s growth in faith through participation in a SG.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethics involves sensitivity to the risks of human subjects in research. From the outset, I focused on this area by following the DCU procedures for ethical approval (1.7.3.; Appendix B). Any potential physical risks (and these were no more than those faced in the normal course of life) were minimised by arranging interviews through virtual online video conferencing (Zoom). This was due to COVID-19 restrictions and conducted in accordance with *Zoom & Data Protection Guide for DCU Staff* (Data Protection Unit, 2020, Section 3 ‘Guidance for Researchers’). The research itself constitutes a low-risk project.

Additionally, every participant was an adult able to give informed consent before participating in the research. Qualitative research is typically characterised by its thick description, which can complicate the protection of privacy. Over-eliminating such description and evaluation in social research can dilute it and compromise its usefulness (Howe and Moses, 1999, p. 44; Geertz, 1973). Judgements about privacy and the elicitation of information have to be made but are not straightforward (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p. 14). Participants were advised in the *Participant Informed Consent Form* (Appendix H) that although complete anonymity will be the goal, this cannot always be guaranteed. The relatively small sample size in the study and the small Evangelical community in Ireland made anonymity difficult to guarantee. Participants were told that, as far as possible, information that may result in identification will be anonymised but that this may not guarantee complete anonymity. All data generated during interviews were stored to ensure the confidentiality of the material. Interviews were assigned codes to prevent the identification of participants. The key to the code was kept in an encrypted electronic file, only accessible to the principal investigator. In any data reporting, participants were only referred to using participant codes or pseudonyms.

The main risks of the study were that participants might consider the area of research and the research instrument (interview) to be:

- intrusive or touching on important religious issues, or
- asking about an issue they do not have experience with (and thus potentially embarrassing in the context).

To mitigate these risks, every participant was provided with a plain language statement and consent form, which explained what was expected of them for the interviews before they consented to be involved. If the nature of the subject matter made anyone feel uncomfortable, they could decline consent at the beginning or opt-out at any time. Given that the participants were chosen from Christian Evangelical faith communities, the data sought was not particularly sensitive. It may be personal, but in the context of a faith community, such issues are often spoken about.

In the event of adverse/unexpected outcomes, a plan was in place to 1) stop the interview and suspend the recording; 2) initially discuss the issue/incident with the participant, and if further help is required, it was possible to have recourse to one of the following support mechanisms:

- a. pastoral care structures of the faith community they attend;
- b. professional counselling service (for example, Bray counselling and therapy centre)

Positive benefits for participation in the study were assessed as 1) participants may gain some personal development from engaging with the process (and indeed some reported such an experience); 2) the tangible output of the thesis or publications can be availed of later.

3.6 Selection considerations

Involving research participants evokes two broad questions: Whom will I need to collect data from, and how will I access and recruit those participants? (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 44). These issues involve careful planning and design, as Patton (2002) highlighted: ‘The sampling strategy must be selected to fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and the constraints being faced’ (2002, p. 242). My initial idea was to compare SGs of churches from the Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical traditions. As the project developed, it became increasingly clear that this was too

broad, especially considering my ‘time, budget, access, and hospitality’ (Stake, 1995) as indicated in the last section of the graphic above. I felt the questions I sought to answer would benefit from more focused research on one Christian tradition.

3.6.1 Research questions

While one’s philosophy must guide the thesis (Salomon, 1991; Sefotho, 2015), it is also true that the questions one wishes to answer will determine the research approach necessary to answer them. Causal questions are not a good fit for an interpretative paradigm, just as ‘complex learning environments’ do not suit “positivistic” assumptions (Punch, 2014, p. 23; Salomon, 1991, p. 15). Even the wording of one’s questions will carry implications for the choice of methodology. Qualitative questions are often related to discovering, seeking to understand, exploring or describing an experience (Punch, 2014, p. 23). They enable one to work with ‘meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, which corresponds to a deeper space of relationships’ (Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017, p. 370). They help analyse new phenomena or understand the meaning and personal perspectives of how such phenomena affect individuals (Castellan, 2010; Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Punch (2016, pp. 47–51) was helpful here. He encourages planning one’s research based on research questions. He distinguishes five levels of concepts and questions that progressively lead to a sharper focus: research area, research topic, general research questions, specific research questions, and data collection questions.

3.6.2 Who I am

This focusing or ‘funneling’ down of my ideas also took into account ‘sensitizing concepts’ to which I am ‘most attuned’ (Tracy, 2020, p. 29), primarily involving my experience with Evangelical churches and SGs. I have been involved in the Evangelical movement for over thirty-five years, pastored an Evangelical church and had much experience leading evangelical church SGs (see 1.1 and my self-disclosure statement, Appendix A). Some theorists even argue that empathy for a community one researches is an essential ethical quality (Punch, 2016). Naturally, a balance must be struck here between rigour in the research and ‘care for the participants and their setting’ (Punch, 2016, p. 39). Nevertheless, as Tracy (2020) notes:

Some of the best ideas for qualitative research come from your personal life. Ask yourself: What has happened to me, or around me, that is particularly interesting or puzzling? Perhaps your life has been touched by certain religious practices, political beliefs, or health issues that encourage deeper reflection.

(2020, p. 12)

Likewise, I considered supervisors' encouragement to focus on an area where I have a unique experience (Arthur et al., 2014; Tracy, 2020). My experience within Evangelicalism makes me an insider, and a wide body of literature has highlighted both the challenges this entails (lack of critical distance, subjectivity and bias) but also the advantages (including greater access, understanding and rapport) (Toy-Cronin, 2018, p. 455). Everyone comes with their viewpoints, opinions, and perspective on the world (Atieno, 2009; Sefotho, 2015). However, following Tracy, I prefer to view this as 'wisdom' to be acknowledged and celebrated rather than 'baggage' (Tracy, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, the researcher's distance from the local community could lead to research theories and categories that do not accurately represent local categories and theoretical understandings or misunderstands connected with the ambiguities of human language use (Atieno, 2009). I became aware of the potential my insider perspective can offer, a point forcefully brought home to me in my initial literature review reading Malley's (2004, pp. 34–36) similar research experience regarding Evangelical Biblicism. I recognised that I am 'in mind and body', the 'research instrument - absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world through observation, participation, and interviewing' (Tracy, 2020). As an insider with my background and values, I further recognised that the key to maintaining proper research rigour was careful 'self-reflexivity' in my research (Punch, 2016; Tracy, 2020). This involves keeping my 'guiding assumptions' before my mind 'and consistently reconsider[ing] their value and consequence' (Tracy, 2020).

3.6.3 Sampling and hospitality

Additional support for a narrower focus came from the practical consideration of my access opportunities (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2016, pp. 32–34; Yin, 2018, p. 26). I am aware from a census conducted by the Evangelical Alliance Ireland (2018) that approximately five hundred Evangelical churches exist in the Republic of Ireland, outside of the four mainline churches. While modern data protection laws (GDPR) preclude me from gaining access to that database, a qualitative case study approach only required me to engage a small number of these groups. Through my networks in the Evangelical world, I had access to some individuals (insiders) and 'gatekeepers' in churches (Punch, 2016; King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019, pp. 60–61). Yin recommends (2018) asking knowledgeable and qualified people to suggest candidates for study. My networks included leaders I knew personally in Evangelical churches and those I had contact with through my work in an Evangelical college. A similar focus to the EAI census of churches 'outside of the four mainline churches' (2018) was also adopted to further sharpen my study's focus.

Stake's (2005) discussion concerning access guided me in conversations with gatekeepers of potential SGs considered for this research. I found his differential between the term 'access' and his more descriptive word, 'hospitality', very illuminating and practically helpful. Regarding hospitality, he notes, concerning an imagined study about school children, 'for the time is short and perhaps too little can be learned from inhospitable parents' (Stake, 2005, p. 452). Likewise, the hospitableness or openness of SG representatives to this research influenced my case choices.

My sampling strategy involved a snowballing, friendship pyramiding, or networking technique (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 57; Patton, 2002; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Through my networks in the Evangelical world, I had access to some individuals and gatekeepers in churches. These networks included leaders/gatekeepers I knew in Evangelical churches and those I had contact with through my work in an Evangelical college. Several such leaders were contacted with varying responses. This generally involved an initial phone call in which I explained the proposed research, including the criteria for participants, finishing by posing a question as to whether a SG in their congregation may like to participate in the research. While none of the various groups I approached utterly ruled out the idea during this initial phone conversation, some were more hospitable than others. At times the leader said they would let me know. However, if they were immediately responsive to the possibility, I would inform them that I would send further information explaining the study and the process. If they were willing to progress further, I explained that they could describe the study and the process to the SG to gauge interest, or I could do this by joining a small part of the group's regular Zoom meeting. This latter approach happened in the first group I interviewed, but the leaders presented the idea to the other two groups. I subsequently contacted anybody from the groups who expressed interest, providing them with specific information, including a plain language statement (see Appendix G) and consent forms (see Appendix H). I arranged an interview appointment if they were willing to proceed.

3.6.4 Learning, generalisability, and representation

Bryman (2012) cites a qualitative research study and suggests that saturation was reached after twelve in-depth interviews. Stake (2005) is less concerned with 'compelling representation' or 'a statistical basis for generalizing' from a small number of cases, which due to its number, would make such a generalisation hard to defend (1995, p. 6). Notwithstanding, even an intrinsic case study can be a step towards such generalisation (Stake, 2005, p. 448). Reader or

user generalisability is made all the more viable by providing rich detailed descriptions of multi-site and varied cases (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). However, I followed Stake (1995) in seeing the primary value represented in the opportunity to learn. I found that focusing on concepts such as ‘information richness’ (Patton, 2002, p. 245), ‘information power’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021b, p. 28), or ‘illumination’ potential (Yin, 2018, p. 26) of the dataset, and how the dataset aligns with the questions and focus of the study to be more useful when choosing case(s). Prioritising the best possible opportunities to learn in a collective case study came through building variety and balance into the ‘purposive sample’ of the several cases chosen (Stake, 1995, p. 6, 2005, p. 451).

Accordingly, while I was interested in groups sharing some typical particularities, I was also interested in having some variety within the groups. This was achieved by enquiring from my primary contact regarding the general focus of the group. In the end, I was able to have three groups based around some form of religious study, yet each form was different. The first group was centred around following a prayer video course; the second on reviewing and applying the previous Sunday message received in their associated church; and the third on an apologetics teaching delivered live each week by those leading the group (see Table 3). There was some purposeful choice on my behalf in this. For example, the second group’s leader suggested two possible avenues for my research that may be available within his church, one as just noted, or another that involved a community event run by church members. However, for various reasons, this fit the study less. For example, the people working on the community event regularly changed (with a few exceptions). Additionally, the group we finally agreed on were following a well-known SG approach (reflection on the previous Sunday message) and one I had surveyed and written about (Perry, 2021), so I was interested to hear how this was working out for them.

Table 3. Overview of the three groups in the case study

Small Group 1 (SG.1)

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Members: | |
| Interviewed | Maeve (leader); Charlize; Kiera; Noel; Rose. |
| Attending | 12 members (average) |
| Church Size | Average Evangelical Church (50-100 members). |
| Location | Large-sized City (70,000 + people) |
| Time | 8:00-9:30 pm |
| Program | <p>The group is focused on learning about prayer – following an eight-week video course, <i>The Prayer Course</i> (Greig, 2021).</p> <p>The group starts at eight o'clock. There are ten minutes where people are joining and ‘chit chatting’. This is followed by a short prayer and watching the roughly twenty-minute video on the night's topic. After the video, there are reflective questions, usually about five. Maeve leads the first one or two with the large group (approximately twelve people) before giving the rest of the questions to be done when she breaks the twelve people into groups of three or four. She gives people about fifteen or twenty minutes in their breakout rooms, or ‘sometimes maybe half an hour’. Maeve says that ‘breakout room time’ is ‘probably the largest segment’ of the meeting.</p> <p>After bringing the breakout groups back into the main session to openly share what they were learning, Maeve breaks them up again to ‘pray for fifteen minutes, in whatever area that the topic of the night is on (intercession; contemplation; unanswered prayer et cetera). During the half-hour (the first breakout time), people talk about whatever the subject of the evening is about and share their experiences of it. However, the last breakout room section, the fifteen minutes in the end, is to apply it, ‘you’re doing it’ (Maeve).</p> <p>The group is reunited again at around 9:25-9:27 to say goodnight. Maeve reminds them to look at the prayer tools for next week. The next day she sends out a recording of the teaching video in case members want to watch some of it again or if any member missed the meeting altogether. She also sends out the prayer themes of the week.</p> |

Small Group 2 (SG.2)

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Members:</p> <p>Interviewed</p> <p>Attending</p> | <p>Joshua (leader); Dearbhla; Leona; Michael.</p> <p>12 members (average)</p> |
| <p>Church Size</p> | <p>Average Evangelical Church (50-100 members).</p> |
| <p>Location</p> | <p>Medium-sized City (20-40,000 people)</p> |
| <p>Time</p> | <p>8:00-9:00 pm</p> |
| <p>Program</p> | <p>The group is focused on considering together the application of the Bible teaching that was delivered in the congregation on the previous Sunday.</p> <p>The group starts at eight o'clock. A small amount of chitchat follows this at the beginning, and then Joshua opens the meeting in prayer. Joshua (the leader) makes a point of telling me that this happens much faster than it would if it was a 'pre-Zoom', in-person meeting. In that case, people would gather from seven-thirty and spend a 'good twenty sometimes thirty minutes' unwinding and catching up with other people over a cup of tea or coffee.</p> <p>However, Joshua says they now gather at eight o'clock and 'you can find yourself starting the study at five-past-eight' (8:05 pm). Then the leader leads the group through a set of questions on a particular Biblical passage. The questions are sent to everyone at least a day or two before the meeting so people can prepare beforehand if they wish.</p> <p>At the end of the meeting, the leader tries to leave about five minutes for an open prayer time, reflecting on the passage. Concerning the prayer time in the end, Joshua says, 'we've had this long discussion on this passage, and all the truths of this passage are brought out and we've been thinking about how it applies to us. Now let's pray together in response to what we've been studying'. This might include 'prayers of thanksgiving, or just praising God for what we've seen of Him in the passage or praying through a little bit more the application of it' (Joshua)</p> |

Small Group 3 (SG.3)

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Members: | |
| Interviewed | Amos (leader); James; Julie; Trevor. |
| Attending | Started with up to 17 people but quickly settled down to around 12 attendees (average) |
| Church Size | Large Evangelical Church (200+ members). |
| Location | Large-sized City (70,000 + people) |
| Time | 7:00-7:50 pm |
| Program | <p>The group is focused on apologetics. A number of core group members were asked to present one or more of the talks over the twelve weeks (two sets of six meetings, with a review just before the second set of six started).</p> <p>The group starts at seven o'clock. They spend the first five minutes in personal conversations. At about five-past-seven (7:05 pm), the meeting is introduced with a short prayer. The assigned speaker for the evening then presents the talk for about twenty-five or thirty minutes.</p> <p>This is followed by a question-and-answer time where the group can comment or ask questions about the particular subject for the evening. If there are no questions about the subject that the evening is focused on, people can ask about another related subject that has to do with apologetics or any challenge concerning the area they have faced. As a guideline, it is felt that whoever was presenting the talk is most prepared to answer random questions, so s/he is given preference initially. However, an 'open-mic' is practised, so other small group members can also add their thoughts. Members can also comment on anything from the evening they found interesting or unhelpful so that it can be corrected for the next time.</p> <p>The meeting finishes with an official send-off prayer at around seven-fifty (7:50). However, some people will usually stay on for ten, twenty or sometimes more minutes to chat about the subject or related subject[s].</p> |

Evangelical churches in Ireland are mainly made up of Irish-born attendees, but an ethnic mix has increased in recent decades (EAI, 2018). While this case study was not aiming for national generalisability, some representation of such rich diversity was hoped for (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). However, I decided to see if this developed naturally from those that volunteered (which it did) from each group rather than specify it. While other specific criteria did guide the case selections, I tried to keep this to a minimum (LeCompte and Schensul (2010), in Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). These can be outlined as follows, 1) participants must be over eighteen years of age; 2) as the focus was primarily on experiential research, participants should be actively engaged in the group, either presently or recently. In one of the SG cases, the group had just finished within one to two weeks of my interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 56); I expressed to the gatekeeper my desire, 3) to have a mix of male and female participants; 4) that the ‘leader’ of the group may be asked to participate. This was to gain an overview from him/her of the meeting format, as well as their personal growth experience; 5) to have at least four participants from the SG before proceeding with that group as a case. This concurred with the advice of Patton (2015, p. 314) to specify a minimum sample size ‘based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study’, as well as my experience following the first group reaching saturation point.

3.7 Bottom-up or top-down approach

Yin (2018) argues strongly for the value of theoretical propositions to guide the study’s definition, design and data collection, as well as aiding in the generalisation of its findings (2018, pp. 34–42). He does allow for some mid-research changes to facets of the research design after gathering some initial research data (2018, pp. 30, 57–58), yet he argues that such change should be limited (2018, p. 63). However, this thesis aligns with Stake (1995, 2005), who presents a more open, responsive and emergent approach to conducting case studies. Stake (1995) notes:

we qualitative researchers do not confine interpretation to the identification of variables and the development of instruments before data gathering and the analysis and interpretation for the report. Rather, we emphasize placing an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case [...] initial research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study by the case researcher. The aim is to thoroughly understand...[the bounded case] if early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed.

(1995, pp. 8–9)

Additionally, while I value training (especially in qualitative case study research), I follow Stake (1995), who highlights the importance of experience and intuition. I see this as including both research attributes and aspects of my insider perspective, used with appropriate reflexivity.

3.7.1 Qualities of the researcher

Stake highlights two important qualities for the researcher when investigating a case: a desire to learn ‘how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus’ and ‘a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn’ (Stake, 1995, p. 1). Likewise, Swanborn (2010), while not dismissing the use of theoretical knowledge, warns the researcher against prematurity in selecting and ruling out aspects of the phenomenon under study, holding closed or inflexible plans for data collection or analyses, or utilising overly simplistic models of reality that does not allow for various human interactions and the possibility of change (2010, p. 20). Similarly, Miles et al. (2020) note that while the researcher can and should interpret the meaning of things, observe patterns even make assertions and propositions throughout the research, such conclusions should be held lightly. Such ideas, which are formed vaguely, will become more explicit and grounded but are not always fully visible until the end of the data collection. Consequently, they recommend a cyclical and fluid process (2020, pp. 8–10).

Stake acknowledges that ‘often, the patterns will be known in advance drawn from the research questions, serving as a template for the analysis’, while at other times, they will appear ‘unexpectedly from the analysis’ (1995, p. 78). Such evolution of research enables Stake (1995) to speak of *progressive focusing* in a case study, where investigators move through the interrelated stages of ‘observation, renewed inquiry and explanation’ (1995, p. 22).

3.7.2 Issues and research questions

Stake (1995) seeks a greater understanding and appreciation of the case’s uniqueness, including its ‘embeddedness and interaction with its contexts’. This involves moving away from hypothesis and goals statements, which, while sharpening the focus, minimises ‘the interest in the situation and circumstance’ (1995, p. 16). Instead, Stake (1995) chooses to use *issues* (1995, pp. 16–25) as a ‘conceptual structure’ and ‘issue questions’ as primary research questions, thus ‘force[ing] attention to complexity and contextuality’ (1995, p. 16). Issues are stated early and highlight the problems or ‘foci for our study’, which are ‘intricately wired’ to the context, ‘especially personal contexts’ of the study (Stake, 1995, p. 17) (see my interview questions,

Appendix F). In collective or multiple case studies, such ‘an early commitment to common topics’ also ‘facilitates later cross-site analysis’ (Stake, 1995, p. 25).

3.7.3 A summary conclusion regarding my approach

I deem the maintenance of both qualities mentioned by Stake for a researcher (desire to learn and curbing one’s presumptions) as significant to the production of this thesis concerning learning within Irish Evangelical SGs. In the Irish context, there is no focused study on Evangelical SGs, no satisfying model of the phenomenon of learning taking place within them, or scholarly literature concerning how to separate such a phenomenon from its SG environment. Consequently, and with a desire to learn, I seek to hold lightly many presumptions while learning. This does not mean that the knowledge identified in the literature review will not be used but will be held lightly as a guiding influence for learning.

Emerging case study researchers owe a debt to Yin (2018) as a first and continuing key theorist and practitioner to guide the case study approach. However, when following the guidance of a case study theorist, one’s ontological and epistemological (i.e., philosophical) approach to research should be as congruent with their approach as possible. Consequently, following Stake (1995), I will not come to the cases with a firmly held hypothesis, which is more akin to Yin’s (2018) approach. I deem Yin’s (2018) approach, which demonstrates a positivistic disposition and realist ontological assumptions (Belk, 2010; Moriceau, 2010; Yazan, 2015), too inflexible, giving the context of this thesis, and find Stake’s (1995, pp. 39, 42–43, 99–104) epistemic commitment to constructivism suits better.

At this time, I do depart from Stake (1995) in his contention that a researcher ‘needs through experience and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him or her’ (1995, p. 77). As a new researcher, I feel such advice is difficult to follow and Stake’s (1995) guidance, while generally fit for my purpose, lacks practical detail at points. However, Merriam (1998; 2015) and Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021b) provide such clear guidance at these points and are also closely aligned with my epistemological perspective. Consequently, they will aptly supplement Stake for this thesis, with Yin’s approach followed less.

Overall, since I seek to understand *why* people get involved in SGs and *how* they learn or grow through such involvement, a *multiple instrumental case study* approach is the most helpful for this thesis. In this, I first investigate each case within its context, yet the cases are purposefully chosen to understand a larger phenomenon outside themselves: i.e., a believer’s growth in faith

through participation in an Evangelical SG. This purposive sample will be drawn with variety in mind and sensitivity to the level of openness (hospitality) of those asked to participate.

3.8 Quality strategies for enhancing validity and reliability in my research

In developing the thesis, I paid attention to strategies for ensuring quality. Helpful advice came from Braun and Clarke's (2021b, p. 269) 15-point checklist for good reflexive TA. The advantage of this list is that it aligns closely with my interpretivist philosophical positioning and helps me guard against unacknowledged 'positivism creep' (Braun and Clarke, 2021b, p. 270). The checklist covers areas related to transcription, coding and theme development, analysis interpretation and quality in a written report, and ensuring adequate time is apportioned to each phase of the TA process. I also drew upon excellent advice on quality research from various authors (Stake, 1995; Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2021b) and created a table to reflect my attention to these areas (Appendix I).

3.9 Interview guide

In preparing for my pilot interview, I constructed an interview guide that included my main and several probing questions at the time (Appendix C). I also constructed a small questionnaire (Appendix E), planning to send this beforehand to elicit general background information from each interviewee. However, in consultation with my supervisors, I decided to discuss these questions with the interviewees as part of the interview. I asked group members eight questions (I usually left out question number nine, open to it emerging naturally in the open interview discussion). I asked the group's leaders four additional questions to gain a bigger picture of the group and its meetings. Asking these questions at the beginning of the interviews facilitated a helpful transition between the 'introductory phase' and 'the central core of the interview' (Gillham, 2003, p. 37). I took an iterative and reflexive approach in creating the interview questions allowing for amendments to be made throughout the process (to view the final version of my interview questions, see Appendix F).

I conducted two pilot interviews with a critical friend named Susan to trial my interview questions (Appendices B and C) and interview approach for this research. Susan is an Evangelical Christian who attends a SG in a church nonaligned with the three case studies.

3.10 Pilot study

The pilot highlighted some issues, prompting amendments to both my questions and my interview approach:

- I moved away from using the word ‘grow in discipleship’ in favour of ‘growth in faith’.
- I rechecked all questions for grammatical accuracy and accessible language.
- The interview duration was adjusted downwards by reducing the number of questions asked or aligning some of these under one another to hold as reserve probing questions if required.
- I made practical changes regarding recording, including my distance from the microphone and how I responded when the interviewee spoke. Later, I added extra recording equipment to cross-check hard-to-hear words (Appendix D).

The pilot study confirmed that:

- The inclusion criteria for participant recruitment were workable.
- The interview questions matched the purpose of the study, were clear and utilised unambiguous language.

3.11 My analytic approach

One of the least developed aspects of the case study methodology involves analysis (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). Generally, I follow Stake (1995) in understanding the analysis of the study as running from the meaning ascribed to ‘first impressions’ right through to ‘final compilations’ (1995, p. 71). Such insights are sometimes found ‘in a single instance’ yet usually coming from ‘reappearance over and over’ (1995, p. 78), with such repetitions isolated and formally coded (1995, pp. 78–85). However, desiring a more detailed analytic approach for this thesis, I utilised the thematic analysis (TA) method widely used for analysing qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017, p. 17). TA is an umbrella term that can apply to different approaches sharing common characteristics (analysis through coding and theme development; some degree of theoretical and research design flexibility; a focus on

semantic and latent meaning), yet that may differ significantly in their philosophical viewpoints and the procedures they employ (Braun and Clarke, 2021a, p. 8). It is important for scholars to locate their methodological stance in order to produce high-quality qualitative research (Terry et al., 2017, p. 18). Therefore, this section will consider the form of TA I used in analysing the data, which is an approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2013, 2021b, 2021a), and more specifically identified as ‘*reflexive* thematic analysis’ (RTA) (Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2019a, 2021a, 2021b).

Instead of one ideal methodological approach, several could have been used to conduct and analyse my research, with commonality among them (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Rather than charting ‘a thinner series of comparisons’ of such approaches, it is more valuable to provide a deeper justification that demonstrates an understanding of the method I chose (RTA), what it offers and how it was applied (Braun and Clarke, 2021b, p. 125). RTA is a practical choice for this research for several reasons. It reflects the view that qualitative research is ‘reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a resource [...] rather than a potential threat to knowledge production’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019a, p. 591). SGs in Irish Evangelical churches have received little or no in-depth research. Therefore, rather than bringing firmly held theories from other contexts to my project, the flexibility RTA offers allows me to listen carefully to the participant’s stories, utilise and reflect on my personal experience, and adjust my approach as I journey in this new research area. Braun and Clarke (2019a) emphasise that ‘qualitative data analysis is about telling “stories”, about interpreting, and creating’, with the final analysis being a ‘product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative’ (2019a, p. 591). I see part of my role as a researcher as collaborating with the interviewees to create and tell the story of their experiences of Irish Evangelical SGs.

While the RTA approach contains a rigorous coding and theme development plan, it is nevertheless ‘fluid and recursive, rather than rigid and structured and requiring the use of a codebook or coding frame’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019a, pp. 591–592). The term *reflexive* TA highlights this distinctive aspect of the approach and includes the need for the researcher to be constantly aware, throughout the process, concerning their role in knowledge production. ‘Themes do not passively emerge from either data or coding’ rather, they ‘are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019a, p. 594). Braun and Clarke (2019b) capture this dynamic research process with the use

of terms such as ‘developing’, ‘constructing’ or ‘generating’ (2019a, p. 594) and have regularly updated their six-phase TA approach (2013, 2021b) first outlined in (2006) to accomplish this task. The approach is specifically designed to allow reflection during the process (Braun and Clarke, 2021a, p. 3).

RTA offers an opportunity for an inductively focused and experiential analysis that suits my research and philosophical positioning (Braun and Clarke, 2013). RTA’s theoretical flexibility means it can be informed by a mix of Evangelical and non-Evangelical religious educational and SG theorists, enabling me to give voice to the lived experiences of a minority Christian group while also locating these voices within the broader theoretical discourses. Braun and Clarke (2021b) outline a transparent six-phased approach to conducting RTA, which constitutes ideal guidance for the new researcher. In Table 4, I sketch the steps I followed in my analysis as I focused on their approach. Further information regarding my approach in this area can be found in my codebook (Appendix L).

Table 4. Describing my analytic steps (Personal collection, 2022)

| Six phases of RTA based on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021b) | Analytic steps for this thesis |
|---|---|
| Familiarising yourself with your data | I produced a verbatim transcription of the dataset, involving multiple re-listenings and re-readings. This process aided me in gaining deep immersion in the data set. I recorded my initial ideas and insights. |
| Coding | I coded all the data systematically utilising NVivo software, which involved labelling all the sections relevant to my research question and understanding that some sections contain significance for more than one code. At the same time, I recognise that ‘TA does not require the researcher to code every line of data’ (Terry et al., 2017, p. 25) and that the process is about reducing and organising the data, along with my observations of it, into themes or patterns. In this manner, I struck a balance between selective and complete coding, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 206–207). |
| Generating initial themes | I started to identify shared patterned meanings across the dataset (candidate themes), grouping codes that might share a common concept or idea and that might answer my research question. |
| Developing and reviewing themes | I again critically assessed the themes for compatibility with codes and the entire dataset. I checked if they made sense, captured the most important patterns in light of the research questions, and revised them where necessary. Started to consider their relationship with existing theory. |
| Refining, defining, and naming themes | I continued fine-tuning the themes. I checked that each was built around a strong core concept in the data and asked how they all interact to tell the fuller story of the dataset. |
| Writing up | I continued, finessed, and finished the writing process already begun with my initial impressions from earlier phases. |

In the write-up of my analysis, my conclusions are presented as one overall narrative drawn from the data. The themes that make up this narrative are developed in their own right yet combined to form the larger story of the data. In analysing the data, I aimed for a balance between providing data extracts and offering analytic commentary. The commentary highlights significant features of the data extracts, primarily identified through semantic (overt) readings, coupled with some aspects of latent or hidden meanings. The data extracts are used *illustratively* to provide rich support and detailed description of the themes and *analytically* by interpreting the respondents' data to identify areas of implicit or latent meaning.

For each theme, three key interrelated aspects are presented to the reader: Firstly, I present examples of data extracts (quotations) that show evidence for the theme(s). Secondly, I provide an analytic narrative throughout, giving my interpretation of these data extracts and their meaning. Both these steps are presented in chapter four. Thirdly, I connect these two elements (quotations and their interpretation) to my research questions and, importantly, the broader scholarly literature they are situated within. In this, I position my voice within the larger group of voices in this field. This third step is presented in chapter five. Finally, chapter six presents a broader summary of the conclusions.

In this approach, I am following one of the two options outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021b, pp. 131–133). The first is to present *separate* results and discussion sections, and the second is to *combine* the analysis and discussion. I analysed one theme utilising the second approach but found that it did not allow me to give sufficient attention to discussing the volume of literature (2.1-2.9) I was dealing with without cluttering the presentation of the findings with long sections of analysis. Consequently, the first approach was preferred, given the specific requirements of this analysis.

3.12 My transcription approach

The degree that the researcher captures in a transcript what is said in interviews, personally observed or written in a notebook is a decision s/he must make (Gibbs, 2018, p. 21). The decision involves 'a series of choices to be made' rather than simply following 'standard rules', as little exist (Brinkmann, Kvale and Flick, 2018, p. 109). Brinkmann and Kvale state that 'the amount and form of transcribing depends on factors such as the nature of the material and the purpose of the investigation, the time and money available, and – not to be forgotten – the

availability of a reliable and patient typist' (Brinkmann, Kvale and Flick, 2018, p. 108). Even with an experienced typist, the time to type an interview verbatim is estimated at between five (Brinkmann, Kvale and Flick, 2018) and six (Bryman, 2012; Gibbs, 2018) times the length of the interviews.

Such a time commitment in one area can ultimately detract from other research areas, and several options are possible. Gibbs (2018) notes that 'it is not necessary to transcribe all or even any of the information you have collected in your project in order to analyze it' (2018, p. 19). Bryman (2012) highlights that 'some interviews or at least large portions of them are not very useful' (2012, p. 486). Sometimes they are not really inspiring, the interviewee is reticent, or the material lacks relevance to your research topic. Thus, he suggests there is little reason to transcribe material you know you will not want or that 'is unlikely to be fruitful', rather listen to the interviews a few times and then transcribe 'only those portions that you think are useful or relevant' (2012, p. 486). Gibbs (2018) follows similar lines in outlining different strategies that can be used when one is transcribing certain types of research: 1) Only transcribe selected parts of the interview, with analysis and coding done from notes or directly from the recording of the rest; 2) ignore the parts of the interview where your memory or notes inform you that the interviewee went on a tangent to the topic. This approach is quicker and allows the researcher 'to focus on the larger themes and not get bogged down in the particular words' (2018, p. 20).

Two problems require consideration here, however. Firstly, the transcribed parts of the interview may lose their context without their surrounding sections. Secondly, different themes may emerge throughout the interviews that the researcher did not consider at the earlier interviews and subsequent transcription decisions, requiring the researcher to return to the interviews again to seek such information afresh (Bryman, 2012; Gibbs, 2018). Additionally, Bryman (2012) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlight the benefits of personally transcribing your material. It can help you get close to the data and identify themes or categories in which you may be interested. It can also help you observe variations between the different interviewees' accounts of the case under study (see also, Stake, 1995, p. 65). Being convinced by the arguments concerning the two possible problems, as well as the benefits of personally transcribing the interviews in full, I chose this approach.

Following this, decisions on how I translated also required attention and should be explicitly outlined here (Brinkmann, Kvale and Flick, 2018, p. 109), as 'continuous speech is very rarely

in well-constructed sentences. Speakers stop one line of thought in mid-sentence and often take up the old one again without following the grammatical rules' (Gibbs, 2018, p. 22). Gibbs (2018) lists four levels of transcription: Just the gist, verbatim, verbatim with dialect, and discourse level (2018, p. 23). I generally aimed for the 'verbatim level' in this thesis. I transcribed the full interviews on the spectrum between Verbatim and Verbatim with dialect. This means that the context for any quotes can be quickly gained. Apart from this, the audio recordings of interviews will be kept for a period after the thesis is produced.

Gibbs (2018, p. 22, adapted from Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 146) suggest that 'abbreviations' are sometimes spelt out, 'verbal tics', like 'er', 'um', 'erm' are often ignored, 'pauses' are 'either cut or shown simply by three dots (...)' and 'repetitions' simplified. Generally, I followed this as a guide. However, while I did ignore some 'verbal tics', especially when repeated several times in succession, I left some when I felt they might prove important for this or other researchers in the future. I spelt 'um' as 'Mm'; 'either cut' out or show 'pauses' by dots, a small pause with (.) or longer with multiple dots (...). I put the additional letters in square brackets [] when I finished an abbreviated word with my best judgment. If unsure of words, I generally add them in square brackets, or if I felt they were essential to understanding, I re-engaged the interviewee for clarification. Where I added some of my own words, for example, to explain a point or provide contextual comments, such notations were put in round brackets (). The very act of transcription 'is a change of medium and therefore necessarily involves a transformation of the data' (Gibbs, 2018, pp. 21–22). One needs to decide what type of transcript is appropriate for the purposes of the study. In all, I sought to provide a fair reflection of the interviewee's comments that resembled normal text.

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach I am taking in this thesis and discussed the philosophical assumptions I hold as a researcher. The chapter provided my rationale for using a qualitative multiple-case study in this research. It delineated the attention I gave to ethical issues before and during the course of this research. Additionally, my considerations regarding acquiring data and the selection of cases were provided, as was a vignette of the three final groups chosen for the research. My approach to the research, research questions and generalisability was discussed. Strategies for ensuring quality research were elaborated, and

my work in producing an interview guide and piloting my research questions was explained. Finally, a detailed rationale concerning my analytic and transaction approaches was supplied.

Chapter 4: Presentation of findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the research findings and my analytic commentary on them. The structure of the chapter will follow the outline presented in Table 5. This table (5) provides a bird's eye view of these findings beginning with the overall concept: *Growth in faith through small group participation*. This finding is supported by two overarching themes developed from the interview analysis:

Overarching theme 1: That small groups provided a place to grow.

Overarching theme 2: The members' experiences of growth.

Each of these overarching themes comprises two main themes that form the four main themes developed through the analysis of the interview research data.

That the *small groups constituted a place to grow* is undergirded by the two main themes:

Main theme 1: The motivations that brought the members to the SG.

Main theme 2: The supportive environment for growth created within the SG.

The six sub-themes that support these conclusions (main themes 1 and 2) are outlined in Table 5 and each sub-theme will be discussed in the following analysis.

The members' *experiences of growth* through participation in the small group are observed in the second two main themes:

Main theme 3: That growth took place through learning with others.

Main theme 4: That this growth had a significant impact on the members themselves and beyond.

The five sub-themes that support these conclusions (main themes 3 and 4) are outlined in Table 5 and each sub-theme will be discussed in the following analysis.

Thus, from the overall analysis of my data, eleven sub-themes were developed supporting the four main themes established from the findings. Together these themes and sub-themes seek to answer the research question: whether the interviewees experienced growth in faith through SG participation.

Table 5. Interview Findings

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|--|
| Growth in faith through small group participation |
|--|

Overarching Themes

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Small Groups: A place to Grow | Experiencing Growth in Community |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|

Main Themes (T.1-T4)

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| (T.1) Small Group: Learner motivations | (T.2) Small Group: A supportive environment | (T.3) Experiencing Growth: Learning with others | (T.4) Experiencing Growth: Impact of learning |
|--|---|---|---|

Sub-themes

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>(T.1.1) Desire for Connection.</p> <p>(T.1.2) Desire to Grow.</p> | <p>(T.2.1) Support requires the proper environment.</p> <p>(T.2.2) Support comes through relationships.</p> <p>(T.2.3) Support helps in struggles.</p> <p>(T.2.4) Support is holistic.</p> | <p>(T.3.1) Learning with others is centred around a shared teaching but focuses on its application.</p> <p>(T.3.2) Learning with others engages with diverse viewpoints.</p> <p>(T.3.3) Learning with others is participatory.</p> | <p>(T.4.1) Members are challenged to grow in personal areas and active expressions of their faith.</p> <p>(T.4.2) Members of the small group have a positive impact on the larger congregation.</p> |
|--|--|---|---|

4.2 Findings

Small groups a place to grow: Learner motivations (sub-themes T.1.1-T.1.2)

The interviews revealed that the small groups were a place to grow, firstly shown by the underlying motivations that brought the members to the SG. Consequently, this part of my analysis will start by considering what motivated the members to be part of the SGs. The two sub-themes (sub-themes T.1.1-T.1.2) that support the analysis for this section are outlined in Table 5 and each sub-theme will be discussed in turn in the following analysis.

What motivated the members to be part of the SGs was the first open question I asked each interviewee. In asking it, I wanted to uncover the underlying motivations and desires that the members brought with them into the SG. While individual interviewee answers varied, two broad responses to the question emerged, which in turn provided two sub-themes for the organisation of this section. The two primary desires that motivated people to join the SGs were a desire for relational connection; and a desire to grow in areas of their Christian experience.

Sub-theme T.1.1: ‘*my primary motive was a bit of fellowship*’: Desire for connection

it would just seem like that was somewhere I needed to belong to, a small group, because I knew the connection, I felt the connection and the relationship, [...] and how I grew in my faith in those groups I wanted to continue that when I came here.
(Dearbhla SG.2)

In summarising her experience with SGs, Dearbhla draws attention to some of their key features: relationships and a feeling of connection. She also emphasises that she has grown in her faith in SGs and that this is something she wants to continue through her present involvement. A desire for connection and growth in faith embodies the two key reasons that motivated the interviewees to join the SGs.

We see this desire for connection in James’ (SG.3) remarks:

I suppose with the pandemic, there was a great kind of eh lack of loss of connection [...] I just felt the need to kind of in some way reconnect with people, and to eh you know just enjoy a bit of fellow(ship) I think my primary motive was a bit of fellowship really to be honest with you.
(James, SG.3)

The importance of Christians connecting is felt in James' words. He also draws attention to the fact that this desire was only amplified during COVID restrictions on in-person church gatherings. Charlize (SG.1) similarly adds:

I got involved when COVID happened and we couldn't meet up or really go to a church or anywhere, everything was and still is over a screen. It's now at a stage where everything feels unreal. A piece of glass has now replaced the human connection and touch, almost everything we took for granted is replaced by a piece of glass.

Charlize (SG.1)

Charlize's vivid description of the loss of 'human connection and touch' along with its replacement by technology, provides insight into the period of this research and the very human need that SGs meet profoundly: connection. James (SG.3) contrasts viewing a service online with the personal interaction SGs provide when he says:

we had to church on Sunday, via what is it Facebook and Instagram, [...] but on a personal, smaller kind of more personal level you know we'd a bit of fellowship involved there wasn't really much of that.

James (SG.3)

Speaking of the SG, he adds:

It could have been any subject you know as long as it brought people together and we'd enjoy a bit of fellowship together [...] and reconnect.

James (SG.3)

While Christians watched church services online, the desire for a closer, personal, and an interactive connection was strongly felt. The SGs, albeit also online, helped meet that need, which was a key motivation for people joining them.

Sub-theme T.1.2: '*I was interested in the idea of improving...*': Desire to grow

I'm just very interested in apologetics. [...] you know, I'm a Christian for forty odd years, and I felt that the answers that I have today aren't suitable for people today, whereas they were grand for back in the day [...] because I think apologetics is so fundamental [...] that's why I would be a part of it [the SG].

(Julie SG.3)

Julie is part of the apologetics group and expresses her deep interest in and desire to grow in this subject matter. This desire is partly motivated by the changing times and her longing to be equipped to share her faith with a modern audience. An interest in the learning focus of the SG and a desire to grow in the learning offered is the second main factor that motivated people to be part of one of the respective SG's.

For example, Maeve (SG.1 leader) shares how she started SG.1 because of an interest in prayer:

The first reason that I decided to do the course was the sense that there was a greater, Mm, hunger for people to pray and because they were locked down, partly, that there was interest in prayer. And I myself was more interested in praying, and intercession, just all kinds of prayer.

(Maeve, SG1)

Maeve's (SG.1) comments are revealing. She notes again that people's hunger for prayer increased partly due to the 'lockdown' restrictions. The 'interest' she notes goes beyond a casual desire, with Maeve (SG.1) calling it a 'hunger', not only to learn about prayer but to practice prayer together:

and I thought this [the prayer course] [...] would be brilliant, I'd like to do this with a group [so] I decided I'd start it for Lent. [...] and I think it was timely because I quickly got over a dozen people interested in signing up.

(Maeve SG.1)

Maeve (SG.1) sees people's motivation expressed in their enthusiastic and quick response to joining the group. Rose (SG.1) exemplifies such a member saying she joined because:

I'm not particularly satisfied with my prayer life. [...] I just thought [...] this could help me focus more could give me a few pointers, techniques, there was a mention of different types of prayer different ways to reach you know that intimacy with the Lord [...] this was my thinking [at the start] of course.

(Rose, SG.1)

It is interesting to see in Rose's (SG.1) comments a dissatisfaction with her present praxis in prayer, coupled with a feeling that there was immediate usefulness in the learning offered in the SG. Likewise, Charlize (SG.1) expresses her desire when joining the SG by saying:

I would love to know [...] I wanted to know how to pray, to know what it would do for me when I pray, how I can be closer to God when I pray, not just pray because it's a prayer and that's why I got into this group.

(Charlize, SG.1)

Charlize's (SG.1) hunger ('love to know') for the subject matter and the feeling that this SG could meet her needs is also evident in the quote. She desires to experience a reality in her communion with God that goes beyond a ritualistic performance.

Joshua (the leader) from SG.2 focuses primarily on what motivated him to start the SG, saying:

it was just a desire to keep people in God's word and keep people thinking about it, and applying it, and learning it.

(Joshua, SG.2)

Here again, we see his desire for a practical form of theological study or learning. He wants people to keep ‘learning’ the Bible and ‘applying’ it to their lives, noting that his involvement in the SG helps him also ‘to think through [...] how does this apply to me’ (Joshua SG.2). Similarly, Dearbhla’s (SG.2) previous experience of SGs, where she ‘would have really enjoyed the learning in them’, motivated her to join this SG. Leona (SG.2), who had led SGs, also ‘felt the need [...] to attend a study, and actually not present but to actually learn’.

The desire to grow (sub-theme T.1.2) is evident in these quotes, which are representative of the three SGs. So far, this desire is expressed in a deep longing to learn and grow in areas of perceived, primarily personal, need. They feel the SG can meet this need not just theoretically but in an immediately beneficial, practical, and practised way, which motivates them to join.

However, a personal need is not the only reason that members desire to grow, as Julie (SG.3) explains:

I suppose I would have an Evangelical heart as well, so, that would be very important to me so I am able to, I feel equipped to answer the questions of today.
(Julie SG.3)

Julie (SG.3) was looking for growth that practically equipped her for service to others, which in her case involved relating the Gospel to people in a relevant way and answering the questions about that message raised by modern society. Thus, the growth that members wanted also involved being ‘equipped’ to minister to others. Even in SG.1, a group focused on prayer, prayers of intercession for and with others are regularly mentioned. Maeve (SG.1) was motivated to be part of the group because she ‘was more interested in praying, and intercession, just all kinds of prayer’. From the same group, Rose (SG.1) similarly and concisely summarises her SG experience by saying that ‘learning to be more active eh in the prayer or the intercession *with others* is definitely, probably my number one, [...] *growth* element’. Both Maeve and Rose highlight the group’s (SG.1) communal focus and intercession prayers, which by their very nature constitute outward-focused forms of ministry. The desire for growth parallels the desires of others noted in this section. Members joined the SG sometimes with an awareness of dissatisfaction in an area of their Christian walk and a strong desire (hunger) for change. The growth sought included the inner domains of their relationship with God and others and a desire to be equipped, practice, or express their ministry outwardly.

Small groups a place to grow: A supportive environment (sub-themes T.2.1-T.2.4)

The interviews revealed that the *small groups were a place to grow* and that such growth was facilitated by the supportive environment created in the SG. The qualities of this environment included its relational approach to providing support, that support was offered to members in their struggles, and the holistic nature of the support offered. This part of my analysis will consider this environment by providing an analysis of the four sub-themes (sub-themes T.2.1-T.2.4) related to this area as outlined in Table 5 with each sub-theme discussed in turn in the following analysis.

Sub-theme T.2.1: ‘it’s definitely a supportive environment’: Support requires the proper environment

Leona (SG.2) delineates some of the helpful features of the SG environment:

So I think in a small group when you start developing relationships and friendships with people, people open up more and you’re privileged to become, to hear more about the lives more information about them it can be more personal. I mean not so much on Zoom anymore but definitely when you meet face to face, people are more vulnerable and more open and it’s definitely a supportive environment.

(Leona, SG, 2)

For Leona, this ‘supportive environment’ comprises several elements, which she concisely describes in an almost programmatic way. The SG participants develop ‘relationships and friendships’, which in turn leads to more ‘open[ness]’ and increasing ‘vulnerability’ in conversations. Leona (SG.2) further highlights that such vulnerable sharing does not occur in a vacuum; instead, it is predicated on members feeling that the group constitutes a ‘safe’ place:

And also in a small group I think people feel safe to share issues and talk about and pray together over certain issues, you feel like it’s whatever is said in the room can stay in the room, I think it’s a more trusting environment in that sense

(Leona, SG.2).

These trusting relationships, Leona (SG.2) points out, are ‘strengthen[ed]’ by a ‘bond’, as it is ‘typically the same people’ coming to the ‘small group week after week’ (Leona SG.2). In this context members feel ‘safe’ in the confidentiality of the SG and this, in turn, creates a ‘trusting environment’ to share.

Two key actions regarding this supportive sharing are noted by Leona (SG.2). First, there is ‘sharing’ and talking about issues. The broader context of the quote makes clear that this sharing concerns how some members have ‘struggled with life issues without faith’ and how,

as believers, they have subsequently ‘experienced their journey of faith’. So, while the group talks about scripture, they also gain ‘insight’ into more earthy ‘life issues’. A second action taking place concerning these life issues is ‘prayer’. It is striking that prayer is immediately connected with such issues. It is not demoted to some secondary woolly idea but afforded a concrete supportive role in dealing with real-life issues.

Consequently, the SG environment comprised deep and trusting relationships built through regular engagement, allowing for transparent mutual sharing of one another's lives. Additionally, it included reflection on the Bible and the spiritual dynamic of prayer. These elements, working together, create an environment that offers holistic support. They will be considered further in sub-themes T.2.4-T.2.6 below.

Sub-theme T.2.2: ‘*there’s merit in the fellowship alone*’: Support comes through relationships

Kiera (SG.1) underlines the relational support the SG offers when she says:

you're not on your own [...] And we're building relationships through this course. [...] they'd be people that just [bringing] in a confidence that, a fellowship that, you know, I could go to them I could ask for prayer I can ask for their encouragement in situations.

(Kiera, SG.1)

Kiera (SG.1) highlights the importance of ‘building relationships through [the] course’ with people with whom she can find support, ‘especially [...] in a crisis’. Such supportive relationships mitigate against her natural tendency to ‘draw back [...] in a crisis’, become ‘self-isolated’ and ‘get stuck’ because people can come alongside her and provide support. For her, this support provides ‘confidence’, ‘prayer’, and ‘encouragement’ (Kiera, SG.1). Confidence, in different forms, occurred regularly in the interviews and was an enlightening finding in the study for me. Such confidence was enabled by the safe, secure and supportive atmosphere the SG offered. In Kiera’s (SG.1) case, confidence in relationships and the support that can come from them are highlighted.

Rose (SG.1) also emphasises the ‘merit’ of such relational ‘support [of] one another’:

There’s merit and power in growing in the fellowship with others. Because those connections deepen, because our interest in one another grows and then [...] we're more willing to support one another, or more effective, I suppose, you know, whether it comes to picking up prayer need, or given word of encouragement or whatever.

(Rose, SG.1)

Of interest is Rose's (SG.1) insight that deeper relationships lead to further interest in each other, which in turn leads to more willingness and effectiveness in supporting one another. In this, Rose suggests that SGs may play a role in a church community in promoting support for one another and in making it qualitatively 'more effective'. Rose also highlights that a lot of the support occurs as the members engage with one another in conversations after the formal teaching of the evening (in her group's case, a video presentation). Rose and Kiera's group (SG.1) allocated specific and significant time to such interaction, both as a SG of about twelve members together and by breaking this group for periods each week into 'mini/tiny groups' of three to four members as Noel (SG.1) explains:

Yeah the breakout groups, [...] you've more of an opportunity to share closely with just two or three, or one or two other people. So [...] it's more sort of face to face, it's more personal.

(Noel, SG.1)

Julie and James's group (SG.3) does not practice periods of subdivision into mini-groups; nevertheless, Julie (SG.3) also observes, 'I suppose obviously there's going to be intimacy when there's smaller numbers'. Even small talk or brief moments of conversation can have a significant impact, as James (SG.3) vividly expresses:

There's a little bit of fellowship before and a little bit afterwards [...] the bit afterwards can be short [...] so it's at the beginning, maybe that few minutes before the whole meeting formally starts: We're *ah hi James how's it going!* [James acts expressively waving his arms to demonstrate] *Ah hi Paul good to see you, jeaany mac I haven't seen you in ages!* And we're you know just someone to say your name you know. It's like [...] the Cheers pub, as the song goes like, "where everybody knows your name".

(James, SG.3)

As James (SG.3) continues, he mentions that relationships develop and become more meaningful as people are 'known [to one another] for a long time' and meet with 'week[ly]' regularity. This comment aligns with Kiera (SG.1) and Leona's (SG.2) observations above that effective support occurs when a group consistently meets and develops confidence in their relationships.

Sub-theme T.2.3: *'life is not always aah happy clappy, you know'*: Support helps in struggles

Rose (SG.1) says:

the other benefit of this small group that I would call out is [...] even in the introduction, you know, when we're just saying hello how are you doing, how was your week, things like that. People might say something that could give you a little insight about something they may be struggling with or even the way they articulate a prayer request during the session, you know, it gives us opportunities I think to support one another a little bit more.

(Rose, SG.1)

Rose highlights the sensitivity that can develop in the SG, enabling people to find support in their struggles. Relating an example that she experienced, she shares that as the SG leader [Maeve] welcomed everyone on Zoom she:

asked in passing, how are you Rose, how was your week? and [...] one time, I referred to the fact that I just had a rough week, that I hadn't been feeling very well that there was something funny going on.

(Rose, SG.1)

Rose (SG.1) explains that this incident took place at about week three or four in the course when relationships, some of which predated the course, had developed. It is noticeable that the experience starts with small talk, similar to the type of conversation that James (SG.3) speaks about above. However, as someone else quickly joined the Zoom call, the conversation moved on, leaving Rose's (SG.1) comments unresolved. Yet Rose (SG.1) notes:

somebody picked up on the fact that I was voicing a discomfort or concern, you know, and [...] in my small meeting group [when the SG of about twelve members divided for periods of the SG time into mini groups of three or four people] that person having picked up on that offered to pray for me.

(Rose, SG.1)

Here again, the importance of prayer is highlighted and the opportunity that the SGs afford for personal support in struggles through intimate sharing. Rose got to share more detail with the SG, who all prayed for her immediately and the following day, 'and very quickly the issue disappeared'. Rose continues that she appreciates:

the fact that somebody was actually listening [...] they followed the lead of the Spirit, [...] picked up that there was a need [...] and the prayer was very powerful [...] I was touched by the sensitivity of the person [...] And then the whole group prayed for me. [...] you could tell that they cared, and you know that type of support that Christ-like love, that you, you end up experiencing as part or nearly as a by-product of the course.

(Rose, SG.1)

Rose views this supportive prayer as an effective and practical response to her need. She sees the group's actions as evidence of the working of 'the Spirit' [of God] and Christ-like love', which she links to the sensitivity of the SG members and their ministry to one another. For Rose (SG.1), this ministry was testimony to the care of the group, and their support extended beyond the meeting time, with members continuing to contact her in the following days. She recognises that her involvement in the group delivers much more than a simple course of study and includes experiencing 'Christ-like love' through the ministry of God's Spirit among the members.

Maeve (SG.1) experiences other opportunities and beneficial effects of group participation, which she sees as generated by the members' open and honest interaction concerning the application of Biblical teaching:

there's a great deal of openness, vulnerability, and honesty. [...] And this course kind of really encourages you just be honest about what really happens and how you really feel. [...] one of the first nights one of the questions was, how much time in prayer do you feel you're performing? And in the big group [twelve people] they were all like, ah *what?* [Maeve acts out a defiant look and raises her voice with a slightly questioning defensive tone]. But [voice changes to a low assertive tone] when they, eh, got into small groups, a lot of people found out that they were performing in prayer. And they started to talk about that. And that set a tone for the entire [course].

(Maeve, SG.1)

Once more, the progression towards growth in honest reflection and vulnerable interaction is observed. Maeve (SG.1) mentions a natural tendency towards superficiality in relationships, often experienced in the church [echoing Astin (2002, p. 46)] and even in their SG of twelve. However, early in the SG's lifecycle, when it was subdivided for periods into mini groups of around three people, members began to engage more openly with one another, moving from superficiality to depth. In this case, this involved providing honest and mutual support in struggles with applying Christian teaching to one's life. Thus, the SG, especially the mini-groups, afforded space for personal and communal vulnerability and honest reflection, a reflection that allowed members to explore their practice and the affective areas of their feelings as well. Joshua (SG.2) observes a similar progression that:

in a small group there's more opportunity for vulnerability, [...] with one another, and to share struggles, and weaknesses [...] these are people you're meeting every single week [...] there can be an openness and vulnerability, that's deeper as the small group gets to know each other, and feel comfortable with each other.

(Joshua, SG.2)

Again, Joshua (SG.2) observes that support in struggles comes through the vulnerability that develops as relationships build in the SG through weekly interaction.

Kiera (SG.1) adds:

being in a place you can trust people, and share those feelings is important in encouraging one another, because we're all human [...] life is not always *aah* happy clappy, [...] it can be very hard [...] it's good to be able to know you're not the only person that can feel like that. And you can share that with each other, and encourage one another in how to persevere in those situations.

(Kiera, SG.1)

Again, Kiera highlights the importance of trusting relationships in the SG in creating a supportive and empathetic environment for those facing struggling issues. Kiera emphasises how groups support members in the affective domains of their lives, by providing a space to share feelings and receive encouraging support from fellow journeypeople. For Kiera this is possible because:

the people I'm with in it, they have been through certain life experiences that they can share and that we can all benefit from, as far as how they approached the whatever the crisis was in their life and how they felt about that and being real with each other [...]

(Kiera, SG.1)

Kiera (SG.1) highlights the trust that developed through group members' open and honest sharing. They not only shared their experiences but did it transparently, opening up to one another concerning how they approached challenges in their lives and consequently benefiting others in the group.

Sub-theme T.2.4: *'it's more about growing in our faith and in our love for one another':*

Support is holistic

A final consideration regarding the support received through SGs concerns its broad and holistic nature. Rose (SG.1) demonstrates this when she speaks of learning and growth but also support in practical, spiritual, and affective areas:

there's a lot of value in [...] staying on past the video and exchange observations, exchange thoughts on what we've learned or what we've tried before what works, what doesn't work. Sometimes we would move off topic a little bit, but this doesn't really matter, I think, what matters is the fact that we're fellowshiping and we're all in there engaged seeking the Lord, you know, broadly speaking, it's not necessarily about improving our prayer techniques, it's more about growing in our faith and in our love for one another. [...] the fellowship time that follows [the video] is just very beneficial for people's wellbeing, you know, for their sense of connection and all of that.

(Rose, SG.1)

The picture of the holistic approach to growth offered in the SG is unmissable, moving from didactic teaching to experiential learning, communal prayer to practical and affective growth areas. Practical experiences of living out the teaching are considered 'what has worked, what has not'. Communal spirituality is observed as they are 'all [...] seeking the Lord'. Affective growth is noted in that, ultimately, their time is about growth in 'faith', 'love for one another', and a fellowship that benefits members 'wellbeing'.

Similarly, Leona (SG.2) highlights the opportunity for the SG to focus on areas traversing various domains of spiritual growth:

it may be the only opportunity where you can worship you know or maybe pray into pray together in a group, and obviously definitely it really facilitates, it makes great learning [...] going through a passage of scripture together

(Leona, SG.2)

Leona (SG.2) views growth as involving the learning of scripture and taking place through times of prayer, thus encompassing the cognitive and spiritual growth areas. There is a notable appreciation of members worshipping, praying, and learning 'together', highlighting the importance of growth taking place through the community.

Charlize (SG.1) also notes the broad range of the learning taking place through the SG community:

When you have a problem, and you think your problem is so big or that you have the worst problem ever, but then when you listen to other people and what they are going through and how they feel and cope, then only do you realise that you are blessed in different ways, you actually have to go back, to God and say, “Thank You”.

(Charlize, SG.1)

Charlize (SG.1) adds another dimension to the understanding of the growth experienced through SG participation when she reflects on the coping mechanisms she has learned through her interactions with other members. These interactions occur through the mutual sharing of personal testimonies and involve helping one another in the affective area of ‘feelings’ and practical strategies for coping. This point is reinforced by Rose (SG.1), who also shares about supporting other SG members to grow in the affective domain:

I've noticed, [...] some people have, you know, negative beliefs about themselves, I heard them voicing negativity about themselves in the past and they did it again during the group. So, the next day [...] said listen honestly, I really don't think that that's how God sees you and you're a blessing to the congregation, you should really be kinder to yourself da da da. [...] it was a nice opportunity for us to get a little bit deeper with one another, and Mm strengthen the relationships above and beyond the immediate praying group, which I think is amazing, you know, is an opportunity for members of the same congregation to support one another.

(Rose, SG.1)

Again, the example shows SG members sharing Christian truths and encouraging other members' emotional or affective growth. It also highlights how such relationships can provide an extra opportunity for support beyond the SG meeting, building even deeper community bonds, a positive point noted by other interviewees [echoing Richards (1975, p. 265)].

Likewise, Leona (SG.2) speaks passionately about how SG involvement aids in ‘the teaching of scripture’ but also ‘supports’ believers practically and emotionally. She reflects on a Christian moms and toddlers group she was part of when she had her first child before moving to Ireland:

us young moms would come [...] it was kind of a real encouragement and support, being at home on my own with my baby and then getting out once a week, and meeting with another group of likeminded moms who are believers and also you know you can chat about your childcare issues.

(Leona, SG.2)

Leona explains that ‘the woman who taught the study was a granny’ and ‘was like a mom to us [...] like a spiritual mom and a physical mom’ [Leona’s voice and disposition turn emotional, in a way that is difficult to express in written form, as she speaks about this meaningful time] ‘So, it’s really good [...] a really great kind of group’. The group had a common unity because of the members’ faith and as they were experiencing similar life events with which they could support one another. It offered Leona encouragement and support in what otherwise would be a lonely time ‘being at home on [her] own with [her] baby’. She explains that, partly because of this experience, she and the Pastor’s wife started a similar group when she arrived in Ireland, then expecting her second child:

So yeah, it was literally to help establish community and support other young women, and to meet their needs you know, whatever childcare or cook a meal or if you’re having a baby you know you bring around the dinner and that kind of thing, and just to keep, and just to carry on with the teaching of scripture as well.

Leona (SG.2).

Again, it is significant to note that the SG taught ‘scripture’ and supported each other in practical service. Consequently, the interview samples in sub-theme T.2.4 show that the support received through the SGs is broad and holistic in nature. People in the groups are growing through learning scripture together and attending to the practical, spiritual, and affective areas of each other’s lives.

Experiencing growth: Learning with others (sub-themes T.3.1-T.3.3)

The interviews revealed that members experienced growth in small groups through learning with others. While such learning involved a shared teaching, it primarily focused on applying that teaching. Significant factors in the learning process included the members engaging with others in the group with diverse viewpoints and members’ active participation in the learning process. This part of my analysis will consider these factors by analysing the three sub-themes (sub-themes T.3.1-T.3.2) as outlined in Table 5.

These three sub-themes present the SG as a participatory and active learning environment involving the *application of teaching* (sub-theme T.3.1), *engaging with diverse viewpoints* (sub-theme T.3.2), and *active participation* (sub-theme T.3.3). These sub-themes were regularly recurring in the interviews and formed a cluster of qualities in the learning environment.

Sub-theme T.3.1: ‘you are obviously interacting with a specific teaching’: Learning with others is centred around a shared teaching but focuses on its application

All SGs engaged with distinct teaching each evening (see Table 3. Overview of the three groups in the case study), which is assumed in the background of the interviews. However, interestingly, the interviewees’ responses gave less attention to the teaching itself and focused more on the interaction within the SG around the teaching. For example, Maeve (SG.1) says, ‘you are obviously interacting with a specific teaching’ but goes on to focus on the ‘new [...] living knowledge’ that ‘in our responses we are as it were, all, creating’, adding, it is ‘not just *book learning*.’ Noel (SG.1) shares that ‘listening’ to the teaching ‘has been helpful’, but listening to others ‘personal experiences’ in the group makes it more personal. Naturally, this point also applies to SG.2, as this group was wholly focused on discussing the *application* of the Sunday message. Additionally, James from SG.3 explains that while in his group, leaders bring a ‘message’ to the members that:

because it’s [the SG] small [...] it facilitates [...] group discussion and where you can kind of contribute, or question, or query, or criticize [...] sort of say actually I’m not sure where you’re coming from there.

(James, SG.3)

James’ comments go beyond simple group discussion and indicate a critically reflective engagement with ideas. The smallness and the open nature of the SG context afford space for members to dialogic concerning the text and its interpretation.

Sub-theme T.3.2: ‘I’m remembering I am not an island’: Learning with others engages with diverse viewpoints

In considering how their involvement in the SG helped them grow in their faith, participating with a diverse membership was regularly emphasised across the interviews.

Leona (SG.2) speaks of the benefits of hearing diverse perspectives:

it's really great that there's a diverse group of people who contribute because [...] there's a different perspective from different people who've had different life experiences. [...] there's always someone who raises something, which I go that's such a great point I di(dn't) I never thought of that, such a great point. [...] so it's so valuable when you do something in a group because if you just read it yourself you wouldn't have those insights, necessarily, that other people raise.

(Leona, SG.2)

The diversity of life experiences means different members have distinct understandings to bring to the SG. Leona connects this diverse exchange of ideas with learning new insights

that otherwise would have been unavailable to her. Such a context allows members in James' (SG.3) words 'to think about topics more deeply'. As with Leona's comments, James picks up on the importance of diversity in SG discussions and the deeper learning that it enables, saying:

you're getting different perspectives as well, and I think that definitely you whenever I studied scripture in a group context you go deeper than you ever do if you're on your own [...] you're exploring it and bringing [in] the different points of view and stuff like that

(James, SG.3)

Likewise, Noel (SG.1) notes:

I have found over a long period of time, that I really always learn from [...] other people's opinions and views. [...] it has expanded my understanding, my knowledge and has been encouraging to see how God speaks through other people in different ways, often quite different from how he speaks to me. [...] when I hear from people [...] their personal experiences, and both opportunities and challenges, that that has been helpful.

(Noel, SG.1)

The three SGs reflected in the observations above highlight the positive effects deriving from the participation of the diverse membership of the SGs. James (SG.3), as with Leona (SG.2), notes the insights into scripture that various members bring, while Noel (SG.1) reflects how his understanding has increased through hearing the views of others but also seeing and hearing the experiences of God's work in them in both their good and bad times.

Sub-theme T.3.3: '*where the rubber hits the road [...] it's not passive*': Learning with others is participatory

All the groups interviewed were utilising Zoom as an online platform for their meetings, which Maeve (SG.1) notes provided 'plenty of scope for interaction'. James (SG.3) highlights the importance of such interaction, saying, 'you have to give everybody an opportunity to contribute to what they're thinking'. He asserted the benefits of this by adding, 'that the sum of the parts [...] it's more than you would get if you were on your own'. Allowing everyone to share is a vital SG characteristic. Joshua (SG.2) echoes this sentiment, adding that when the leader models such sharing, it encourages others to do the same. Joshua (as Pastor) is responding to my question about whether 'preaching' [the Bible], writing the SG questions, and doing the Bible study, also help *him* in 'the process of understanding' the Bible, seeing its implications better, and applying it better, in his life?

His answer is emphatic:

Yeah, oh yeah absolutely, [...] it helps to think through, you know, how does this apply to me [...] I suppose when you're leading [...] if I can give an example of where this has worked in my life or where I've seen God doing this in my life [...] that draws it out of other people then, they feel a greater freedom to talk about what's happened in their lives and how it's impacting in that sense.

(Joshua, SG.2)

Joshua clearly highlights the importance of SG leaders modelling the application of the Bible in their own lives to promote this applicational process in the other SG participants. Creating the scope for and encouraging such group participation generates an active learning environment within the SGs. James (SG.3) contrasts this active experience of the SG to the Sunday service experience where 'you're almost passive consumers.' While in the SG someone will share a message, but because it is small, you can 'engage', 'discuss', 'contribute', 'question', 'query', and even 'criticize', James says, adding, 'that's where the rubber hits the road like I say that it's not passive'. The picture James draws of the SG is one of the member's critical engagement and exchanging of views around the Biblical text. Maeve (SG.1) concurs that the SGs engender an 'active form of learning', explaining that this involves 'discussions', 'application', and 'prayer'.

The interviewees described a participatory learning environment where members are encouraged to grow through engaging together in discussions, application, questions, and prayer, all in conversation with Christian teaching. I will now briefly consider each of these aspects of SG participation in turn.

Active Participation through Discussion:

The interviewees regularly implied or explicitly stated the connection between discussions in the SG and deeper learning or growth. Charlize (SG.1) expressed how she 'got so much information and clarification on ideas and things I didn't know' through hearing 'different views' about the subject [prayer], but also through hearing 'a life story or incidents.' Dearbhla (SG.2) shares that the collaborative learning in the SG enables her to delve 'deeper' into scripture and that 'hearing other people's opinions on and discussing' the scripture and Biblical teaching with other members 'really helps clarify some of the points on them'. While both experienced deeper learning through hearing the views of others, Dearbhla mainly noted here the members' reflections on the scriptural text. However, Charlize also highlights the learning she received through engaging with others around the subject matter and members sharing their experiences from their life. Charlize's comment suggests an experiential form of learning

happening in the SG forum that goes beyond cognitive or didactic forms of teaching.

Active participation through practical application:

Maeve (SG.1) affirms the necessity of communal learning when she says:

And me, I think, yet again I'm remembering I am not an island, and that you learn far more in a group than you do by yourself. [...] I need the church [...] you really can't learn about Christianity outside of a group I don't think I mean (.) you certainly can't learn how to apply Christianity outside of some sort of group setting, I think, interactive group setting like this.

(Maeve, SG.1)

Maeve (SG.1) highlights the added benefit of group participation to her learning. However, she goes beyond this, explicitly noting the indispensability of a group context for an applied response to Christian learning. Likewise, one of the things Michael (SG.2) found helpful about the SG interaction is that some of the members were much better 'at making' the teaching they were reflecting on 'really practical' through sharing an experience of application to life:

when you're talking about a particular question, they'll always have a, oh yeah, this happened to me last week, and this is how this fits into that situation. [...] they're able to bring it [scriptural teaching] down into eh this is how it boots on the ground works [...] honest and transparent and applying these things in real life situations

(Michael, SG.2)

Such practical application of teaching was regularly emphasised by the interviewees and is often the focus of the SG questions prepared for the SG meeting. Maeve (SG.1) views it as essential for applied learning. Michael (SG.2) suggests that members sharing personal testimonies provide concrete examples of application in practice for others in the SG.

Active participation through questions:

The importance of developing an affirmative environment for people to question and reflect together on Christian teaching is an aspect promoted in the SG as Julie (SG.3) notes:

we really wanted to show that having questions is not something to be ashamed of
(Julie, SG.3)

When people in the SG have the freedom to pursue questions, it is 'a healthy place to be' she says, adding that:

group participation is fabulous because people might ask questions [...] that you wouldn't have thought of yourself so you'd even learn more from listening to others' questions, and other people's answers so [...] being a part of the group definitely causes you to even grow in your faith more.

(Julie SG.3)

Julie (SG.3) highlights again the growth in faith that derives from group discussion and even the interaction that results from the different types of questions various members may pose. Astutely, she notes the healthy learning environment created by encouraging such critical reflection on teaching. Amos (SG.3) agrees that asking questions is a key benefit of SG participation:

you can't [...] ask a book, your questions, but you can ask your questions in the small group. And you can't really ask your questions in a huge group, either [...] even if someone like a brilliant apologist came [...] there's limited interaction there.
(Amos, SG.3)

Both Julie and Amos suggest that it is not only asking questions but the interaction by the SG members around those questions that bring growth in faith. The importance of active participation and the opportunity the SG offered for this was a leading thought expressed in the interview responses.

Application questions based on the Sunday message are essential in SG.2 also. Joshua (SG.2) explains that whoever has preached that week sends the questions out before the SG meeting. This facilitates participants 'thinking through the implications' of that message in preparation for the SG, and some members come well-prepared with their answers already written out. Joshua adds (with a small laugh) that 'it maybe affects the way people listen [...] on Sunday [...] as] they know there are questions coming up'. However, he does mention a possible 'drawback', where members may simply repeat his answer from the sermon, adding:

you need to push them a little bit more in terms of [...] what's your understanding of that or how does it apply in your life [...] in your situation.
(Joshua SG.2)

Again the emphasis on the applied nature of the SG engagement with the Bible is noted. Joshua's desire to push beyond rote repetition to deeper and more engaged personal learning is also observed in his statement. This process does seem to produce deeper reflection, as observed in Leona's (SG.2) comment:

even scripture that you read a million times, you read it again and think actually I don't really know what that sentence is saying.
(Leona, SG.2)

Active participation through prayer:

A final aspect of SG participation concerns the place afforded by the interviewees to the ‘spiritual’ and not just the mind in learning. Naturally, this is prominent in SG.1 with its focus on both the study and communal practice of prayer, as exemplified in Rose’s (SG.1) comment:

So definitely the learning to be more active eh in the prayer or the intercession *with others* is definitely, probably my number one, eh, what I would say has being my number one *growth* element.

(Rose, SG.1)

However, Joshua (leader of SG.2) also opens his group ‘in prayer’ followed by working through questions on the Biblical passage for the evening. Following this:

I try to leave about five minutes at the end then for an open time of prayer, just reflecting on the passage as such.

(Joshua, SG.2)

Joshua (SG.2) further explains that he does not ‘ask for prayer requests’ and that there are other times in the church calendar week when such opportunities are available, but:

what I'm channelling them more towards is, we've had this long discussion on this passage, and all the truths of this passage is brought out and we've been thinking about how it applies to us. Now let's pray together [...] in response to what we've been studying. So it might be, prayers of, you know, thanksgiving, or just praising God for what we've seen of Him in the passage or praying through a little bit more the application of it [...] it's an important part of it.

(Joshua, SG.2)

In this approach, Joshua (SG.2) connects the discussion of scripture with communal praise, prayer for insight, and applying the learning to one’s life, all of which reveals a holistic approach to learning. Finally, while SG.3 is at times focused on the ‘highbrow’ and ‘intellectual’ (James SG.3) world of apologetics, their leader Amos’ (SG.3) comment is revealing when he says:

we would introduce the meeting with a short prayer, just for us to be blessed and attentive and to profit from the whole thing, not in the flesh but in the spiritual world.

(Amos, SG.3)

Again Amos’ (SG.3) comment displays an understanding of learning that involves more than the cognitive dimension alone.

James (SG3), who also attends this group, notes, that sometimes either a large or SG ‘may be the only opportunity where you can worship [...] or maybe pray into pray together in a group’, adding:

when it boils down to it [...] in Christian terms I think scripture says that you believe with your *heart*, [...] not with your mind so much, [...] even though the mind is clearly engaged.

(James, SG.3)

James’ (SG.3) comments emphasise the connection in the SG between the spiritual and affective domains of the learning experience. For him, even the intellectual world of apologetics must appreciate the spiritual dimension of faith development.

Experiencing growth: Impact of learning (sub-themes T.4.1-T.4.2)

The interviews revealed that the participants experienced growth in SGs. The final points in this analysis will elaborate on two broad areas impacted by this growth. Firstly, the members were challenged to grow in and actively express their faith (sub-theme T.4.1). Secondly, the members’ growth experiences in the SG positively impacted the larger congregation (sub-theme T.4.2). This part of my analysis will consider these two sub-themes (T.4.1-T.4.2) as outlined in Table 5 with each sub-theme discussed below.

Sub-theme T.4.1: ‘it was just a great learning experience’: Members are challenged to grow in personal areas and active expressions of their faith

SGs have sometimes been viewed as merely therapeutic and even self-serving groups (Wuthnow, 1994a). However, my interviews reveal that SGs are places where deeply *challenging aspects* of discipleship are being addressed. Members are challenged to grow in what might be called personal or *inner aspects* of their faith and in more *outward aspects* or active expressions of their faith.

Kiera (SG.1) highlights an example of personally challenging discipleship growth when she says:

I found that on a personal level as well. With my marriage you know there was a time of separation in our marriage which I was very unhappy with, and I really struggled with [God] I had a lot of anger with coming through this. And I just had to express it to God I had to be honest.

(Kiera, SG.1)

Kiera's (SG.1) difficult situation included a period of marital separation and the inner struggle she felt in her relationship with God because of this. During the SG one of the members shared a difficult 'struggle' he was having concerning a 'job' he was seeking, along with the lessons he was learning about 'yielding it and giving it over to God [...and] wait[ing] on [God] for what's best'. Considering this 'testimony', Kiera (SG.1) realised that she had made similar decisions when facing her challenging period in her marriage:

I came to a place of saying Lord, you're still God, [...] It's [not] my will, it's your will. And it was difficult, but it made me stand in through that situation I didn't run away from it, I didn't turn away, thank God. And [...] actually our marriage is stronger, we're better friends, maybe that's the outcome, because we decided, okay, we're going to accept each other for who we are. And there's more unconditional love.

(Kiera, SG.1)

As a researcher, I was interested to hear about the positive resolution in Kiera's marriage, and I was intent on clarifying how this learning experience took place for her. It transpired that the SG watched a teaching video about a form of prayer Kiera felt related to her situation. Following this, the group discussed the idea further, and a member shared a testimony (noted above) about applying this prayer principle in their life. Subsequently, Kiera engaged in some personal reflection about her situation. Through a combination of those factors, *didactic teaching, discussion, testimony, and personal reflection*, Kiera (SG.1) was helped in her learning. She exemplified a growth story involving a challenging and significant area of her life.

Dearbhla (SG.2) shares a SG experience where the members were 'discussing how we should behave as being adopted children of God, [...] understand the love of God, and [...] value ourselves', areas she says she always found challenging. She shares about the conversation and especially the input from one of the members, concluding that:

it was just a great learning experience for us to see the love of God and how that should be shaping how we feel about ourselves, rather than just looking into ourselves, so for me that kind of dynamic that you get in the light of the Word of God, and listening to your fellow Christians on how that should impact you, is what the homegroup for me is all about.

(Dearbhla, SG.2)

The experience of learning in the SGs is observed in Dearbhla's (SG.2) comments, involving reflection on the Bible, but also the challenging comments from another SG member.

The positive results of this process are seen as Dearbhla shares her experience of personal growth. It was ‘a great learning experience’ she says, in an area of faith she has always found ‘very difficult’ (Dearbhla, SG.2).

Maeve (SG.1) shares about challenging areas of growth she and the SG engaged with:

So we’ve dealt with some heavy topics like, [...] the pain of unanswered prayer, Mm and I think the small group and the little group really encourages that sort of opening up and being honest with one another.[...] it’s much more, well to me for me anyway, [...] very helpful in personal reflection and growth.

(Maeve, SG.1)

Maeve highlights a point seen throughout the analysis that the SG facilitates open and honest reflection. She also provides a glimpse into some of the content the SG engaged with, describing it with the phrase ‘heavy topics’. Again, the SG affords an impetus for growth in challenging areas of the Christian faith. Maeve (SG.1) explicitly states this as her experience, saying she ‘found it very helpful in personal reflection and growth’.

Charlize (SG.1) relates an example of an aspect of her personal growth saying:

I got invited to this prayer course, [...] I wanted to know how to pray [...] I would have never in all of my life, said a prayer out loud in front of anybody [except, ‘obviously my kids’] I couldn’t really pray, at the table or anywhere out loud. This small group in the prayer course gave me loads of confidence to just saying or asking different questions. [...] to pray without, doubting myself or being shy.

(Charlize, SG.1)

Charlize’s story shows a clear progression of growth in an area that was personally challenging for her. The SG provided a context for her to talk and ask questions about the issue, build her confidence, and practise her newfound skills. She expresses substantial growth from a starting point of little ability in this form of prayer and attributes this to her SG experience. Charlize (SG.1) continues to share about other aspects of growth in areas that she found challenging:

I have never really opened up about faith to my friends, or talked about God, I never talked about faith [...] in my work force and also my circle of friends [...] Lately I can actually sit down and I have more confidence telling them about faith.

(Charlize, SG.1)

Again, Charlize (SG.1) speaks of growing confidence in her Christian practice, in this case in speaking to others about faith:

I was always very reserved, and shy because I always thought I wasn't very clever with God's word or the Bible so I always took a back seat. But this [SG] with Maeve made me want to read more and study more and gather more information so that I can really use the information when somebody asked me to pray or tell them about God, prayer, faith, so that I could be equipped to share my faith. [...] I never stood up or wanted to voice my opinion. But lately, I will actually stand up for my faith. [...] Now I would voice my opinion.

(Charlize, SG.1)

Charlize's story shows areas of substantial growth she experienced through her SG engagement. This included dealing with her inner fear and the confidence to express her ministry outwardly by praying in public, talking to others about prayer, and speaking openly about her faith. Her reservation and shyness to speak were helped through her SG experience, and she developed a new boldness to 'voice [her] opinion'. In relating her experience, I again emphasise that Charlize goes beyond speaking about the inner aspects of growth (fear, shyness) and highlights the outward expressions of the change she experienced (sharing faith and expressing opinions).

Rose (SG.1) shares similar experiences when she says that every week the SG of about twelve participants 'are split into even smaller groups of three or four' to share their thoughts on or practice the form of prayer they are studying that week. She notes that:

one of the benefits of being under the spotlight in the tiny group is that you, unless you're willing to be rude to the rest of the group which I'm not, you have to play your part. So you really have to push yourself and, let's say eh, pray in front of this small group, and for the likes of me that doesn't come particularly naturally. [...] I have to push myself and [...] move beyond the timidity and kind of just be brave and, eh muster my courage and do it you know

(Rose, SG.1)

In a group that's small enough so that members cannot hide from the challenge to 'play their part', Rose speaks of having to 'push' herself, of moving past 'timidity', of 'muster[ing]' her 'courage' and being 'brave'. Each phrase speaks of the SG's challenge to push past a lethargic faith and embrace growth. Rose (SG.1) continues:

And I think for me, this practice is proving really useful because I think it's making [me] a little bit bolder in eh embracing, what the Lord prompts me to say, or interceding with others

(Rose, SG.1)

While challenging for Rose (SG.1), the regular experience of practising her faith that the SG affords was ultimately valuable for producing a faith that more boldly obeys God. Again, her story shines a light on the growth transpiring through the SG, both concerning inner areas, such as timidity and bravery, as well as outer expressions of faith, such as playing her part by boldly ministering to others.

Other members also spoke of their growth in the outward ministry expressions of faith, such as leadership, acts of service, or being a witness for Christ. When asked if there were ‘ways in which involvement in this [SG] helps people be involved outside the group in other areas’, Amos (SG.3) was emphatic:

Absolutely(!) no doubt in my mind. So when we [...] people do something new, then doing that thing it presents new challenges. [...] lets God, grow us by, you know, teaching us on the job. [...].

(Amos, SG.3)

Amos (SG.3) follows this statement up by sharing his experience:

Like, for example, I have very limited leadership experience. [...] but through doing this, you know, I had to make choices [...] champion ideas [...] take a step back when, whatever I was trying to champion it wasn't working, and just try and find a good balance between different views. So those things are all new to me. And I cherish this experience, because I know that it will all be useful in the future. Whenever I'm faced with a new situation, you know I can build on this experience.

(Amos, SG.3)

Amos uses his own experience of the SG to illustrate growth in his ability to serve in leadership. He also speaks of an active form of learning in the SG engaged in by doing things ‘on the job’. In this case, while undoubtedly a stretching experience, the challenge is viewed positively and as something he can build on for further growth. Rose (SG.1) similarly speaks of growing in the SG through doing:

There's more opportunities to be a little bit more active, [...] that gives you confidence, and it helps you grow [...] it's a little bit easier to [...] share something or, you know, put it out there for everybody's benefit. [...] So I think that's one of the biggest differences for me, trying to grow spiritually, I just feel it's like Mm, it's like a gym where you can practice more, there's opportunities to try [different things], to practice more as opposed to be[ing] more passive, like on a Sunday morning in church.

(Rose, SG.1)

Rose (SG.1) highlights an active form of learning in the SG where a person can grow through regular practice. The SG provides many opportunities for such ministry experience, whether it be ‘leading prayer or sharing something or proposing a song for worship’ (Rose, SG.1). The

growth here is not just an inner disposition but involves the outward service of ‘share[ing] something [...] for everybody's benefit’ (Rose, SG.1). The latter phrase speaks to a motivation for growth that goes beyond a desire for individualistic benefits.

Interestingly, in speaking of growth through regular practice Rose (SG.1) uses the suggestive analogy of a ‘gym’. Leona (SG.3) utilises the same image but relates it to the challenge of accountability being a member of the SG provides:

it's like going to the gym, you need to have someone to be accountable to, and you need to have a set time to get to it because [...] there's quite often times when you go, ‘ahh no, Bible study, you know I could probably just watch another episode of something on Netflix on the couch’ [laugh]. But then you go and you go [...] I'm so glad I did it was so worthwhile.

(Leona, SG.3)

James (SG.3) uses a different analogy to express a similar point, comparing the SG to another group of colleagues he joined with in training for ‘a couch to 5K run’. Their WhatsApp ‘acted as a huge motivator’ where they could share advice with those struggling physically or be motivated to excel by hearing the running times of their friends. The running group John (SG.3) notes:

makes a huge difference (be)cause trying to do something on your own is one thing, doing it in a group is altogether different you know, and it's better and you'll see it through.

(James, SG.3)

Relating this to the motivation the church SG provides, he adds:

it encourages us to go further you know maybe in our faith in this context maybe like you know what I mean. That's *growth* isn't it (he asks rhetorically) *to go further*, growth.

(James, SG.3)

As I have observed above, this growth encompasses change in both inner aspects of faith and outward expressions of service. Dearbhla (SG.2) speaks of outward service saying:

And it's good for me to [serve] like running from work at six o'clock, running down to the shop, at times would have been quite difficult, but still it was good for me to actually say, I have to do this for people, this is what I need to do it's my way of serving and helping people.

(Dearbhla, SG.2)

Dearbhla (SG.2) identifies the importance of expressing her faith through outward acts of Christian service and hospitality. Even practical issues, such as preparing her home to host a SG, benefit her faith development and are done from a motive to serve and help fellow

members of the group. Another outward expression of faith involves a desire to be a witness for Christ to those outside the church. Both Julie (SG.3) and James (SG.3) engaged in the SG partly from a desire to be equipped in this area:

I would have an Evangelical heart as well, so, that would be very important to me so I am able to, I feel equipped to answer the questions of today.

(Julie, SG.3)

So how do we express and give meaning to our faith in public in some way or other? [...] to identify [...] as a Christian in the modern world, and have some form of witness whatever that might be [...] leading a decent life or [...] being able to talk about your faith [...] I came with that question in the back of my mind, and it has helped.

(James, SG.3)

Julie and James both attend SG.3, where the focus is on apologetics. They both acknowledge the different questions Christians face today when talking to people concerning their faith, and both desire to answer such questions. James also identifies the witness of a Christian 'life' as part of the appropriate response required in witnessing the Gospel. Michael (SG.2) also recognises this dimension in such a witness saying:

one of the greatest attractions apologetics for Christianity is to see Christians relating to each other, [...] how they kind of connect with each other, [...] inviting people into sort of an inside view of the community of the church. I think that's a really powerful [...] way we have of showing people what Christianity really is. It's not [...] information that we're trying to convey but the feel of the community we're trying to convey.

(Michael, SG.2)

Michael (SG.2) goes beyond viewing the Christian witness as merely a verbal transmission of the Gospel and adds the witness of the lifestyle of a Christian community. The SGs give a glimpse of such a community in action to those who attend. The outward effects of the SG may also be felt in its parent congregation.

Sub-theme T.4.2: ‘the smaller groups are the lifeline to the bigger church’: Members of the small group have a positive impact on the larger congregation

The small group members interviewed reported experiencing growth that impacted them personally and the wider congregation that the SG belonged to. This positive impact of the SG on the larger congregation that sponsors it is a theme that regularly came up in the interviews. Trevor (SG.3) highlights this element when he says: ‘One of the things I find about a small group is that it kinda knits people into the body better’, which he contrasts with remaining ‘on the fringes’ [of the larger church]:

people that attend the small group [they build up] deeper relationships with people, and [...] people’s lives are more kind of Mm knit into each other.
(Trevor, SG.3)

Trevor’s (SG.3) comments draw attention to a significant feature of SGs: they aid in establishing and retaining people in the larger church body. This is partly because the depth of relationships that develop through SG involvement help connect or ‘knit’ people into the congregation. Julie (SG.3) mentions that typically in a SG there would be people she knew from the congregation. Nevertheless, she adds:

[I] wouldn’t have had any relationship with them. And so, [...] it’s amazing the next time I see them inside in [her church] there’ll be that bond [...] the relationships that were built together and the experiences that we’ve had over six to twelve weeks Mm that will change things when we see each other again inside, inside on the Sunday morning.
(Julie, SG.3)

Julie and Trevor are both in SG.3, which is in a large church, and Julie’s (SG.3) distinction between people she knows in the church and the deeper relationships built through the SG is instructive. As a church grows, people can have many acquaintances yet remain relationally unconnected (Astin, 2002; Harrington and Absalom, 2016). Julie (SG.3), like Trevor (SG.3), speaks of a ‘bond’ that is built through the SG and has positive effects extending to the main congregation. Leona (SG.2) also speaks of ‘bond[ing]’ saying:

but definitely in a small group typically when we meet in someone’s home, a lot of people’s guard would come down and they’d be more open and more definitely bonds are formed and relationships and people would make a date to meet up outside of the group and go for a coffee or go for a walk, and discuss life issues and help one another through whatever challenges they might be facing at the time and pray together with them and those kinds of things.
(Leona, SG.2)

The benefit of SGs to form ‘bonds’ is highlighted by Leona (SG.2), although she reflects that ‘now on Zoom not so much because we don't have that social element as much’. As distinct from Trevor (SG.3) and Julie (SG.3), Leona (SG.2) is from a smaller congregation, yet interestingly the ‘bond[ing]’ that the SG context affords is also a significant factor she highlights. The SG ‘definitely’ facilitates the formation of such ‘bonds’ through the openness and relationships that can develop there, Leona (SG.2) notes, and these benefits go beyond the SG time itself, again underscoring the broader impact of SG ministry in the life of the church. The need for such relational bonding is also expressed by Joshua (SG.2) when he observes, ‘where you just have the large group gathering, it can be very impersonal’. The SG confronts the challenge of this loss of intimacy in relationships as a church grows numerically. In her interview Julie (SG.3) asks me to imagine a very big Sunday service. While acknowledging that such a group would be ‘fabulous’, she adds, ‘there can't be that intimacy really there [...] people can get lost in the crowds and so on’. Julie (SG.3) is adamant, therefore:

Oh without a doubt Paul I absolutely believe that the smaller groups are the lifeline to the bigger church. I firmly believe that, [...] And we know that where there was life there has to be growth. And I believe that the small groups, definitely cause growth, [...] it's growth with your relationship to God and your love for God, it's growth with your faith concerning your faith, and when it comes to relationships with each other as well there's growth there.

(Julie, SG.3)

Julie's (SG.3) emphatic speech is striking as she emphasises the growth that the SGs ‘definitely’ produce. The multi-faceted nature of this growth is also highlighted: relational growth towards God and fellow believers, as well as growth in ‘faith’ and ‘love’. Consequently, the growth resulting from the SG has both inner and outwardly expressed dimensions that impact the individual and the wider community, respectively. This is an important dimension, emphasising that the effects of the SG are not just felt on a personal level but have benefits for people and groups beyond the SG itself. Indeed, Julie (SG.3) reinforces this very point by saying:

And I think if you have a small group that all of these areas of growth is happening you're going to bring that into the bigger church. [...] these small groups [...] are definitely so important.

(Julie, SG.3)

As noted, the link between all three SGs and their respective congregations was solid and beneficial. Indeed, a recurring idea from the interviews was that people in SGs also tended to be very committed to the larger congregation. For example, Michael (SG.2) says:

but most people that are involved in a home group are part of, sort of the people that [...] are core committed people members of the church who feel like they're part of the community, like they have, feel some kind of ownership towards the community of the church and are that kind of committed in all sorts of other areas that of the life of the church.

(Michael, SG.2)

Michael's (SG.2) picture of the typical SG member is illuminating, denoting a person who is committed to, feels ownership for, and serves in the larger congregation. Trevor (SG.3) echoes his point:

So it's just a kind of general observation that I had that I thought that people who took part in smaller groups tended to be a bit more committed in general, and took an interest in volunteering and helping [...] in the main church as well.

(Trevor, SG.3)

Trevor (SG.3) adds some practical examples of such commitment: 'volunteering and helping [...] in the main church'. Michael (SG.2) and Trevor (SG.3) draw attention to people actively participating in the SG but committed beyond it also in the congregation's life.

Of course, as Michael (SG.2) acknowledges, 'it's hard to know [...] what the correlations' are, whether if people:

feel more committed then they're more likely to come to a home group, or if [...] being part of the home group and the community of that helps them feel more part of the community. I think it's probably both actually [...] they build on each other and reinforce each other.

(Michael, SG.2)

Michael's (SG.2) judgment may be judicious here. Yet one thing is clear, the picture that was regularly drawn by him and other interviewees is that far from the SGs encouraging selfish individualism, the people who attend are or become people who are often serving in and taking ownership of the larger congregation.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter presents the research findings and my analytic commentary and represents the heart of the thesis. The themes and sub-themes that form the chapter are based on the interview data. They reveal the interviewees' experiences that the SGs constitute a place to grow in faith. The supportive environment for growth created within the SG was a major factor in this.

Additionally, two other vital areas emerged in the analysis: that growth took place through learning with others and that this growth significantly impacted the members themselves and beyond. These findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

5.1 Introduction

This study is driven by an overall desire to understand if small groups are helping Evangelicals grow in their faith. The conclusion to the previous chapter has succinctly summarised the findings of the research based on the interview data. It concluded that the SG members experienced growth in faith through their participation in the SGs. It outlined the reasons for and the impact of this growth.

This chapter will move the thesis towards a final stage in the research by locating these findings regarding the broader scholarly literature they are situated within, as outlined in my literature review. In this, I position my voice within the larger group of voices in this field, indicating where my research confirms, builds on, or extends previous research.

5.2 Review of research questions and findings so far

As in every section of this thesis, my conversation with the findings and the broader research in the field is ultimately guided by my overall research questions:

1. Why do people join Evangelical small groups?
2. Does their involvement in the small group help them grow in their faith?
3. If so, what is the impact of such growth?

Towards an understanding regarding these questions, my last chapter described the nature of the experience of a group of adults from three different Evangelical SGs in Ireland based on my research analysis. The findings are outlined in the thematic map in Figure 4.

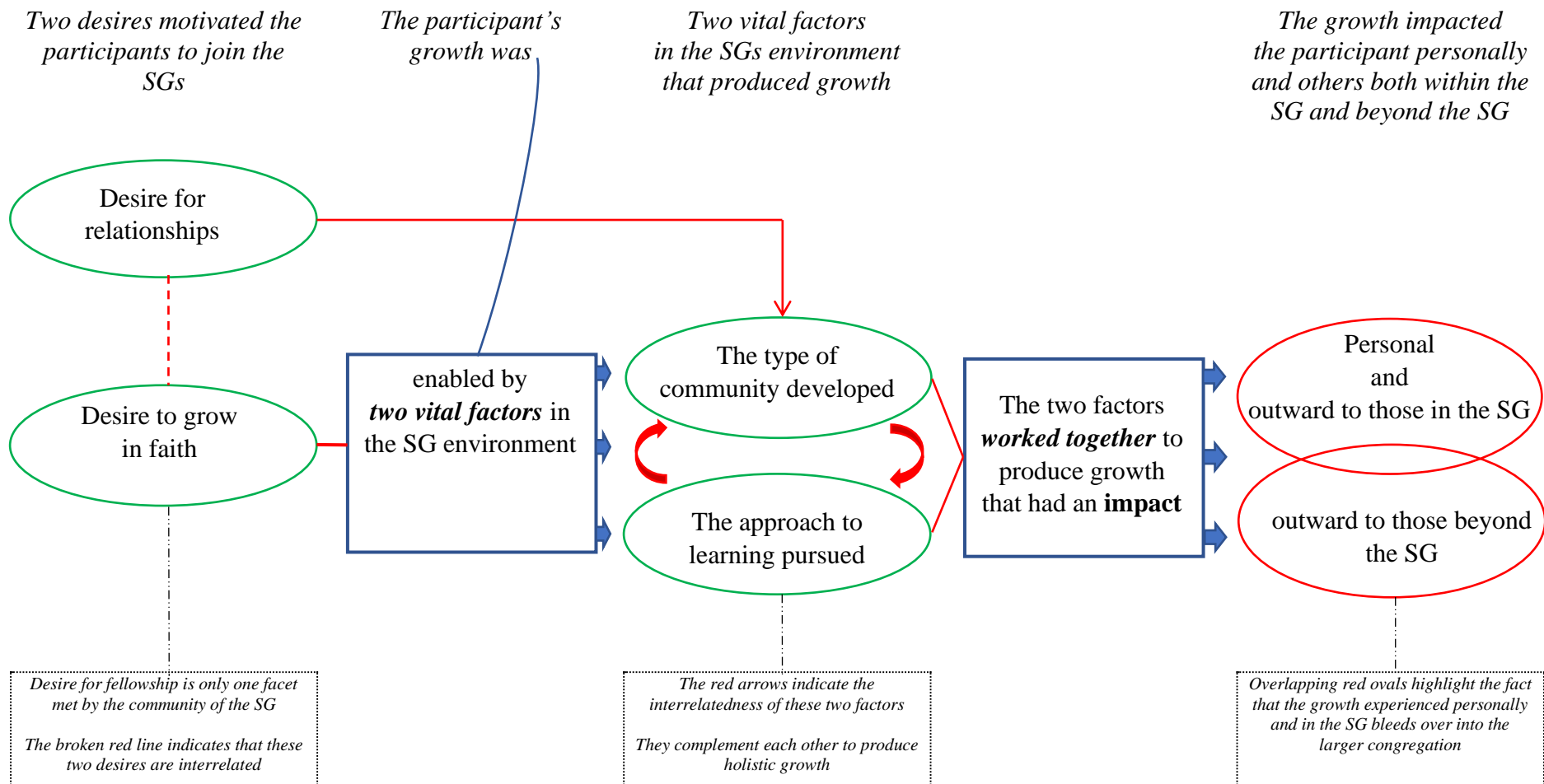


Figure 4. Map of Findings and their connection to the Literature (Personal collection, 2022)

The first two green ovals on the map answer question 1 above (*why do people join Evangelical small groups?*), indicating that members joined the groups with a desire for relationships but also growth in their faith. In answer to question 2 above (*does their involvement in the small group help them grow in their faith?*) the findings indicate that members did grow in their faith through SG participation. The two green ovals in the middle of the thematic map reflect two vital factors that produced this growth in the participants of the SGs: the type of community developed and the approach to learning pursued by the SGs. The last two red ovals on the thematic map answer the final question above (*if so, what is the impact of such growth?*), indicating that the impact of the growth was experienced personally, in the broader SG and beyond the SG.

A thematic map and several tables in this chapter give the reader a concise overview of significant findings and contributions made by this thesis. Tables (6, 7, and 8) list several key findings, indicate a selection of previous research relevant to these and note significant contributions that this thesis makes. References are included in brackets at points in Tables 6, 7, and 8 that refer the reader to relevant sections of the literature review where further details can be found regarding each discussion. These details further connect my research findings and literature review.

5.3 Discussion of my findings and the broader literature

Focusing more deeply on the thematic map (Figure 4) highlights other pertinent issues relevant to this chapter.

The first two green ovals on the map note that members joined the groups with a desire for relationships and growth in their faith. It will be observed that these ovals have a broken red line between them, indicating that these two desires were often connected in the data. The desire for relationships was met in the community developed in the SG. This point is indicated in Figure 4 by the red arrow proceeding from the green oval representing this desire and finding its fulfilment in the SG community.

However, the effects of the SGs went beyond meeting relational needs. The type of community developed in the SGs provided deep support and engendered growth in faith. The research findings in chapter four noted several factors that developed the optimum environment in the SG for such support and growth to take place. I will outline some of these findings below and suggest, in a summary fashion, how they relate to the broader literature.

Table 6: The supportive environment in the SG

| <i>Findings from this research</i> | <i>The broader literature</i> |
|---|--|
| Desire for relationships | (Harris, 1989; Wuthnow, 1994b; Davie, 1995; Hull, 2006; Bielo, 2009; Walton, 2011, 2014) |
| Smaller numbers | (Harrington and Absalom, 2016; Ogden, 2016b) |
| Importance and definition of safety | (Everist, 2002; Bielo, 2009; Walton, 2014) (Wuthnow, 1994b; Davie, 1995) |
| Trusting relationships and openness to share | (Everist, 2002; Hull, 2006; Ogden, 2016b) |
| Informal communication/chatting | (Day, 2005; McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014; Beins, 2016) |
| Holistic support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastoral care • Mutual ministry • Holistic growth | (Vandenakker, 1994; Walton, 2014) (Richards, 1975; Astin, 2002) (Downs, 1994; Vella, 2002; Wolterstorff, 2002; Maddix, 2010; Malley, 2013) |
| The importance of the leadership of the small groups | (Wuthnow, 1994b; Comiskey, 1998, 2000; Astin, 2002) |
| <p>Key contributions</p> <p>As members grew in their relationships, a supportive environment was created in the SG that enabled participants to have open discussions, leading to mutual support and holistic growth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This confirms Wuthnow (1994b) and Walton (2014) and aligns with Bielo (2009) – that a strong desire for community is a key factor in drawing people • Advances the proposals of Ogden (2016b) and Harrington and Absalom (2016) that, given the appropriate conditions, reducing the size of the SG increases the openness for people to share (T.2.3). • It affirms the significance of a safe environment in enabling effective support. • Challenges the idea that safe communication automatically implies a limited and non-challenging experience (Wuthnow, 1994b; Davie, 1995) • Has demonstrated the holistic mutual service by members of the SG supporting one another in practical, spiritual, and affective areas. • Has shown the importance of SG fellowship for holistic care and growth (Harris, 1989; Everist, 2002) • Extends previous research on small talk demonstrating its significance in virtual church SGs • It builds on existing advice for practice from educational and spiritual formational literature, which recommends a similar holistic focus (see 2.7.2 and 2.8.2). • These findings confirm and build upon findings from elsewhere regarding the importance of SG leadership for the success of the SG ministry. | |

5.3.1 Desire for relationships

Community forms the background of much of the findings in this study. The search for community is regularly noted in the literature as a substantial motivating factor in the development of SGs (Harris, 1989; Davie, 1995, pp. 51–55, 135–137; Malley, 2004, p. 10; Hull, 2006, p. 235; Bielo, 2009, pp. 75–77). My research findings show that the desire for relational connections motivated members to join the SGs (T.1.1). Such observations are in keeping with the findings of the research conducted by Wuthnow (1994b) and later confirmed by Walton (2014), highlighting that SGs' strong sense of community is a key factor in drawing people. It also aligns with Bielo's (2009) conclusions that the 'spirituality' promoted by Evangelicals 'is defined by intimacy with God and intimacy with fellow believers' with every group 'decision' and 'practice' seemingly 'oriented toward nurturing this type of spiritual environment' (2009, p. 90) (see, 2.6.1, 2.7.3). The supportive environment for growth is facilitated by several factors outlined below.

5.3.2 Smaller numbers

The findings advance Ogden's (2016b) and Harrington and Absalom's (2016) contention that, given the appropriate conditions, reducing the size of the SG to an even smaller mini-sized group (3-5 people) increases the openness for people to share (Sub-theme T.2.3). Creedon (2021) rightly criticised Ogden's (2016b) proposals by highlighting that they were based on anecdotal and not data-based research. Thus my findings partly answer this critique (Creedon, 2021) concerning the use of *microgroups* by adding data-based support to Ogden's (2016b) proposals. Smaller size groups, where relationships can develop, lead to people sharing their lives more transparently and finding support. This sums up much of the appeal of Christian SGs (Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b) (see 2.7.4).

5.3.3 The importance of and definition of safety

Safety and trust must be present in the SG to develop a 'warm and sharing climate' where people feel free to 'share' (Richards, 1975, p. 266). These findings affirm, in an Irish context, results of research from elsewhere that a feeling of safety in an environment (Davie, 1995, p. 74; Everist, 2002; Bielo, 2009, p. 76; Walton, 2014, p. 113) is essential in enabling effective support to take place. Additionally, they confirm and build on existing theories that such a safe environment primarily happens through the slow development of deep trusting relationships (Harris, 1989; Everist, 2002). (see, 2.6.1-2.6.3).

The findings challenge the general idea that safe communication automatically implies a limited and non-challenging experience (Wuthnow, 1994b; Davie, 1995) and align more closely with Everist's (2002) definition of safety as a physical and emotional space for openness, honesty, and the probing of new ideas. Thus, the findings (T.2.3-T.2.4) move beyond ideas of simple interpersonal support or shallow sharing. They report vulnerable and non-superficial sharing taking place, connected with holistic mutual service by members supporting one another in practical, spiritual, and affective areas (see 2.6.2). The supportive environment for growth promotes growth in several areas noted below.

5.3.4 Trusting relationships and vulnerability

Trusting relationships provide a foundation for openness, vulnerability, and confidence in receiving support in struggles or times of need. Vulnerable sharing is facilitated by the safety created in a SG of trusted people (T.2.2-T.2.4). Ogden (2016b) argues that 'a trustworthy environment' promotes 'ever-increasing openness and transparency' in relationships and is a 'key ingredient for continual transformation' (2016b, p. 145). Everist's (2002) advice for teaching in the church community is crucial regarding developing such trust: 'Trust builds slowly, deliberately' (2002, p. 66). Ogden (2016b, p. 146) agrees that members need to 'listen' to one another, keep 'confidences', be 'full of grace', and humility with one another for an atmosphere of 'trustworthiness' to develop. Taken together, it can be observed that a warm, gracious and affirming atmosphere, where people feel there is a grace-filled, safe and confidential space to share and listen to each other, will enable members to trust and receive input from one another, all leading to spiritual growth (see, 2.6.1; 2.6.3).

5.3.5 Informal communication/chatting or small talk

The findings highlight the significance of the growth that emerged in SGs through informal communication and small talk. Despite the relative diversity of the three SGs, all three made space for such informal conversations and spoke of the resultant benefits (T.2.2; T.2.4). An example of starting conversations like this can be seen in James' description of greeting people before the meeting with the phrase: '*How-e-yeh how-e-yeh getting on*'. James describes the positive support that simple introductory questions like this can produce. Previous research has shown that small talk or chatting elicits deep support with subsequent experiential growth (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 159; Day, 2005; McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014; Beins, 2016), and creates close 'bonds' (Bielo, 2009, pp. 75–76; Malley, 2013, p. 10) (see, 2.7.1). The three effects, bonding, support, and growth, can be observed in the findings (T.2.1; T.2.3; T.4.2).

However, previous research has been conducted with SGs meeting face-to-face (Wuthnow, 1994b; Malley, 2004; Day, 2005; Bielo, 2009) or in purely educational settings (McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014; Beins, 2016). My research findings extend this evidence to demonstrate the significance of small talk in virtual church SGs.

5.3.6 Holistic support

Through pastoral care: Closer relationships develop sensitivity among members to one another's needs and increase interest in one another, which leads to more willingness and effectiveness in supporting each other (T.2.2-T.2.4). This support highlights that SGs can be part of the means of meeting (see 1.5) pastoral care (Vandenakker, 1994; Walton, 2014) and other ministry needs (Hussey, 2020).

Through mutual ministry: This form of decentralised ministry in the SG aids in meeting members' unmet needs and is widely encouraged in SG literature (Richards, 1975; Astin, 2002) (see 2.7.2-2.7.3). The supportive environment of the group facilitates deep relationship development, where members can become vulnerable and find support in the struggles of life. The size of the group provides an opportunity for everyone to participate in meeting the needs of each other in practical, spiritual, and affective areas. This growth is sometimes personally challenging and encourages an active faith expression that positively impacts others in the SG. Such support already moves beyond the self and involves a communal experience of loving service and holistic growth in faith.

Through holistic growth: The SG community supports members practically and emotionally, along with encouraging them in their growth in faith and love for one another (T.2.4). This implies that the SGs can offer holistic support that includes paying attention to the individual's cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects, affecting their growth as a whole person. These results build on existing advice for practice from educational and spiritual formational literature, which recommends a similar holistic focus in these areas (Downs, 1994; Vella, 2002; Wolterstorff, 2002; Maddix, 2010; Malley, 2013) (see, 2.7.2 and 2.8.2).

5.3.7 The importance of leadership in the small groups

The interviewees highlighted that the quality of the SG leadership is a significant factor in the success of the SGs. The three groups that formed the case studies for this research were all led by highly competent leaders. Maeve (SG.1) had many years of experience in leading SGs.

Indeed Rose (SG.1) notes a key reason I joined was ‘I wanted to support Maeve because Maeve has always so many amazing initiatives [...] I always see a huge amount of vision behind the things that she runs and leads’. Likewise, SG.2 was led by the Pastor and Assistant Pastor of the church, who, between them, have led many such groups. Amos (SG.3) said he learned much about leadership through running the group. Nevertheless, there were several unsolicited comments from SG.3 interviewees about his passion for and deep knowledge of apologetics. Amos (SG.3) led a core team and asked a few of these to present some of the talks. The leader that did the most talks, by far, apart from him, was Julie (SG.3). Julie and her husband had extensive previous experience leading SGs for over fifteen years.

Numerous SG theorists confirm that churches that successfully run SGs prepare their leaders for the role. Training techniques may include one-on-one mentoring, classroom sessions, running a pilot SG for leaders to demonstrate the approach, seminars, or apprenticing a potential leader(s) under a more qualified leader within a regular SG (Comiskey, 2000). Many churches employ a combination approach involving classroom and on-the-job leadership training (Wuthnow, 1994b; Comiskey, 2000, 2001; Astin, 2002; Arnold, 2004; George, 2013; Singleton, 2020). The training content generally focuses on character development, practical bible study and leadership skills, group dynamics, and the care of group members. Organizing SGs as creative spaces where members may contribute is one key area of training often noted, emphasizing the leader’s role as a facilitator who, rather than teaching new knowledge, aids people to draw out practical implications of the Bible themselves (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 268; Comiskey, 2000, pp. 126–127). However, this is not to reduce the leader’s role to someone who merely keeps the discussion going. Leaders are often chosen for their spiritual maturity and depth (Wuthnow, 1994b) and can significantly benefit from training in conducting good biblical studies (Arnold, 2004; Singleton, 2020). In sum, leadership ability and ‘leadership training is imperative’ (Arnold, 2004, p. 45) and therefore constitutes essential considerations for the success of small groups. The findings of this research confirm and build on the literature from elsewhere in this regard. (See 1.5.3; 2.7.2, 2.8.2-2.8.3, 2.8.6; 3.6.4; 6.2.7; T.2.4, T.3.1, T.3.3).

5.4 The approach to learning pursued in the small groups

The last section considered the focus on developing a supportive environment for growth and community in the SGs. This section considers the focus of the approach to learning pursued by the SGs. The research findings (chapter 4) noted several factors related to the area of learning in the SG (see esp. T.3.1-T.3.3). I will outline some of these findings below and suggest how they relate to the broader literature in a summary fashion. I will also provide details that further connect my research findings and literature review.

Table 7: The approach to learning pursued in the SG

| <i>Findings from this research</i> | <i>The broader literature</i> |
|--|--|
| Socialisation plus! | (Richards, 1975; Westerhoff, 1976; Walton, 2014; Bandura, 1986; Sherkat, 2003; Astley and Francis, 1994) |
| Participatory learning | (Vella, 2002; Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi, 2019) |
| Diversity in learning | (Mezirow, 1978, 2009; Brookfield, 2004) |
| Experiential learning | (Comiskey, 2001; Vella, 2002; Arnold, 2004; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005; Ogden, 2018) |
| Critically engaged learning | (Astley and Francis, 1994; Groome, 1998; Astley, 2018) |
| Holistic learning | (Harris, 1989; Wilhoit, 2022) |
| <p>Key contributions</p> <p>Learning transpires through community discussions. Members learn holistically by combining reflection on their experience, the views of others, and spiritual practices in conversation with the Biblical story (further see 2.9).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partially aligns with theories of socialisation (Richards, 1975; Westerhoff, 1976; Walton, 2014) • Challenges the notion of a simple or passive socialising experience (see 5.4.2) • Extends a model of learning in Evangelical SGs based on socialisation to include other relevant factors (see 5.4.2; 5.4.5-5.4.6) • Extends Brookfield’s (2004) adult educational goals for discussion in groups to church SGs (5.4.3) • Aligns and applies parts of Mezirow’s (1978, 2009) transformative learning theory to Evangelical church SGs • Builds on the applied learning focus of SG theorists by connecting it to adult educational material regarding the importance of immediacy in teaching (Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005) • Highlights the congruence of Groome’s (1998) approach of shared Christian praxis to the experiences of the SGs (see 2.8.6-2.8.7; 5.4.2). • Recommends the combining of the experiential and critical aspects of learning (5.4.4-5.4.5) • Establishes that holistic learning is transpiring in the SGs, embracing the cognitive, relational, emotional, volitional, and spiritual domains (see 5.4.6) | |

5.4.1 Socialisation plus!

One answer regularly proposed by the literature regarding how learning transpires in SGs is that communities ‘socialize people into their values and practices’ (Walton, 2014, p. 31; see also, Richards, 1975, and Westerhoff, 2012). Experiences in the community's life and the church's liturgy form the curriculum by which such socialisation occurs (Westerhoff, 1976; Harris, 1989). Individuals are influenced both consciously and unconsciously in their outlook and attitudes by the modelling (Bandura, 1986, 2003) of leaders (Walton, 2014; Hockridge, 2021) and other members (Richards, 1975; Downs, 1994), especially when these sources are trusted (Sherkat, 2003). Such proposals emphasise the social, nonformal, and informal aspects of religious learning. The church promotes spiritual growth in its members through its language, beliefs, the expression of its attitudes and affections, and Christian behaviour, while only secondarily through direct formal instruction (Astley and Francis, 2013) (see, 2.8.5).

In some respects, these findings align closely with such theories of socialisation (T.3.2-T3.3; see 2.8.4 and 2.8.6). For example, the SGs value the modelling of leaders (Arnold, 2004) and members alike (Richards, 1975), as well as the participation of all the members in the key activities of the group (T.3.2-T3.3). As noted earlier, the SGs are highly trusting and relational environments (T.2.1; T.2.3; see 2.6.3). They share key characteristics for Christian nurture (Westerhoff, 2012), such as common rituals, a familial type community, and a commitment to a common end beyond themselves. Consequently, the SGs seem to provide an ideal setting for such socialisation.

5.4.2 Participatory learning

Nevertheless, the findings challenge any notion of a simple or passive socialising experience. The SGs constitute a highly participatory learning environment, where members are encouraged to grow through engaging together in discussions, lesson application, questions, and prayer, all in conversation with Christian teaching (esp. T.3.1-T.3.2; see, 2.8.6). This collaborative learning model creates a synergy of ideas and facilitates a deeper understanding of scripture. Taking together the experiences of those interviewed suggests that participating with a diverse SG of members, sharing their personal perspectives, as well as positive and challenging experiences concerning both the SG teaching and the Christian life, produce deep learning and growth in the Christian faith. This communal form of learning evokes insights that transcend a purely individualistic approach. Indeed, one of the significant findings to emerge from this research is that the participants expressed that they grew in their faith more through the interactions and conversations around the teaching, primarily through hearing the

diverse perspectives of others in the group rather than directly through the teaching itself (T.3.2).

Consequently, the data contributes to a clearer understanding of the learning process as experienced in SGs. Whatever socialisation is involved is of a refined and more constructivist type, highlighting the creative role of individuals who, through self-criticism, innovation and selection of their choices, continually ‘reconstruct and refine’ (Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi, 2019, p. 3) their religious identity, either individually, or in a more socially constructivist model through their community membership (T.3.2-T.3.3; 2.8.4 and 2.8.6). At first blush, it may seem that the Evangelical approach to learning moves only directly from Biblical theory to applied practice. However, it is clear from the motivation section (T.1.1-T.1.2) that many members have at least some general questions even when entering the SGs.

Additionally, it is transparent that members bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the communication act in the SGs (T.3.2-T.3.3). Therefore, instead of passively listening to and applying a teaching, the SGs allow space for interactive discussions that include questioning and critiquing the teaching content together (esp. T.3.1; T.3.3). All of this develops a good foundation for creating a shared embodiment of Christian theory evidenced in holistic growth [‘conation’ (Groome, 1998)] in the Christian faith. Consequently, what transpires in the interaction between practice and theory within the SG has an affinity with Groome’s (1998) approach of shared Christian praxis (see 2.8.6-2.8.7). The learning goes beyond simple socialisation and pictures SG members as agent-subjects voluntarily engaging in a dialectic relationship with their social context (Groome, 1998, pp. 101–106).

5.4.3 Diversity in learning

The findings regularly mention that in the SG interactions, members are exposed to new viewpoints from others in the group, who bring to the discussions different insights on scripture and different experiences of the Christian life. This gives them diverse perspectives and helps them see the world as others see it. Both results align with valued adult educational goals for group discussion noted by Brookfield (2004). The findings build on this by proposing that such discussion gives SG members new lenses to reflect critically on and explore their experiences. This transpires through the diverse community discussion in conversation with the Biblical message. Members combine reflection on their experience, the views of others, and the Biblical story, ultimately leading to their growth in faith (T.3.2). This finding aligns with parts of Mezirow’s (1978, 2009) transformative learning theory that

encourages a learner to consider alternative perspectives, through which s/he receives resources that may result in transformation in their thinking, beliefs, attitudes, or actions. Such perspective-taking is helpful in critical thinking, as experience, while a great resource, needs to be reflected on in concert with others.

5.4.4 Experiential learning

Alongside didactic Biblical teaching, the SGs kept experiential learning in focus through testimonies and the application of the Bible to real-life situations. The SGs take advantage of the rich resource for holistic learning that experience provides (see 2.8.6). They also focus on applied learning aligning with advice from SG theorists (Comiskey, 2001; Arnold, 2004; Ogden, 2018). The findings build on this approach to applied learning by connecting it to adult educational material regarding the importance of immediacy in teaching (Vella, 2002; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2005). Members spoke of being motivated to join the group because of dissatisfaction with their present praxis, coupled with a feeling that there was immediate usefulness in the learning offered (T.1.2). Alongside this, the connection of the teaching to immediate areas of application in the life of the members is a common theme in the findings (T.3.1; T.4.1; see, 2.8.2; in the above section, see 2.7.2-2.7.3, 2.8.1, 2.8.3-2.8.4).

5.4.5 Critically engaged learning

By utilising the Christian story to inform such conversations and engaging in this with a reflective community, an extra critical dimension is added to the process in the SGs (see 2.8.6). All three SGs highlighted the transformational learning which resulted from engaging with the diverse perspectives of others in the group (T.3.2-T.3.3), as well as the centrality of the Christian story (in their case, the Bible) in the process (T.3.1). This latter point is essential because SGs that are only dependent on learning the faith through member interaction risk socialising members in a sub-par expression of the Christian faith if such interaction significantly diverges from the Christian story (see, 2.8.7). The findings suggest how the groups mitigated this risk: the experiential form of learning was critiqued through their members' reflective conversations around the Biblical text.

5.4.6 Holistic learning

The findings also add to such learning approaches the importance of prayer, spiritual practices, and reliance on the Holy Spirit (T.2.3-T.2.4; T.3.1). For while spiritual formation requires intentionality and includes human effort, it only takes place through the presence and power of

God's Holy Spirit (Harris, 1989; Wilhoit, 2022). This approach in the SG suggests a holistic learning model embracing the cognitive, relational, emotional, and volitional domains. For example, one SG used 'The Prayer Course' created by 24-7 Prayer (Greig, 2021). The course includes prayer tools such as Lament; the examen; breath prayer; Christian meditation; Lectio Divina; and more. However, all three groups note the importance of prayer in their learning experience. Theorists such as Harris (1989) include *leiturgia* (praise and prayer) as one of the forms that, working together with the others, create the 'whole curriculum' for the church. While prayer and Bible reading are, to quote Wuthnow (1993b), examples of 'ways of drawing closer to God [...] the small-group movement elevates the degree to which such activities are planned, calculated and coordinated'. Rather than simply let intimacy with God emerge, in the SG, 'they prescribe activities for growing closer to the sacred' (1993b, p. 1239). Teaching is intimately connected with the practice of prayer and other spiritual disciplines. For lasting transformational growth to take place, there is an appreciation that the context of community is required, as is the working of the Holy Spirit in the process (T.2.3-T.2.4; T.3.3 5; see, 2.7.3, 2.8.1, 2.8.7).

5.5 The impact of the growth in faith of the small group members

I have already defined the goal of growth in faith as the Christian being shaped into the likeness of Jesus Christ, which includes inner and outer personal transformation, as well as a focus beyond themselves to others (see, 1.5). Previous sections have also detailed significant learning and growth experienced by members through their participation in the SGs. This section (5.5) will conclude by noting the further impact of such learning on individual members in the SG and more widely beyond the group. I will outline some of these findings below and suggest how they relate to the broader literature in a summary fashion. I will also provide details that further connect my research findings and literature review.

Table 8: The impact of the growth experienced in the SG

| <i>Findings from this research</i> | <i>The broader literature</i> |
|--|--|
| Inner and outer personal transformation | (Downs, 1994; Steele, 2001; Bramer, 2010, p. 334; Greenman, 2010; Hindmarsh, 2017) (See 1.5.3) |
| Challenging discipleship | (Ogden, 2018); Contra Wuthnow (1994a) |
| Accountability | (McGarrah Sharp and Morris, 2014; Harrington and Absalom, 2016; Ogden, 2016b) |
| Focus beyond the self to mutual ministry and communal learning | (Richards, 1975; Comiskey, 1998; Arnold, 2004) (Ulrich and Glendon, 2005; Carlson, 2010) |
| SG members’ missional and outward expression of their Christian faith | (Harris, 1989; Walton, 2011, 2014; Harrington and Absalom, 2016) |
| Growth/impact beyond the SG – spill over effect to the larger sponsoring congregation | (Vandenakker, 1994; Astin, 2002; Beckham, 2005) |
| <p>Key findings</p> <p>Growth in faith was experienced by SG members and involved inner and outer personal transformation and a focus beyond oneself to serving others. This growth was sometimes challenging but was aided by the mutual support and community offered in the SG.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights Evangelicals' vision for holistic transformational growth (see 1.5.3). • I contest the view of SGs as mere therapeutic or self-serving groups and contend that they are places where deeply challenging aspects of discipleship are being addressed. • My findings extend proposals regarding accountability by observing it in larger SGs, as distinct from <i>microgroups</i>. My findings extend this by observing accountability in informal church-based SGs in an online forum instead of formal online educational groups. • The findings confirm and build on theories from educationalists regarding the benefits of communal and peer learning as an educational strategy. • The SG as an ideal setting for developing a decentralised mutual member ministry. • The findings build on and extend Walton’s (2011, 2014) discussion on the missional impact of SGs. • These findings add valuable data regarding how SGs and their parent congregation interact. | |

5.5.1 Inner and outer transformation in the lives of small group members

The findings of this research demonstrate the growth in faith of SG members, affecting the inner dimensions of their lives and outer expressions of their faith that includes a focus beyond themselves to others. Highlighting these various domains of transformation in SG members (T.1.2) confirms the claims of Hindmarsh (2017) that Evangelicalism has drawn its members inward to ‘intensive interior devotion to Christ and intense experience of Christian community in small groups, just as a powerful “centrifugal dynamic” has driven them out in sacrificial service’ (Hindmarsh, 2017, p. 292). Engaging the content of belief, capturing the believer’s heart and affecting their will, inspired action based on their belief (Downs, 1994, pp. 18–19).

The thesis’ findings emphasise a growth in believers where their physical and material existence is not separated from their mental or spiritual life. Examples of spiritual practices include members focusing on the inner domain of their life through scripture reading and prayer, the outward domain in areas of personal sanctification or loving service, and the corporate domain in ways such as practising accountability through community or public worship. Consequently, the SGs advance the recommendations for believers to be ‘formed and shaped holistically’ (Estep Jr., 2010, p. 261; see also, Greenman, 2010; Shaw, 2014; Astley, 2018; Gin, Lester and Blodgett, 2019) (see 2.8.1;1.5.1; 1.5.3)

5.5.2 Challenging discipleship

SGs have sometimes been viewed as merely therapeutic and even self-serving groups (Wuthnow, 1994a). As I noted above (2.6.2), Wuthnow (1994b) argued that the structures of SGs were set up to merely ‘create a space, as it were, for people to get to know each other’ with their very *raison d’être* ‘often to provide deep, intimate interpersonal support–period’ (1994b, p. 159). This, he contended, was a ‘contemporary redefinition of spirituality’ (Wuthnow, 1993b, p. 1239), promoting an unbalanced focus on the individual’s comfort and feelings, with the primary goal of helping them get along and be happy, over and above focusing on goodness, reverence of God and ‘taking the risks that may be necessary for true growth to emerge’ (1993b, p. 1239).

However, my research findings (T.4.1-T.4.2) contest this view and suggest that SGs are places where deeply challenging aspects of discipleship are being addressed. The interviewees spoke of their ‘dissatisfaction’ with present praxis, their desire and even ‘hunger’ to grow (T.2.2; T.4.1). Individuals relayed that they experienced growth in difficult and complex areas of life such as their marriage, understanding the love of God, low self-value, overcoming fear and

shyness to minister publicly, their prayer life, and learning to serve. Members used provocative imagery to communicate the challenging environment for growth that the SG facilitated, such as being ‘under the spotlight in the tiny group’ or the analogy of the SG as a ‘gym’, where a person can grow through regular practice (see, 2.6.2-2.6.3; 2.7.4; 2.8.5).

5.5.3 Accountability through small group involvement

Other SG members related ‘gym’ or training images to accountability (T.4.1). SG theorists Harrington and Absolom (2016) as well as Ogden (2016b), contend that accountability can transpire in church micro-groups of 3-5 people. In addition, McGarrah Sharp and Morris (2014) discovered that small online discussion groups arranged in a formal online educational course enabled accountability (see, 2.7.1, 2.7.4). My findings extend these proposals by indicating accountability in larger SGs (approx. 12 members) and informal church-based groups in an online forum. The findings suggest this accountability was often of a subtle and motivational kind. (See 2.7.4).

5.5.4 Focus beyond the self to mutual ministry and communal learning

The findings suggest that the SGs create a forum where members could learn to minister to and support one another (T.2.3; T.4.1). The findings align with SG theorists who encourage such decentralisation of ministry where everyone can use their gifts for the benefit of all (Comiskey, 1998, p. 56). The findings confirm and build on theories from educationalists that actively involving church members in teaching and learning from one another is a strategy conducive to growth, religious education (Richards, 1975; Everist, 2002), and the retention of the learning created together (Ulrich and Glendon, 2005; Carlson, 2010). (See 2.7.2).

5.5.5 Small group members’ missional and outward expression of their faith

The research findings indicate that SG members were challenged in areas related to the outward expression of their Christian faith. This might take the form, for example, of joining in the communal ministry of prayer and intercession, taking bold acts of obedience to God, speaking about faith and being a witness for Christ both individually and/or as a community (T.4.1-T.4.2). While the COVID restrictions limited some opportunities for such outward ministry, the findings indicate a desire and trajectory towards such areas, albeit if not all of this could be acted upon at this time. In some ways, it could be argued that Walton’s (2011, 2014) contention that SGs are not generally being used for mission is confirmed by these findings if mission is defined as evangelism. Nevertheless, such a finding may imply that there cannot be legitimate variety in the focus of SGs (Richards, 1975; Creedon, 2021). Furthermore, it may involve

constructing an overly narrow definition of mission. These findings expand such a definition, suggesting that the SGs helped establish and retain people in the larger church congregation by building deeper relationships, creating bonds, and providing a forum for discipleship growth. Additionally, SGs ultimately influence mission by positively affecting their church congregation and thus its mission outreach. The benefits they offer are part of a more holistic picture of the SGs and the main congregation they are connected to working together in Christ's mission (Harris, 1989) (see 2.8.1-2.8.2).

5.5.6 Growth has an impact beyond the small group affecting the congregation

The interviewees highlight that what transpires in the SGs has a significant spillover effect within the congregation the groups are part of (T.4.2). A picture regularly indicated in the findings is that far from the SGs encouraging selfish individualism, the people who attend are or become people who are often serving in and taking ownership for the larger congregation. The SGs create relational bonds and 'knit' people into the wider church community (T.2.1; T.4.2). People known vaguely in the congregation become more deeply connected through the SG ministry. This relational growth is directed towards God and fellow believers. It is expressed as growth in 'faith' and 'love', impacting individuals in the SG and the wider community, respectively (T.4.1-T.4.2). What is experienced in the SG crosses over into the congregation and greatly affects the relational bonds and service that takes place there also (Astin, 2002; Beckham, 2005). Members of the SGs tended to be committed to, volunteer and help in the main church. It is unclear whether the SGs attracted or produced such members or, more likely, a mix of both. However, one interviewee was emphatic: 'the smaller groups are the lifeline to the bigger church' (Julie, SG.3). Based on the other interviewee's comments, I might add the average-sized church also. This finding adds valuable data on how SGs and their parent congregation interact. It goes some way in answering worries raised concerning SGs separating themselves from their main congregation for self-serving reasons (Vandenakker, 1994). In the churches related to my findings, the opposite was the case, and the SG members were an asset to the wider congregation. (See 2.6.1; 2.7.1)

5.6 Practical suggestions

These findings suggest several actions:

- Promote small groups as a forum for growth in faith through applying and practising the Bible in a participative and supportive community.
- Allocate aspects of pastoral and other ministry functions to the small group and provide them with the requisite leadership training and oversight.
- Encourage small groups to design their small group format keeping a holistic approach to learning in mind and a design that encourages the members' inner and outward or service-focused development.
- Encourage small groups to design their small group format based on an environment with plenty of opportunities for all members to participate in formal and informal discussions within the group time.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings of the research detailed in chapter four. The findings suggest that two major factors contribute to the growth in faith of individuals in the SGs. These relate to the type of supportive environment or community developed in the SG, and the SG learning approach. Further, the chapter has considered the effects of such growth on the SG member, others in the SG and beyond the group itself. It has concluded by offering some practical suggestions based on these findings. The next chapter will present a conclusion to this thesis.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The impetus for this research came from a desire to record, analyse, and seek to understand the experiences of Evangelicals who participate in church SG meetings. The heart of the question that drove the thesis was whether such involvement in SGs helped the members grow in their faith. Importantly the findings provide evidence that the members did indeed grow in their faith through their participation in church SGs. Moreover, this growth was holistic, impacting them relationally, cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, and spiritually. The growth was experienced in the inner lives of members but also in the outward expressions of their faith, as demonstrated in their love and ministry to others both within and beyond the SG.

This growth was enabled by the supportive environment created in the SGs. The qualities that constituted this environment included its relational approach to providing support and offering such support to members in their struggles. The results also show that the support received was broad and holistic in nature. People in the groups grew through learning scripture together and attending to the practical, spiritual, and affective areas of each other's lives.

This research also revealed that members experienced growth in small groups through learning with others. Such learning involved a shared teaching and primarily focused on applying that teaching. Significant factors in the learning process included the members engaging with others in the group with diverse viewpoints and members' active participation in the learning process. This participation included the members engaging in group discussions and critical reflection on applying Biblical teaching to their lives. It also involved practising the principles learned and attending to the spiritual dimension of learning through praying together.

These approaches to learning that the SGs embodied led to more profound growth in the faith of their members. The findings provide information about the impact of the growth experienced in two further broad areas. Firstly, the members impacted others in the SG by actively expressing their faith, love, and service to one another. Secondly, the growth the members experienced in the SG positively impacted the larger congregation.

Overall the results demonstrate the strong effect of the Evangelical SGs on the growth in faith of their members. Following this, the research suggests several actions noted in 5.6 above.

6.2 Further research contributions

In addition to the findings noted above, this thesis makes several other research contributions, which will be considered now.

6.2.1 To my knowledge, this is the first evidence-based research of its kind in Ireland engaging this topic of research.

The thesis contributes to understanding diversity and ecumenical issues among Christian groups in Ireland, especially concerning awareness of Evangelical expressions of faith. As noted, this vital area has received scholarly attention in other countries, but this is not so in Ireland. While Evangelical groups are a growing feature in the Irish church landscape, they still constitute a minority Christian sub-section. They are susceptible, for numerous reasons, to being misunderstood or misrepresented. This thesis responds to this disparity, specifically interviewing Irish evangelicals concerning their experience of growth in faith through small group participation. The findings of this thesis expand the understanding of Christian formation in Evangelical SGs and provide a resource for fellow scholars to utilise. Additionally, the thesis is a source for churches and church authorities to draw upon, which is evidence-based rather than merely anecdotal.

6.2.2 The research captures a very significant period in the experience of the Irish church.

The research was conducted during a unique time in the history of the Irish church in which in-person or face-to-face church meetings were disallowed due to COVID restrictions. The SGs, like many other church meetings at this time, met virtually in live, interactive, online sessions conducted over Zoom. The interviews that form the basis for this research were all conducted within this time frame of COVID restrictions before churches were allowed to resume in-person meetings again. This is, therefore, a unique, unrepeatable contribution made by this study. Even if later research is conducted based on people's memories of their experiences of this period, it would be significantly different from this research conducted during the period itself. Consequently, this research places on record the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of evangelical Christians engaging with virtual SGs at this unique time in Irish church history (1.4; Sub-theme T.2.3; 5.8).

6.2.3 The research uses Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyse church small groups

The data for this research was analysed utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2021b) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). As explained above, RTA is very conducive to analysing research of this kind. This thesis utilised this approach and catalogues the steps taken to follow this method in rich detail. These steps are outlined within the paper body and in the extensive appendices that supplement the work. References to Braun and Clarke's approach have been drawn from many of their writings (2006, 2013, 2021b) and include the latest updated version of their book on conducting RTA (2021b) released during the time of the production of this thesis.

Reflexivity is a crucial element of qualitative research because it enables researchers to consider their (inevitable) impact on data collection and analysis (Shaw, 2010). The reflexive and fluid nature RTA offers was helpful for this research, as the early creation of a codebook could forestall the iterative and inductive approach this new research area required. The focus on reflexivity also proved helpful due to my longstanding experience within the Evangelical community, as prior knowledge, assumptions, personal bias, or personal interest in the research topic are avenues for reflexivity. Understanding that I have such an impact on the research helped me be reflexive, and highlighted the challenges to be aware of and the benefits that I brought to the research (Pope and Mays, 2020, p. 219).

My own first-hand experiences with Evangelical SGs sensitised me to elements present in the data, for example, when interviewees expressed the sense of community they experienced. However, other experiences expressed by the interviewees were quite distinct from my own and stood out. For example, the learning that people experienced through engaging with the opinions of others who were very different from themselves or through specific challenges they faced. Therefore, these areas also become very interesting to me. Consequently, what I noticed in the dataset were things that partly resonated with my experience of SGs and partly diverged from it. My experience constituted a strength in enabling me to quickly identify particular areas in the data. In contrast, other areas required me to draw upon additional perspectives, especially from the wider SG and educational literature (Terry et al., 2017, p. 25).

In sum, this point highlights how the thesis contributes by modelling RTA, aiding other researchers in their work.

6.2.4 The research uses a compelling multiple case study design and engages with literature from various academic disciplines

This thesis richly illuminates the ‘experiences, implications’, and ‘effects’ of the phenomenon, of a believer’s growth in faith in different SG settings, by employing a multi-site case design (Bishop, 2010, p. 589). The design utilises varied and purposive samples of three SGs from different locations in Ireland, each employing a slightly different approach to learning. This variety of multiple cases promotes a compelling argument (Stake, 1995) that can ‘blunt [...] criticism and scepticism’ a single case may evoke (Yin, 2018, p. 62).

The use of literature from various disciplines related to my research question also adds veracity to the thesis. The research themes are developed, and the findings are presented using data extracts (quotations) from interviews that show evidence for the theme(s). These are supplemented by my analytic narrative that gives my interpretation of these data extracts and their meaning. These two elements (quotations and their interpretation) are considered in conversation with the research questions and broader scholarly literature. This conversation creatively combines reflections from educational, small group, and faith formational literature. In this, I position my voice within a larger group of scholarly voices, creating a synergy of ideas related to the growth of faith in SGs.

6.2.5 The research provides a foundation for future research of small groups in other non-Evangelical, expressions of the Christian church

This research establishes its findings in a selection of Evangelical SGs. It exercises appropriate scholarly restraint in not claiming generalisability to all such groups. Nevertheless, the research is suggestive and provides a basis for further research of Evangelical SGs and SGs from other Christian churches. As indicated above, church SGs share many similarities to those researched for this study, and SGs are used widely in various streams of the Christian Church. Therefore although not automatically generalisable, this research establishes an excellent foundation for further research endeavours in churches from various Christian traditions.

This foundation provides much general background information concerning SGs for the researcher to draw from. Future researchers will also be aided by many of the definitions and SG characteristics explained in this thesis. Similarly, this thesis's considerable literature review and substantial bibliography will be of immense value to other researchers. Finally, researchers may find guidance for appropriate methodological approaches to their research from the approach taken in this thesis.

6.2.6 The research expands on the findings of other research from outside Ireland concerning the impact of church small groups

This thesis engages with previous research on SGs that are based in areas outside of Ireland. It identifies helpful contributions regarding these groups in works, such as Wuthnow's (1994a, 1994b) seminal studies on SGs in the USA and Walton's (2014) later analysis of SGs in the UK (1994b). It acknowledges that the findings of these research studies were undoubtedly based on the SGs in these geographical locations. However, this thesis also expands on such findings from elsewhere by cautioning against a simplistic transference of these studies to the Irish SG experience. For example, this thesis challenges Wuthnow's (1994a, 1994b) view of SGs as self-serving and possessing a weak ability to produce growth in faith (Wuthnow, 1993b, 1994b). The thesis has also challenged the portrait of SGs as mere self-help or therapy groups (Walton, 2011, 2014) by highlighting that the growth experienced by members often entailed personally challenging and outward-focused dimensions. Members experienced growth in their ability to minister to one another in the group. There are clear signals that such a service went beyond the SG. This included a voluntary commitment to meeting the congregation's needs that the SG was part of. Furthermore, the findings include ministry that went beyond the church congregation that the SG belonged to, whether it was in showing acts of love or becoming more courageous to take a stand for one's Christian convictions in the marketplace.

Additionally, the thesis has questioned if Walton's (2014) explanation of learning through socialisation thoroughly captures how the change took place in the SG members. While suggesting that formation happens in SGs through socialisation is not necessarily wrong in itself, I contend that it is wrong by itself. I make this assertion based on the research findings outlined above, for these emphasise other factors that a simplistic account of socialisation minimises. Community is clearly an element present in the SGs, and many of the reflections from the members relate to the support they received and the growth in faith they experienced through this. Learning approaches in the SGs were also holistic, including a focus on teaching, application, prayer, and practising new-found skills. The teaching engaged the cognitive, affective and behavioural areas of the members' lives. Again, the correspondence between this approach and the advice of curriculum theorists such as Harris (1989) concerning multiple formational elements working together to fashion people was arresting.

The role of the active participation of the individual in the process of change is another factor considered in this thesis that led to members' growth in faith. Others include personal and

communal critical engagement with the scripture and the role of God's Spirit in transformational growth.

In sum, this thesis critiqued and expanded several previous contentions regarding the impact of SGs, by highlighting these additional formation elements.

6.2.7 The research improves our understanding of the use of a dialogical approach to learning in Evangelical small groups through formal and informal conversations

Such a dialogical approach was partly facilitated by the small numbers of people attending each group, yet this alone did not guarantee the proper conditions for growth. Other more subtle environmental conditions required attention, such as developing trust, openness, and vulnerability, all based on a foundation of close relationships. These relationships facilitated growth in faith through the dialogical and conversational approach the SGs took to learning and the support of their members. The importance of these conversations should not be minimised, and the findings revealed that even small talk engendered deep care and growth (see sub-theme T.2.2; 2.7.1; Table 6; 5.3.6).

6.2.8 Summary

In sum, the thesis has provided a data-based analysis of Irish SGs that is the first of its kind to my knowledge. It is also based on a unique time in the Irish experience due to the COVID restrictions. It has presented a picture of Evangelical church SGs as a space for a growth in faith that impacts their members and others in the group and beyond. The thesis has highlighted the elements that worked together and contributed to such growth, reflecting a supportive community and a holistic environment of learning that promotes the development of a deep-seated and owned faith. While these findings are not automatically transferrable to all SGs, they are suggestive and demonstrate the exciting potential that SGs may offer to Christian church life.

6.3 Reflections on the approach

I was trained in and utilised qualitative research tools to answer the research question posed by this thesis. I have found this research approach to be both fascinating and illuminating. It allowed me to be iterative throughout the process, adapting interview questions as my knowledge grew through engaging with the interviewees or updating my literature review in conversation with new insights gained through such fieldwork. This allowed me to take account of evolving understanding and new lines of inquiry that emerged throughout the procedure, and in this sense, initial analysis had begun from the interview. The qualitative method opened a world for me through which I could listen to, engage with, and analyze the rich experiences of other people. It enabled me to examine these experiences in a deep and detailed way, to give voice to these experiences, and catalogue them for this and future generations.

In the case of Evangelical Christians in the Republic of Ireland, such recording is significant. I hope that, in some way, this work may facilitate a clearer understanding of the desires and experiences of members of at least a section of this group. Of course, none of this would be possible had it not been for the openness of those interviewed for this project. Their willingness to give their time and share their experiences with remarkable candour was a humbling experience for a new researcher.

6.4 Limitations of the research and further research possibilities

Despite the richness of this study, it has limitations. While the SGs were chosen with care and are like many others represented in the Evangelical church, other versions of SGs could benefit from such research. For example, some SGs may be more focused on straightforward didactic teaching with less group participation or be highly focused on evangelism. Naturally, some of the findings from such groups may diverge, at least in emphasis from this thesis' findings. Comparative analysis of SGs from different church traditions would constitute an exciting line of enquiry.

Additionally, I purposely chose to focus on groups connected to sponsoring churches, whereas some groups are much more independent than this. Some of this stems from their ideological perspective, and they would be interesting to investigate. Of course, it may also be shown that many of the findings from such groups are complementary to the findings in this thesis.

As noted, the research timeframe was highly significant due to COVID restrictions yet limiting simultaneously. While capturing this timeframe was important other opportunities remain for

future research in similar SGs under different conditions. This research was conducted by necessity through Zoom video communication technology with positive benefits, yet it also opens room for other approaches. Additionally, the interviewees could only attend SGs virtually and had fewer opportunities to minister face-to-face with people, whether from the SG or outside. Similar research to this would be of interest with these restrictions being lifted.

I became aware of other research possibilities through the research process and, interestingly, on occasion, through the outlier comments of the interviewees. For example, when answering a question, one of the interviewees said she wondered if a man and a woman might respond differently to the given situation. This thesis has already provided some analysis of various sizes of SGs and suggested differences that this implies in what transpires in them. However, there remains room for further analysis specifically focused on this question. Gender differences, psychological differences, and even sociocultural differences in SG makeup may provide valuable avenues for further research in this field. Leadership's importance and effect in the SG is another area of great potential for study. Accordingly, SGs present an exciting and rich field for potential research. I hope this offering is a forerunner of other research pieces that will be produced in the Irish context.

6.5 Closing comments

This thesis highlights the potential that SGs have to offer to individuals desiring to grow in their Christian faith. It also underlines the need to develop and nurture this potential for it to be fully realised. Nevertheless, the thesis suggests that such groups present a potentially rich resource within the church. The SG features of a supportive and caring community, and an environment for growth in love, service, worship, and Christian character, represent antidotes to many of the significant needs characterising our communities. Consequently, SGs offer great potential as a locus for the worship of God and a means to benefit society through the message of the Gospel.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Self-disclosure statement

I worked as a pastor in a local evangelical church in Dublin for over a decade from 2000, and since 2007 I have worked on the Irish Bible Institute (IBI) faculty. My initial interest in church SGs began almost twenty years ago, shortly after assuming this role as a Pastor. Much of this interest came from my work within such evangelical communities, including being part of and leading SGs. I started reading practical SG literature to equip me for this SG leadership role better. While helpful in specific ways, I questioned how transferable some of this literature was to an Irish context, mainly as it primarily reflected experiences in a non-Western context (Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998; O'Halloran, 2002). For example, some literature reported on enormous evangelical churches from South Korea and South America, which had hundreds or even tens of thousands of small groups (Cho and Hostetler, 1981; Comiskey, 1998, 2000, 2015). While I assumed the general principles like developing caring SGs where people could learn and grow together would transfer nicely, other areas, such as how quickly SGs could grow numerically and multiply in these regions, did not seem to align with the material I was reading from closer afield such as in the United Kingdom (Astin, 2002). Consequently, a desire began to emerge in me to engage first-hand with SG members in Ireland regarding their actual experiences of SGs.

While the IBI offers accredited BA and MA degrees in applied theology, there is no specific module wholly devoted to the practical leadership or purpose of SGs. However, a number of the courses are very relevant to this research. Of the courses I teach, the discipleship course has highlighted some pertinent areas. Other courses I teach revolve primarily around understanding and utilising the New Testament. I continue to be an active member within an evangelical congregation in Dublin, regularly ministering within this group and similar congregations in Ireland and abroad. Additional to this experience, I have enjoyed working in the wood industry in the past, as well as teaching in the secondary and adult education sector.

Appendix B: Ethics committee approval for this research proposal

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Mr. Paul F Perry
DCU Institute of Education

Dr. Gareth Byrne
DCU Institute of Education &
Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education

Dr. Bernadette Sweetman
DCU Institute of Education &
Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education

3rd December 2020

REC Reference: DCUREC/2020/238

Proposal Title: Evangelical faith development through participation in church 'small groups': An Irish case study.

Applicant(s): Dr. Paul F Perry, Dr. Gareth Byrne, and
Dr. Bernadette Sweetman

Dear Colleagues,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Geraldine Scanlon', is written in black ink.

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

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Appendix C: Pilot study questions

Issue: Personal learning and growth

1. How would you **briefly describe** your spiritual/faith journey so far?
Supplementary: what sort of role has small groups played in this?

2. What motivated you to get involved in this *group*?

May help me get at the shared (unspoken) assumptions about small groups.

Be aware of this when I ask the question.

3. What does the *group* do when it meets?

What aspects of this do you **find most/least helpful**?

If I said to you what is **the best thing about the group** ‘for you’?

Are the **positives and negatives** of the small group?

4. How does your involvement in this group **impact your spiritual growth**?

Could you tell me about something from the small group that has impacted you in the past month/6 months/years/3 years?

What is your **most significant learning experience** as part of a small group?

How would you **describe the extent** of the impact?

Has such faith/spiritual **growth lasted** in your experience?

How would you describe your **experience of God** as part of the group? Could you give an example?

5. D. advocate question: “ ah sure you could have just (watched those videos / read that book) at home by yourself and got the same benefits”

How would you respond to them?

Issue: How does what is happening in the SG – affect what happens outside the group?

6. Do you interact with members of the *group* outside of its official meeting(s)?
7. How does your involvement in the small group relate to how you engage with the **wider church** grouping?
8. How does your involvement with the group help you **relate to or serve** those who are not in the group (or even the church)?

Could you give an **example**?

Does your small group do anything – **together**?

How do you?

Issue: definitions

9. How would you describe **Growth in discipleship**?
10. Is there **anything else** about how you think your involvement in this small group helps you learn and grow in your faith?

Appendix D: Journal notes concerning interview questions and recording

Field Notes

Pilot Interview – S

27-03-21

I observed several interesting things as a result of this pilot study:

- It really helped me to see how many questions are suitable for a one-hour meeting.
- It also highlighted some practical issues to do with recording and also some issues to do with my question layouts. [Essentially, I found that when I'm recording over Zoom: If I say anything, it seems to interrupt the recording. When I listened back to the recording, I ended up missing a word or two from the interviewee].
- My pre-interview questions: there is an issue that came to my light. Regarding describing words – my use of the word *discipleship*. This was a fascinating discussion with the interviewee as there was a strong hesitancy, almost a grimace on her face when asked that pre-interview question and in later discussions, it was highlighted by her that her hesitancy was around the term discipleship and what that implies to her (primarily the outworking of her faith).
- In the open interview, I used other terms such as growing in faith or growing. These were noted by the Susan as being much clearer, And if I had said growth in faith on the pre-interview questionnaire, she would have had no hesitancy whatsoever in saying that she had definitely grown in her faith through her participation in small groups.
- So this raises a question for me that I felt that while it is fine to write about these terms and how interchangeable they are or are not, while I am analysing the literature, it is important for me when talking to interviewees to use a term that is readily accessible to Evangelical Christians.
- Also, to stick to that (one) term, as Susan pointed out very clearly to me. She felt I was going between terms. I feel that this highlights an ambiguity in my own mind concerning whether it is appropriate for me to only use one term.
- Consequently, I think when I'm speaking to the interviewees, it is important that I stick to the term 'growing in faith' as it encompasses what I am seeking to know about, and it is a term that I believe, and this interviewee confirms is clear to 'Evangelicals' (education/learning has too many 'purely cognitive connotations, faith formation is not a term that Evangelicals would really recognise),
- Another point of interest was that the question asked to briefly describe your spiritual / faith journey (the first question in the open interviews) went on much longer than I thought it would by a multiple of at least 4 times. In contrast, the other questions took a shorter time.
- I naturally brought some of the other questions together in the discussion.
- While some of the ways I worded them separate nicely on the written page, in normal conversation, they do not separate so easily and may feel very repetitive.

- So I believe I need to minimise the questions into broader categories that encompass various subcategories or probing questions

(re; recording – later developments)

Later I also chose to use several recording devices at once where possible so I could cross-check and understand words.

Not speaking, hardly at all, after I ask the question made for unusual interaction because usually, I would like to say Mmm, Yeah, that's good, or interesting etc. I later explained to the interviewees and asked them not to take my silence as indicating that I was not interested. However, I simply had to ask the question and stay completely quiet, or the recording would get interrupted. I could still make hand gestures (thumbs up) or nod etc.

Appendix E: Background information questionnaire

A little about you?

You can simply put an 'X' (and/or a small comment in the other box if required)

Name: (write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

1. Is this *small group* connected to the church you attend?

| Yes | No | Other (explain briefly below) |
|-----|----|-------------------------------|
| | | |

2. If so - How long (approximately) have you been involved in that church?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

3. Have you *grown in your faith* through your involvement in this group?

| Yes | No | Other (explain briefly below) |
|-----|----|-------------------------------|
| | | |

4. Are you involved in any other *small groups* at this time?

| Yes | No | Other (explain briefly below) |
|-----|----|-------------------------------|
| | | |

5. Does your church encourage people to become involved in a *small group(s)*?

| Yes | No | Other (explain briefly below) |
|-----|----|-------------------------------|
| | | |

6. Are you involved in any other ministry connected with your church? (example: *finances; outreach; prayer team; etc.*)

| Yes (list below) | No | Other (explain briefly below) |
|---------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| | | |

7. How many church *small groups* have you been involved in as an adult?
(if more than ten you can just say 'many')

| Many (10+) | None | Other (give a number or explain briefly below) |
|---------------|------|--|
| | | |

8. How would you describe your ethnic background?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

9. Could you briefly describe your spiritual journey so far?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

As a leader of the group: I would like to get some additional **basic information** from you about it.

10. Details about the group (on average), the *group's* meetings are?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| When: Where: How often (per week/month): How long are meetings: |
|--|

11. How many people usually attend the meetings of the *group*?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

12. What is the general makeup of those attending this *group*?
(men/women – different cultural backgrounds – age range etc.)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

13. Briefly describe what *generally* happens in the group's meetings?
(write in the box below)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

Research project details

Project working title: Evangelical faith development through participation in church 'small groups': An Irish case study.

This project is part of a Doctor of Education (EdD) study within the Institute of Education at Dublin City University (DCU)

Principal investigator: Paul Perry (paul.perry4@mail.dcu.ie)

Supervisors: Dr Gareth Byrne (gareth.byrne@dcu.ie) and Dr Bernadette Sweetman (bernadette.sweetman@dcu.ie).

If you require further details about the study, please contact me at (paul.perry4@mail.dcu.ie or 0876890155).

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Appendix F: Final interview questions

Issue: Personal learning and growth

- 1 What motivated you to get involved in this group?

May help me get at the shared (unspoken) assumptions about small groups.

- 2 What is it about being part of this small group that helps you grow in faith?

Prompts: (sometimes I use them, sometimes not)

- Would you have a specific example of **how the group** has helped you have a **significant learning or growing experience** ?
or
- Could you tell me about a **significant learning experience** that you have experienced as part of this small group?

- How would you **describe the extent** of the impact?
or
- Has such faith/spiritual **growth lasted** in your experience?

- Do you interact with members of the *group* outside of its official meeting(s)?

devil's advocate question: **if someone said to you** “ ah sure you could have just (watched those videos / read that book) at home by yourself and got the same benefits”

How would you respond to them?

Issue: How does what is happening in the SG – affect what happens outside the group?

Do you think your involvement in the small group helps you be more involved in the church or wider community in any way? (the main question I used here)

- Are there ways in which your **faith grows** through **small group** involvement that is **different** from the **larger group** gathering?

Or / Connected

- Are there ways you think the *small group* **complements (benefits?)** the *larger group* or visa-versa?
- Are there ways in which one helps the other?

- Outreach / serving community ?

Issue: missed personal areas

- 3 Is there **anything else** you would like to share - about how you think your involvement in this small group helps you learn and grow in your faith?

Appendix G: Plain language statement

Plain language statement for research participants

Ethics approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Research project details

Project working title: Evangelical faith development through participation in church 'small groups': An Irish case study.

This project is part of a Doctor of Education (EdD) study within the Institute of Education at Dublin City University (DCU)

Principal investigator: Paul Perry (paul.perry4@mail.dcu.ie)

Supervisors: Dr Gareth Byrne (gareth.byrne@dcu.ie) and Dr Bernadette Sweetman (bernadette.sweetman@dcu.ie).

Details of involvement in the project

In Christian Churches today, mid-week small groups or gatherings (usually 3-15 people) are playing a significant role. These groups often offer a place for such things as prayer, bible study, the building of friendships, and service to the wider community. Many people also say they join such groups with a desire to 'deepen their faith'. This study wants to investigate how people experience growth in their faith through their engagement with such groups, in an Irish context.

If you agree to be a participant in this project, you will be interviewed by me about how you have experienced engaging with a small group(s) in your church. You will also be asked if such engagement has helped your education in the Christian faith or faith formation/spiritual growth, and if so how? The interview will not require any preparation and you will only be asked to talk about things you are comfortable to talk about. It is envisaged that this will take around 60 minutes and will be conducted online (over Zoom, following DCU protocol), at Irish Bible Institute or another suitable venue.

The interviews will be recorded (audio only) to ensure that the data I am using is accurate. The interviews will be transcribed and subsequently analysed.

At this stage, I am not planning more than one interview, but there is a possibility that I may request to speak with you again to enlarge on or clarify some things you have said. You are at liberty to refuse any further requests for information at any time.

Potential risks

There are no obvious risks involved in this study beyond those that would be encountered in the normal course of life.

Potential benefits to participants

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant, apart from the opportunity to express your story about how engaging in a small group has influenced your life.

Most of the benefits from being a participant are indirect. It is envisaged that the data gathered in the study will enable churches and Christian educators to be better able to promote spiritual growth in the faith of individuals through their engagement with small group meetings in their local church.

Confidentiality/anonymity

The information gathered during this study (whether from interviews or focus group(s)) will be treated as confidential and stored securely either in a locked facility (hard copies) or encrypted (digital data) for the duration of the study. All of the material will be anonymised using codes and the codes will be stored securely. I will be the only person with access to the data and the codes.

Every effort will be made to ensure that you will not be personally identifiable. However, given that this is a small study, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. If you have any concerns about this, you can raise them with me at any time. I am required to point out that there are legal limitations to data confidentiality. "Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions".

A copy of the results of this part of the study can be made available to you upon request.

Data storage and destruction

Electronic data (recordings, transcripts, and reporting documents), will be stored in an encrypted form; I will be the only person who has access to the decryption key.

Hard copy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, which will only be accessible to me.

Data will be destroyed five years after the project is completed.

Hard copies of material will be shredded; electronic files will be securely wiped.

If any material needs to be kept beyond five years, this will only be done so with your express written permission.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any point in advance of data processing and formal analysis.

If you require further details about the study, please contact me at (paul.perry4@mail.dcu.ie or 0876890155).

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Paul Perry

Appendix H: Participant informed consent form

Participant informed consent form

Ethics approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Research project details

Project working title: Evangelical faith development through participation in church 'small groups': An Irish case study.

This project is part of a Doctor of Education (EdD) study within the Institute of Education at Dublin City University (DCU)

Principal investigator: Paul Perry (paul.perry4@mail.dcu.ie)

Supervisors: Dr Gareth Byrne (gareth.byrne@dcu.ie) and Dr Bernadette Sweetman (bernadette.sweetman@dcu.ie).

Purpose of the project

Church small groups (usually 3-15 people) are playing a significant role in the modern Evangelical church. Such groups often offer people a place for such things as prayer, bible study, building of community, outreach, and a place to deepen their faith. Consequently, an important question regarding the development of faith in adults is the place played by these small and often informal groups within the church. Within the Christian churches, there are various statements regarding the purpose of such small groups. However, these are often theoretical and do not necessarily indicate if and/or how people actually experience growth in their faith through their engagement with such groups in an Irish context. Fuller details about the study's purpose can be found in the plain language statement provided to you.

This project will investigate the ways in which people who belong to the Christian/Evangelical church interpret their experiences of engaging with small groups in their church. It is important that the actual experience of people who engage with small groups is heard and engaged with.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be interviewed and asked to talk about your experiences of engaging with church small groups. The interviewer will use guiding questions, but the focus will be to encourage and allow you to tell your story of how small groups has influenced you and your faith formation.

What is expected from you as a participant?

Please complete the following to indicate that you have understood what is expected from participants as outlined in the Plain Language Statement:

| | |
|---|----------|
| I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) | Yes / No |
| I understand the information provided | Yes / No |
| I understand the information provided in relation to data protection | Yes / No |
| I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study | Yes / No |
| I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions | Yes / No |
| I am aware that my interview will be recorded and transcribed | Yes / No |
| I understand the issues about the limits of confidentiality and anonymity discussed in the statement | Yes / No |
| I am aware that non-identifiable quotations from the interviews will be included in the final research write-up | Yes / No |

Formal consent

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research project about small group engagement. I am aware that I will be interviewed about my experience of engaging with church small groups and encouraged to ‘tell my story’. I understand that selected parts of what I say in the interview may be included in the final research write-up (but not in a way that allows me to be identified).

I understand my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any point in advance of the data processing or analysis stage. I understand that all measures will be taken to protect my anonymity, but I am also aware that total anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I am also aware that there are legal limitations to data confidentiality and that it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting depending on what is disclosed.

I am aware that the recorded material and their transcripts will be stored in a secure environment and that all records will be securely destroyed five years after the completion of the project unless I give formal written permission to allow its ongoing secure storage.

I am aware that there may be follow-up questions/interactions and that I am at liberty to refuse to be involved in these.

I have been informed that a copy of the results of this part of the study can be made available to me if I request it.

I have read and understood the information in this form. Any questions and concerns have been answered, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix I: Quality strategies for enhancing validity and reliability in my research

I have developed the quality strategies below from Stake (1995), Merriam and Grenier (2019), and Braun and Clarke (2021b). Relevant sections in the thesis where I address these qualities are noted in brackets.

| Strategy / Quality | Description |
|--|--|
| Researcher's position or reflexivity and reflexive journaling | I engaged in critical self-reflection regarding areas that may affect the research, including my philosophical orientation, background, assumptions, and biases. Reflective journaling or note-taking is a helpful tool in reflexivity. I utilised this method at several key points in the research process. Reflexivity also included conversations with others about my developing ideas and analysis and seeking their critical feedback (3.6.2, 3.7-3.9, 3.11; 6.2.3). |
| Theoretical knowingness | This involved seeking to understand the philosophical or theological assumptions embedded in particular approaches and being aware of this in using those approaches. Such theoretical knowingness enabled me to be sensitive in reflexively applying appropriate theory to my research (2.6.2, 3.7.2, 3.7.3, 5.3-5.4, 6.2). |
| Ethical | Ethics involves sensitivity to the risks of human subjects in research. From the outset, this was done by following the DCU procedures for ethical approval (3.5, 3.6.2; Appendix B). |
| Peer review/examination | Critical feedback was an essential and healthy part of this process. Discussions with colleagues and supervisors aided in all points regarding the study process. Additionally, gaining insight from peers and supervisors helped check the harmony of my developing findings with the raw data. Feedback was also received through presenting sections of the emerging research at conferences (NfRCE, 2019; IPDA, 2021) as well as in writing for publication (Perry, 2021) (3.6.2). |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Adequate engagement in data collection and theme development</p> | <p>Adequate time was spent collecting data such that the data contained information richness and illumination power (3.6.4). As time constitutes a key factor in data immersion, this included doubling up on my work by combining data collection and analysis from the beginning of the project. I ensured that themes were based on shared patterns of meaning around a central organizing concept through prolonged immersion in the data, leading to familiarization. This included personally transcribing the interviews to a verbatim standard. Familiarization led to coding, with the initial proposal of candidate themes being rechecked and adapted as data analysis continued and finally re-checked against the data before the final write-up (1.3, 3.12; Table 4; 2.4-2.5, 3.6, 3.6.3, 3.9-3.10).</p> |
| <p>Maximum variation</p> | <p>I created diversity in sample selection by purposefully seeking small groups from different churches, geographical locations, and approaches to organising their meetings. These multi-site and varied cases facilitated a greater range of application of the findings by users of the research (3.6.4, Table 3)</p> |
| <p>Rich, thick descriptions</p> | <p>Reader or user generalisability is made more viable by my provision of rich, detailed descriptions that enable the reader to contextualise the study to determine to what extent their situation matches the research context. This aids the readers in deciding whether findings can be transferred to their context (3.11, chapter 4).</p> |
| <p>Audit trail</p> | <p>A detailed account of the methods, procedures and decision points in carrying out the study is provided. I used the NVivo computer program to develop an electronic trail (Appendix L: Codebook).</p> |

Appendix J: Interview Findings

Growth in faith through small group participation

Overarching Themes

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Small Groups: A place to Grow | Experiencing Growth in Community |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|

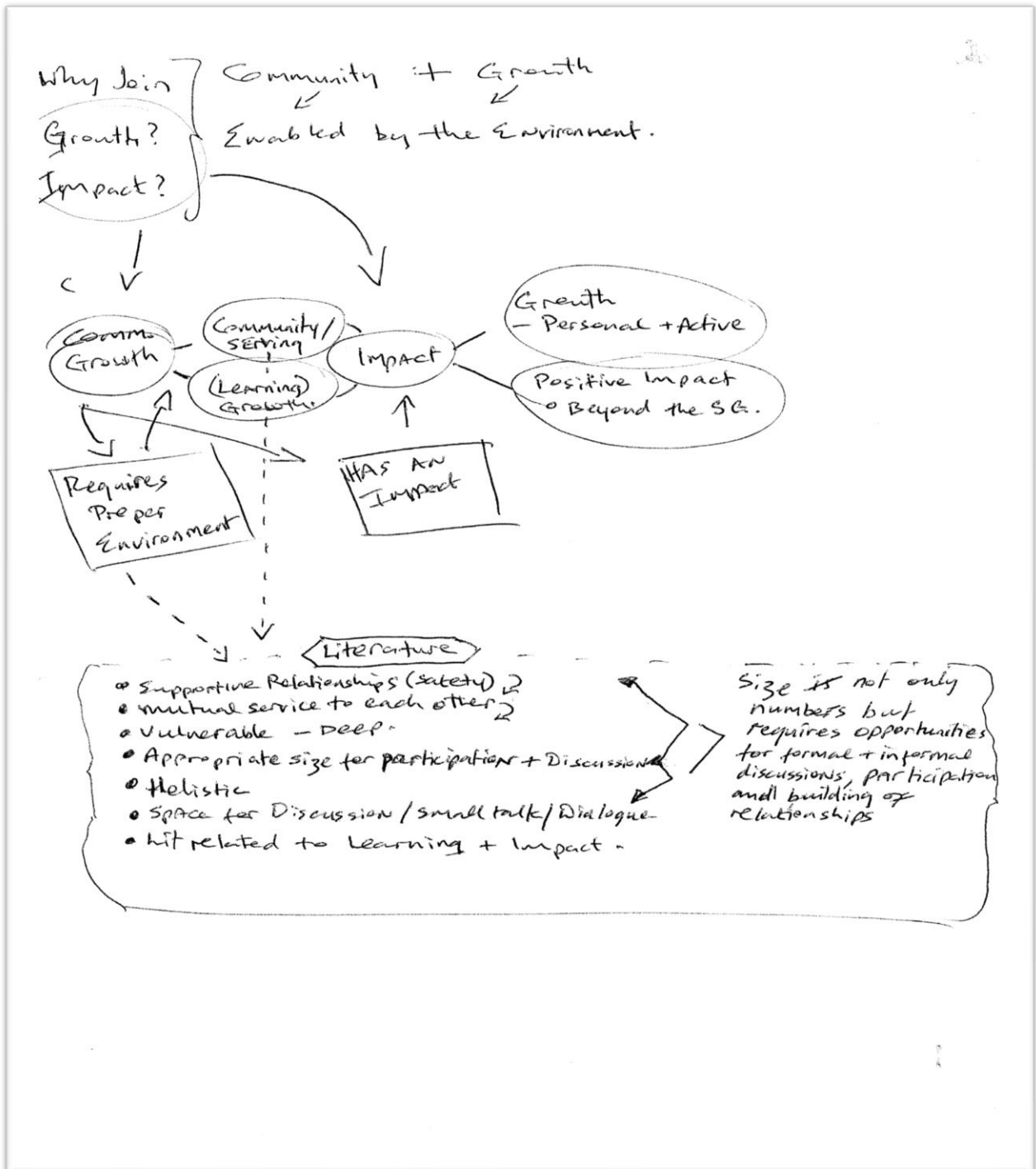
Main Themes

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| (T.1) Small Group: Learner motivations | (T.2) Small Group: A supportive Environment | (T.3) Experiencing Growth: Learning with others | (T.4) Experiencing Growth: Impact of learning |
|---|--|--|--|

Sub-themes

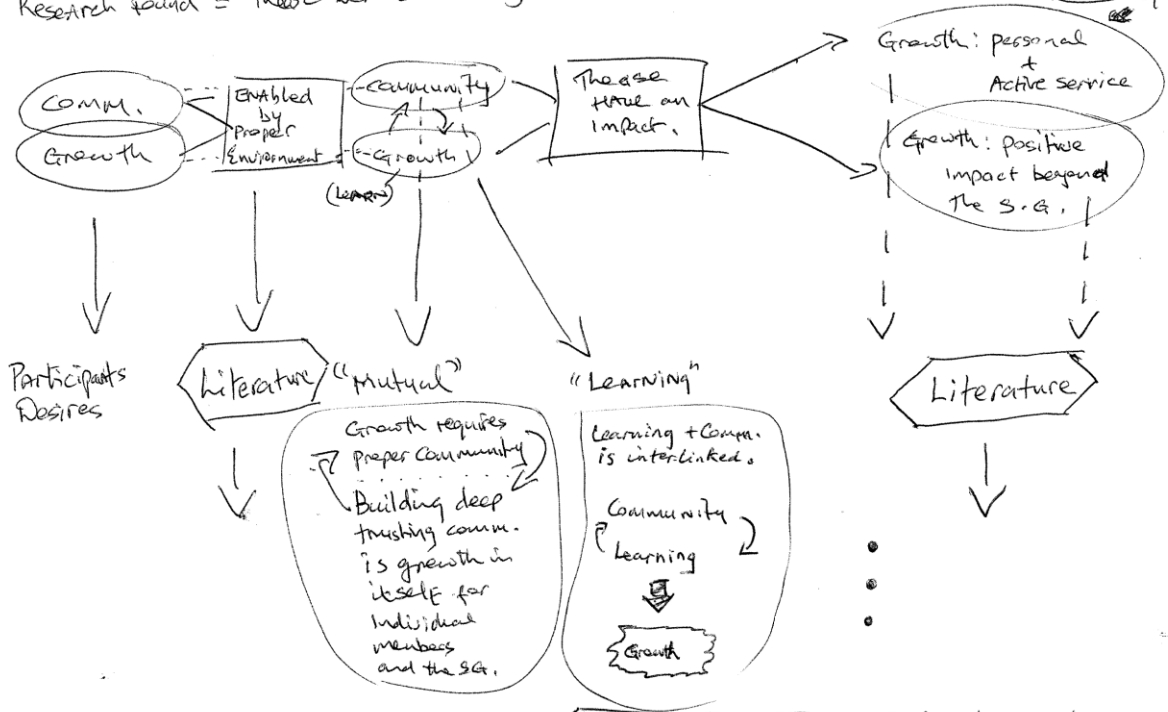
| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| <p>(T.1.1) Desire for Connection.</p> <p>(T.1.2) Desire to Grow.</p> | <p>(T.2.1.) Support requires the proper environment.</p> <p>(T.2.2) Support comes through relationships.</p> <p>(T.2.3) Support helps in struggles.</p> <p>(T.2.4) Support is holistic.</p> | <p>(T.3.1) Learning with others is centred around a shared teaching but focuses on its application.</p> <p>(T.3.2) Learning with others engages with diverse viewpoints.</p> <p>(T.3.3) Learning with others is participatory.</p> | <p>(T.4.1.) Members are challenged to grow in personal areas and active expressions of their faith.</p> <p>(T.4.2) Members of the small group have a positive impact on the larger congregation.</p> |
|--|---|--|--|

Appendix K: Developing thematic maps to communicate my findings



Desires - Why Join = Community + Growth.

Research found = These were enabled by the SG Environment (if done correctly) IMPACT OF Growth



< Literature > < Sub-Themes > = Key Sections.



| Type of Community Needs | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Factors | |
| 1. = | |
| 2. = | |
| 3. = | |
| CONFIRMS, builds, extends | |

Appendix L: Codebook

Codebook

**Growth in faith through participation in church small groups:
a study of Evangelicals in the Irish context**

Codebook - Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-------|
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| Phase 2 – Systematic data coding (open coding)..... | 5-9 |
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| Example of Conceptual Mapping..... | 165 |
| Example of the role Analytical Memo..... | 16 |

Phase 1: Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes¹

The screenshot shows a text editor window titled "Int 1 CCC_R_Code 1 for review". The text contains several paragraphs with blue highlights and red annotations. A red callout box on the right contains the text: "Phase 1 – Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes involved reading and re-reading transcripts and annotating to integrate contextual factors such as coding assumptions, field notes and observations and researcher's thoughts and ideas during the encoding process". A red arrow points from the callout box to the highlighted text in the transcript.

Annotations

| Item | Content |
|------|---|
| 6 | Reason the SG easily facilitates Active participation |

¹ Phase 1 – Familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes involved listening to interviews, reading and re-reading transcripts; annotating to integrate contextual factors such as coding assumptions, field notes, researcher's thoughts and ideas during the encoding process about individual data items and the dataset as a whole.

| K | Int. | R | Interview |
|---|------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| New small group helped. | | Spiritual growth | |
| Teaching + Testimony = Reflection + change. | | Growth in the herd | |
| Was I pushing the serving idea → as a result of Walton's challenge? | | Joined to support leader | |
| Just retired last yr Helped her reflect | | Relationships Small - mini groups | |
| Send Questionnaire + Draft = This was too much. | | Push herself. | |
| | | Her No 7. → | |
| | | Learning to be more active w/ prayer. | |
| | | sense God's | |
| | | Presence? Not good ques? | |

² Phase 1 – Familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes involved listening to interviews, reading and re-reading transcripts; annotating to integrate contextual factors such as coding assumptions, field notes, observations, researcher's thoughts and ideas during the encoding process about individual data items and the dataset as a whole.

Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding (open coding)³

| Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) 92 initial codes were generated at phase2 | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| Active faith | 9 | 21 |
| Active faith SEARCH | 3 | 5 |
| Applied knowledge | 9 | 25 |
| Beauty | 2 | 3 |
| Belonging | 4 | 5 |
| Big &_Small meetings working together | 7 | 11 |
| Care | 2 | 3 |
| Challenged | 10 | 24 |
| Chit Chat | 8 | 10 |
| Clarity and Simplicity in teaching | 1 | 1 |
| Committed people | 8 | 20 |
| Community | 4 | 4 |
| Confidence | 3 | 4 |
| Congregation effected positively | 1 | 1 |
| Connecting | 3 | 4 |
| COVID | 3 | 5 |
| Depth | 7 | 10 |
| Desire to build faith | 2 | 2 |

³ Phase 2 – Generating Initial Coding involved deconstructing the data from its original chronology into an initial set of non-hierarchical codes.

| Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) 92 initial codes were generated at phase2 | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Desire to contribute | 3 | 6 |
| Discussion | 5 | 9 |
| Diversity | 7 | 9 |
| Encouragement | 2 | 2 |
| Enjoyment | 1 | 1 |
| Ethnic Background | 9 | 9 |
| Evangelism | 3 | 5 |
| Example of others | 1 | 1 |
| Examples in teaching | 2 | 2 |
| Experience with SGs | 2 | 4 |
| Feeling part of something bigger | 2 | 2 |
| Fellowship | 3 | 8 |
| Freedom to share | 2 | 2 |
| General prayer | 4 | 5 |
| Group lifecycle | 1 | 2 |
| Growth | 8 | 14 |
| How a leader sees it | 1 | 1 |
| Impact OUTSIDE the group | 10 | 17 |
| INTERACTIVE _ Participation | 6 | 10 |
| Interest in prayer & learning more | 3 | 6 |
| Intimacy | 1 | 3 |
| Knit into the Church | 1 | 2 |

| Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) 92 initial codes were generated at phase2 | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|------------------|------------------------|
| LEADER Participant | 2 | 3 |
| Leader's Motivation to start the group | 4 | 4 |
| Learn by Application | 2 | 2 |
| Learn by Listening | 1 | 1 |
| Learn by Questions | 7 | 19 |
| Learn by reinforcement | 4 | 4 |
| Learn by Teaching | 4 | 6 |
| Learn to Learn (do their own Bible study) | 1 | 2 |
| Learn what you value | 2 | 2 |
| Learning in Fellowship | 2 | 2 |
| Learning NEW things | 5 | 8 |
| Learning through the heart | 1 | 2 |
| Longing to return to God | 1 | 2 |
| Mini groups | 4 | 5 |
| Mixed group openness | 1 | 1 |
| Myanmar | 1 | 1 |
| Openness & honesty | 5 | 8 |
| Other perspectives | 9 | 20 |
| OUTSIDE Relationships outside group | 5 | 6 |
| Ownership | 2 | 3 |
| Being part of the group is important | 1 | 1 |
| Practice | 2 | 5 |

| Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) 92 initial codes were generated at phase2 | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Pray for each other | 3 | 3 |
| Prayer regarding Bible Passage | 1 | 2 |
| Provokes faith & research | 1 | 3 |
| Reflection was helpful for the interviewees | 2 | 3 |
| Refreshed | 1 | 1 |
| Regular ritual routine | 3 | 3 |
| Relationships | 10 | 15 |
| The researcher explains the interview process | 4 | 5 |
| Safe place | 2 | 2 |
| Salvation terminology | 1 | 2 |
| Sense God | 1 | 1 |
| Sensitivity | 1 | 2 |
| SG Exclusive | 1 | 1 |
| SG Experience | 4 | 4 |
| SG previous | 4 | 4 |
| Socialising | 2 | 3 |
| Spiritual journey | 1 | 1 |
| Stirs faith | 1 | 1 |
| Structure of meeting | 3 | 11 |
| Support _ Motivation | 6 | 11 |
| Teacher as Learner | 4 | 9 |
| Teaching | 4 | 7 |

| Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) 92 initial codes were generated at phase2 | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Testimonies | 2 | 2 |
| Trust | 1 | 2 |
| Types SGs | 5 | 12 |
| Ups and downs | 1 | 3 |
| Vulnerable | 3 | 3 |
| Zoom & Lockdown | 7 | 17 |
| ZPD in teaching | 2 | 2 |

**Phase 3: Generating initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data
(developing candidate themes)⁴**

| Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data (Developing categories) - 92 initial codes mapped to 11 categories of codes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| ENVIRONMENT for GROWTH | 12 | 59 |
| FACTORS for EFFECTIVE GROWTH | 13 | 110 |
| INTERVIEWEE'S BACKGROUND | 10 | 29 |
| Motivation to Join the SG | 12 | 26 |
| NEGATIVE EFFECTS of SMALL GROUP | 1 | 1 |
| POSITIVE EFFECTS BEYOND THE SG | 13 | 106 |
| POSITIVE EFFECTS FOR THE SG PARTICIPANT | 13 | 77 |
| PRACTICAL ISSUES & SG SET-UP | 11 | 51 |
| RELATIONAL LEARNING_GROWTH | 13 | 59 |
| Teaching style & Meeting Structure | 7 | 34 |
| Valuable MISC | 7 | 13 |

⁴ Phase 3 – Searching for themes involved merging, renaming, distilling, and clustering related coded into broader categories of codes to reconstruct the data into a framework that makes sense to further the analysis and might answer my research question.

Phase 3

These are examples of searching for themes by using one of my journals.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) Environment for learning | B |
| 2) Features of Effective Learning | C |
| 3) Positive effects for Participants | D |
| 4) Positive effects beyond the SG. | D |
| 5) Relational learning. | B |
| 6) Motivations to join the SG. | A |
| 7) Negative effects of the SG. | D |
| 8) Teaching Styles | C |
| 9) Interviewees Background (10) MISC. INTRO | |

Introduction: Interviewees Background + MISC.

- A — Motivations to join SG.
- B — Relational learning Environment for learning.
- C — Features of effective learning Teaching Styles. (growth)
- D — Positive effects for participants Positive effects beyond the SG. (negative)

↑ A Desire for growth (Motivations)

B 1) The environment for growth

C 2) The features for growth

D 3) The effects of growth

Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes (coding on)⁵

| Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes (coding on) 11 categories from phase 4 mapped to 4 initial themes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|---|------------------|------------------------|
| Backstories | 13 | 68 |
| Effects of the small group | 13 | 184 |
| Growth | 13 | 169 |
| Teaching and Learning | 13 | 144 |

⁵ Phase 4 – Developing and reviewing themes involved breaking down the now reorganised categories into sub-categories to better understand the meanings embedded within them. Critically assessed the themes again for compatibility with codes and full dataset. Checked if they make sense, capture the most important patterns in light of the research questions. Started to consider their relationship to existing theory.

Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (developing a thematic framework)⁶

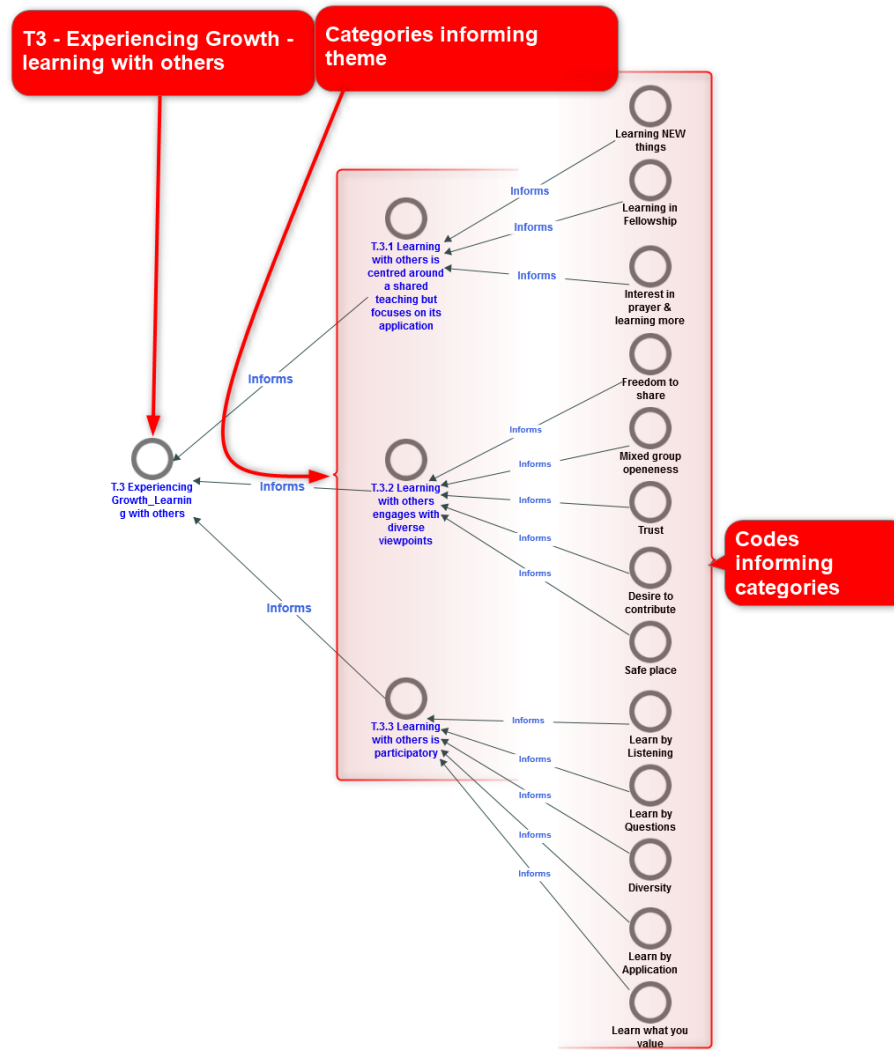
| Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (Developing a Thematic Framework) 4 themes were identified, defined, and named in phase 5, containing 11 elements or sub-themes | Interviews Coded | Units of Meaning Coded |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| T.1 Small Group Learner motivations | 13 | 45 |
| T.1.1 Desire for connection | 11 | 18 |
| T.1.2 Desire to grow | 12 | 24 |
| T.2 Small Group A supportive environment | 13 | 99 |
| T.2.1 Support requires the proper environment | 8 | 18 |
| T.2.2 Support comes through relationships. | 12 | 35 |
| T.2.3 Support helps in struggles. | 11 | 29 |
| T.2.4 Support is holistic | 7 | 17 |
| T.3 Experiencing Growth Learning with others | 14 | 205 |
| T.3.1 Learning with others is centred around a shared teaching but focuses on its application | 12 | 54 |
| T.3.2 Learning with others engages with diverse viewpoints | 14 | 63 |
| T.3.3 Learning with others is participatory | 14 | 86 |
| T.4 Experiencing Growth Impact of learning | 14 | 166 |
| T.4.1 Members are challenged to grow in personal areas and active expressions of their faith. | 14 | 105 |
| T.4.2 Members of the small group have a positive impact on the larger congregation. | 13 | 61 |

⁶ Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes involved conceptually mapping and collapsing categories into a broader thematic framework. Fine tuning of themes also involved checking that each was built around a strong core concept in the data, as well as asking how they all interact to tell the fuller story of the dataset.

Phase 6: Writing up

I continued, finessed, and finished the writing process already begun with my initial impressions from the earlier phases. In this phase there was a combining of the formal writing and the more informal writing that already started from the beginning, such as memos and journal reflections.

Example of flow from codes to categories to themes⁷



Example of the role Analytical Memo⁹

Phase 5 - Refining, defining, and naming themes. (developing a thematic framework)

| Name | Files | Refer |
|---|-------|-------|
| T.1 Small Group_Learner motivations | 13 | 45 |
| T.1.1 Desire for connection | 11 | 18 |
| T.1.2 Desire to grow | 12 | 24 |
| T.2. Small Group_A supportive environment | 13 | 99 |
| T.2.1 Support requires the proper environment | 8 | 18 |
| T.2.2 Support comes through relationships. | 12 | 35 |
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| T.4.1 Members are challenged to grow in personal areas and active expressions of their faith. | 14 | 105 |
| T.4.2 Members of the small group have a positive impact on the larger congregation. | 13 | 61 |

Drag selection here to code to a new code

T.1 Small Group_Learner motivations

An interest in the learning focus of a SG and a desire to grow in that area is the second main factor that motivated people to be part of one of the respective SG's. For example, Maeve (SG leader) shares how she started SG.1 through an interest in prayer,

The first reason that I decided to do the course was the sense that there was a greater, Mm, hunger for people to pray and because they were locked down, partly, that there was interest in prayer. And I myself was more interested in praying, and intercession, just all kinds of prayer.

Maeve's comments are revealing. She notes again that people's hunger for prayer was 'partly' increased due to the 'lockdown' restrictions. The 'interest' she notes goes beyond a casual desire with Maeve calling it a 'hunger', not only to learn about prayer but to practice prayer together,

and I thought this [the prayer course] [...] would be brilliant, I'd like to do this with a group [so] I decided I'd start it for Lent. [...] and I think it was timely because I

Phase 6 – Creating the report involved the creation of analytical memos were used to conduct a systematic review of the thematic framework developed in phase 5 to analyse, report and ask questions of data. Memos were used to reduce the data from series of themes to a series of documents explaining outcomes of analysis of theme content. Later, memos themselves were reduced through editing out overlapping and less important content to cohere findings into a cohesive findings chapter.

⁹ Phase 6 – Creating the report involved the creation of analytical memos were used to conduct a systematic review of the thematic framework developed in phase 5 to analyse, report and ask questions of data. Memos were used to reduce the data from series of themes to a series of documents explaining outcomes of analysis of theme content. Later, memos themselves were reduced through editing out overlapping and less important content to cohere findings into a cohesive findings chapter.

