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Becoming Evangelical:

Ritual Process and Religious Formation in a Christian Youth Group

Rob Barward-Symmons

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

University of Kent

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Abstract

An expectation of the transformation of the religious self, whether that is in the form of conversion from non-believer to believer or from 'inherited' childhood faith to the 'individualised' faith of adulthood, is central to evangelical Christianity. This thesis, based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in an evangelical youth group in London, investigates the practices utilised within church contexts to bring about this transformation and how these are experienced and interpreted by the young people themselves. Drawing on theories of ritual from the work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, the thesis argues that this period of formation can be understood as one of sustained liminality. This liminality, enabled through spatial and structural separation from adult evangelicalism, fosters a subject that is fundamentally communal in orientation and comfortably uncertain as evangelical young people explore and question the nature of faith alongside their peers. While the structures and practices of the group differ considerably from those seen in the adult context in the same church – and from mainstream adult evangelical services in general – through interviews with the young people this thesis demonstrates that these are not merely incidental parts of their group activity but are highly formative in their faith and their expectations of collective religiosity. Examining also the experiences of those who have since left the group, the thesis argues that the absence of a ceremonial marker for the end of this rite of passage – with the young people leaving the group at the age of 18 in line with their academic year-group – risks leaving young evangelical adults in a state of prolonged liminality. This thesis therefore argues not only that we take seriously the nature and existence of young people within the study of evangelicalism *beyond* their place as 'future adults', but also questions the readiness of mainstream adult evangelical spaces to accommodate these liminal religious subjects. This research therefore contributes to the wider study of evangelicalism as well as debates within the field of religion and youth, offering important ethnographic insights into evangelical adolescence, but also conversations in sociology of youth outside of religion by proposing a model of understanding and applying rites of passage outside of traditional contexts.

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Looking back at the end of a research project such as this, it becomes clear to me that 'independent research' is something of a misnomer. Without the constant encouragement, advice, and love of so many people with whom I have interacted over the past few years this thesis would never have been possible – though of course only I can take responsibility for the following thesis.

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Introduction

Fostering Transformation

Over a coffee on the third floor of Cecil Place in October 2018, less than a month after St Aidan's church officially made the converted office block their new home, David reflected on the ultimate goal of his vocation. David had been the youth pastor at the church for a little over three years, overseeing the activities targeted towards those aged 11-18, many (but not all) of whom had grown up attending St Aidan's with their parents since early childhood. I had been involved in the youth work[1] with David for nearly a year and was approaching the end of my fieldwork as we sat down in one of the rooms that was dedicated to the youth activities. Youth ministry, David told me, was primarily about "creating an environment in which young people encounter God", and, as a result of these encounters, "lives being transformed". Making these encounters possible for young people involved a range of approaches and priorities that differed from the adult environment, intended to address the particular needs and concerns of this age group – with the ongoing desire for independence and quest for self-understanding central to this. Yet if these practices were desiring both present encounter and lifelong transformation, the question emerges – what form should this transformation take? What, in other words, would David want a young person at St Aidan's to look like once they leave the group at 18? In answer to this question, David told me:

> I think the idea of what the ideal graduate from our youth ministry looks like, it would be somebody who is very, has established Christianity as their own; is mature in their faith to the point that we've walked a path with them; they understand what faith looks like in practicality within their lives; they're prepared for what lies ahead and in university; and they will engage by, there won't be kind of like this follow-up of, the church like just sit around the church will come to you, but Christianity

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[1] As this research focuses solely on a church-based Christian youth work context, in this thesis I will be using the terms 'youth work' and 'youth ministry' interchangeably. It is important to note, however, that there are distinctions between these terms when applied more broadly. Sylvia Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010**:** 23-4) explain that youth work is 'seen more broadly as educative, not overtly Christian, community focused and with a mission agenda at the social action end of the spectrum', while youth ministry is 'work with young people who are already part of the Church and incorporates evangelism and discipleship'. This will be explored further later in the Introduction.

> and their desire to know it and worship God is so ingrained in their identity that they will seek out a church, and they will try a number of churches until they find one that they can feel at home in, that that community that we've established is so pivotal to how they kind of function and how they identify themselves – they are Christian that's who they are, they're children of God, it's not a part of what they do, it is who they are. I think that would be the ideal situation and we've seen quite a bit of that.

By the time the young people of St Aidan's left their youth set up at the age of 18 and stepped into the adult world, whether they remained in St Aidan's or (more frequently) headed off to university, David had a clear vision for their individual faith. But this is evidently not the automatic faith position of every British 18-year-old – even among those who enter their early adolescence filled with religious vigour. This thesis explores the processes that David and St Aidan's put into place in order to foster this 'ideal graduate', and the experiences of those young people who were going through the life-forming period in this environment. Yet these young people were not simply future-adults or potential-adherents, but were individuals exploring and navigating their religious subjectivities in the context of their everyday lives of the present, unable and unwilling to see themselves exclusively in future-terms. As a result, this thesis also explores young evangelicals – or yet-to-be evangelicals, or soon-to-be-former evangelicals, or never-to-be evangelicals – as they interacted with the group and its members, as well as the rest of their lives as adolescents in the 21st Century Britain.

Dedicated youth ministry is a common feature of churches across Britain – or at least among those with the young people to require it and the resources to provide it.[2] Often aligning with the separation of adults from children that we see in wider society, these groups will frequently exist without much question. Yet it is not a legal requirement to separate young people in this way, and nor is there any explicit biblical demand for this to be the case –

---

[2] Christian youth work takes place at churches of many different sizes, but often these are working with very few young people. Recent figures from the Church of England suggest that less than 7% of Anglican churches have more than 25 children and young people aged 0-16, while 68% have fewer than 5 (Dale and Male 2020: 2). Interestingly, it was also found that evangelical churches were considerably more likely to contain more young people, with 55% of churches with over 25 under-16s and 75% of those with over 100 being classed as evangelical (Church of England Evangelism and Discipleship Team 2020: 29).

indeed, there are growing (yet still minority) calls for an increased focus on intergenerational worship from churches.[3] The purely pragmatic also does not explain this – many churches could comfortably seat the young people alongside the adult congregation during services. Why, therefore, are these groups assumed to be so necessary to the extent that in some churches the youth worker may be the only full-time paid member of staff? Before looking into the particular practices exhibited at St Aidan's and the experiences of the young people involved, this introduction will explore the fears and philosophies that underlie the desire to provide dedicated communities for this age range in the evangelical community. Fundamentally, I shall show, this is a concern over the nature and success of individual evangelical faith formation, viewed as essential both for the individual soul and for the long-term survival of the church. As seen in the quote from David above, the institutional desire is that by the age of 18 the young person is ready to enter into evangelical adulthood having experienced transformational and authentic conversion. This introduction will therefore explore these concepts and how they have been understood in previous studies of evangelicalism, before outlining the rest of the thesis.

Socialisation and Religious Survival

Fear of Failing the Future

The concerns of leaders at St Aidan's to develop their faith in the lives of children and young people was neither unique among churches nor unfounded sociologically. Evidence from large scale studies continues to show that religious affiliation in Britain (and across the Western world) is diminishing, and included within this is a struggle to transmit religious traditions and identities across generations. In January 2018, The Barna Group, an evangelical Christian research centre, released their latest data looking into the religious identity of "Generation Z" – defined by Barna as those born between 1999 and 2015 – in the United States.[4] Describing them as 'the first truly "post-Christian" generation', Barna (2018) found that 'the percentage of teens who identify as such is double that of the general

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[3] See, for example, Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross (2012) and Catterton Allen (ed.) (2018).

[4] The precise birthdates of 'Generation Z'/'Post-Millennials' have been disputed and vary widely between different researchers, but generally the term refers to those born from the mid/late-1990s to mid-2000s or early 2010s – including the age group upon which I intend to focus, aged between 16 and 18 in 2017-18.

population'. Across the Atlantic, the situation appears similar. Sylvia Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010: x) have suggested that in Britain, Generation Y – those born during the 1980s and 1990s – have 'had less contact with the Church than any previous generation in living memory'. More concerning still for Christian organisations concerned with their long-term institutional numerical preservation is Stephen Bullivant's (2017: 13) analysis of the 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey and the 2014 European Social Survey which shows that '[f]or every twenty-six former Christians who now identify with No religion, there is only one former None [an individual who identifies as 'No Religion'] who now identifies with a Christian label of some kind'. Of current 'Nones' in Britain, Bullivant (2017: 12) found, over 60% were 'nonverts' – those raised in religious backgrounds but who shifted their religious identity at some stage later in life. This trend appears to be continuing. Data from the 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey shows that just over one-third of the population now consider themselves Christian (down from two-thirds 35 years ago), with 'unaffiliated young people' being understood as the primary cause of this decline – among 18-24 year olds, only 1% consider themselves affiliated with Anglicanism, compared to a third of over 75s (Voas and Bruce 2019: 20-22). The authors of the report are in no doubt about the cause of this decline: 'people tend to be less religious than their parents, and on average their children are even less religious than they are' (Voas and Bruce 2019: 21). Younger generations appear to be increasingly and consistently less likely to identify as religious than their elders, with limited likelihood of reversion. Anglican church attendance corroborates this, with the number of under-16s regularly attending decreasing by 20% between 2014 and 2018, from an average of 8 per congregation to 6 (Church of England Evangelism and Discipleship Team 2020: 3).[5] Survey data such as these can never tell the complete story, and there is a vast range of factors at play that might determine whether an individual aligns with a particular faith identity, but these are concerning signs for religious – and in particular, Christian – institutions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Children and young people inadvertently find themselves at the centre of this wider religious 'crisis', understood as both innocent souls in need of guidance towards the divine and as holding the future of the wider faith within their hands, something that can provoke both

[5] It should be noted that while still in decline, the figures in London are less concerning than the national picture. The study found that London had both a larger initial average attendance and a less drastic decline, dropping from 20 to 19 across the four-year period (Church of England Evangelism and Discipleship Team 2020: 12)

hope and anxiety in adults. Anna Strhan (2019: 2) argues that in the evangelical contexts in which she was working, children 'powerfully embody the future for adults, representing the possible futures or non-futures of a particular religious culture, and their involvement or non-involvement in religion can therefore provoke anxiety'. Kenda Creasy Dean (2010: 4) – a youth minister and Methodist pastor – in her analysis of the extensive National Study of Youth Religion (NSYR) in the United States, laments that the findings reveal not only a lukewarm perspective of faith among young people but a 'theological fault line running underneath American churches: an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world'. The faith of adolescents for Dean (2010: 6) serves as a barometer for the health of the wider church, and the NSYR shows that adults are failing in their duty of faith formation. For Dean, these results thus instigate fear not only for the 'future' of the church but also for the present health of the adult American church. Robert Orsi (2005:77) points to the urgency and fear with which the Catholic adults he was studying contemplated the important task of passing their 'religious beliefs and values onto their children', concerned both for their children's current state and for their future. As a result, adults organise classes and Sunday school programs, after-school lessons and specific rituals for children, so as to ensure that they 'will not be bereft and alienated on the deepest levels; in the story that adults tell about this exchange, children need religion for their own benefit' (Orsi 2005:77). Beyond this, however, there is a deeper fear. Children 'represent the future of the faith… at stake are the very existence, duration, and durability of the religious world… On no other occasion except perhaps in times of physical pain and loss is the fictive quality of religion – the fact that religious meanings are made and sustained by humans – so intimately and unavoidably apprehended as when adults attempt to realize the meaningfulness of their religious worlds in their children' (Orsi 2005:77).

Beyond the concern for the individual soul of the child or young person, therefore, this is a fear that is felt not only by individuals or parents but also by institutions. Strhan (2019: 206) notes that despite their contrasting approaches on many issues, two of the churches in her study – one 'open' evangelical, the other 'conservative' – emphasised the importance of working with children for the future of the church by using the exact same apocalyptic phrase: "one generation from extinction". While dedicated Christian groups for young people date back at least as far as the nineteenth century – with Sunday Schools for children found even earlier (Ward 1996: 24) – every new generation poses a new challenge to religious groups and institutions. Naomi Thompson (2018: 97) points to the 1970s as a key

moment in which the priority of churches shifted from one of engagement with young people outside of the church community ('outreach') towards one of focusing on retaining those already involved ('nurture'), following a 'near-fatal decline in Sunday School attendance'. Concerns over secularisation have been inescapable since. Contemporary fears of increased generational decline in belief and affiliation define the current approach to Christian youth work, with churches and Christian organisations seeking to reproduce their reality in the lives of these children and young people in order to ensure both their individual religious future but also the institutional survival into the future. This is an aspect that feels all the more pressing alongside statistics that appear to indicate the broader numerical decline of organised religion. This was evident in a comment made in response to data showing the increased and rapid decline of under-16s in Anglican churches: 'The future health of the Church of England depends on a renewed sense of urgency to engage with children and young people' (Russell 2019: 3).

Faith Formation and Sustaining the Sacred in the Study of Religion

While religious institutions have been wrestling with how to improve the likelihood of future generations retaining the faith, the question of how and why new generations adopt or reject religious identities, beliefs, and practices has been asked by scholars of religion for decades. This has largely focused on the ways in which religious groups attempt to perpetuate and reproduce themselves through their relationship with children and young people – whatever form this might take. For Peter Berger – at least in his earlier works – the continuation of religion across generations is most likely when children are raised from birth within a religiously homogenous society. Berger (1973: 59) understands religion as deeply intertwined with world construction, defining it as 'the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order… a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos'. Religion thus presents a 'symbolic universe' that offers the believer 'coherence to the reality that they experience by linking it together and giving it overarching meaning' (Wuthnow 1986: 133). In this sense religious social-worlds function as *sacred canopies* – offering a shared structured cosmic system 'under' which an individual can escape the perils of meaninglessness and disorder. But the maintenance of these canopies is dependent on 'legitimation', the task of 'explain[ing] and justify[ing] the social order' to the extent that the social world reaches a point of being taken for granted, and made 'real' for future generations through social 'plausibility structures' (Berger 1973: 38, 55). The ideal state for this, in Berger's model, is a child being raised within a community wherein a single religious world is taken for granted by all and this is reinforced

in everyday social activity – though he warns that even here social worlds can still be precarious. The desire is for maximum continuity between generations, but the progressions of modernity posed a threat to this. In this earlier work, Berger (1973: 137) argued that pluralism (amongst other factors) had shattered the 'taken for granted' nature of earlier religious plausibility structures, with faith instead being understood as a choice, and as a result the task of future generations being socialised into the religious structures of their parents has become an even more precarious venture. '[F]or the first time in history', Berger (1973: 130) argues, 'the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility… for broad masses of entire societies'. Secularisation was all but inevitable, with theological liberalism the best hope for religious survival.[6]

While Berger (2016: 39) later recanted much of this earlier work as religious attitudes and practices (particularly outside of Western Europe) appeared not to be following the trajectory that he had anticipated (even arguing that 'pluralism is good for faith'), the idea of religious 'plausibility structures' as a model for religious socialisation continued to shape approaches in the sociology of religion over subsequent decades. Christian Smith (1998: 106), in his work on conservative evangelicals in the United States, argued that while entire societies no longer provide 'sacred canopies' under which religious lifeworlds can be made real to new generations, smaller influential subcultural groups can form their own plausibility structures in a pluralist context – so-called 'sacred umbrellas'. Religious plausibility structures, he argues, are not necessarily as precarious as Berger had suggested, and the development of smaller religious subcultures offers 'morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging' in contrast and opposition to the broader pluralist environment (Smith 1998: 118). While here Smith was particularly referring to conservative evangelicalism in the United States, his argument for subcultural religious socialisation could have been applied beyond that specific context.[7] As with Berger, the hope for forming new generations of children and young people into the faith lies in the

[6] One of Berger's follow up works, *A Rumour of Angels* (1970), outlines his own personal religious beliefs and what he believes is the best hope for the future of the Christian church – involving a move away from theological conservativism.

[7] One particular strength of conservative religion for this, Smith argues, is the ability to gain strength not only from those who share their beliefs, but also from 'outgroups' who hold oppositional views to those of the 'ingroup'. He argues that this oppositional aspect is of particular importance as stronger groups will 'employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinctions from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups' – including wider society as a whole (Smith 1998: 118-9).

development of communities with strong and widely shared religious cosmologies. If the young person can adopt these realities as their own, then the religion can survive and thrive into the future – at which point the responsibility for the strengthening and perpetuation of the religious plausibility structure is handed on.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) sought to develop a method of understanding religion in sociological terms that is better placed to the address the nature of religion in modernity and its apparent decline in significance. Dissatisfied with previous attempts, such as those of Berger, she constructs a definition of religion that emphasises the particular relationship between religious belief and the continuation of an authoritative tradition in a way that sets religious belief apart from other forms of social activity. '[W]hat is specific to religious activity', Hervieu-Léger (2000: 100) argues, 'is that it is wholly directed to the production, management and distribution of the particular form of believing which draws its legitimacy from reference to a tradition'. This tradition is essential for Hervieu-Léger (2000:76), as she argues that 'there is no religion without the authority of a tradition being invoked (whether explicitly, half-explicitly or implicitly) in support of the act of believing'. Continuing this tradition in the beliefs of their new generations and assuring them of the authority of the tradition – creating a 'chain of memory' through time – is, therefore, the central responsibility of any religious community or institution that seeks prolonged survival. Whatever the convictions or practices of the religion, the group – and individuals within the group – needs to have a sense that they are part of an authoritative lineage in order to find coherence and cohesion (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 81). However, one of the key characteristics of modern societies, Hervieu-Léger (2000: 4) argues, is that they are 'no longer collective depositories – custodians – of memory'. As a result, these societies are no longer 'ordered with a view to reproducing what is inherited' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 123). Rather than being defined by continuity, modern societies are characterised by change, resulting in their being 'less and less able to nurture the innate capacity of individuals and groups to assimilate or imaginatively to project a lineage of belief' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 123). The reason religious groups are struggling to socialise their future generations into the faith, therefore, is due to a wider cultural trend away from privileging tradition over the new, continuity over change, in a manner that is contrary to the nature of religious belief that prioritises authority stemming from longevity.

Outside of sociological approaches, some of the most influential approaches to religious socialisation have stemmed from the field of psychology. Stage-based approaches from

within developmental psychology emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, in particular from James Fowler (1981) and John Westerhoff (1976). Inspired by the work of Erik Erikson (1995) and Jean Piaget (1969) among others, these models attempt to identify particular characteristics of faith associated with different broad age groups. While the authors both suggest that some, though not all, individuals will progress through every stage, it is clear from both that the expectation (and desire) of the authors is that these stages will be progressed through according to particular age ranges, leading to idealised states in adulthood ('Universalising Faith' for Fowler (1981: 201) and 'Owned Faith' for Westerhoff (1976: 98-9)).[8] In both models adolescence takes on particular significance, with Fowler (1981: 153-4) believing that this is the stage at which one seeks a personal relationship with the divine, and Westerhoff (1976: 96) arguing that adolescence brings about a stage of doubt and experimentation in which 'the "religion of the head" becomes equally important with the "religion of the heart"'. Chris Boyatzis (2011) has identified both the ongoing influence of these models and their significant limitations. Firstly, Boyatzis (2011: 27) notes that stage theories 'constrain our understanding of the varieties of religious development', in part because they 'fail to account for the dramatic variability between and within individuals at any given age.' Within Fowler's own research, Boyatzis (2011: 27) notes that only half of the teenagers involved matched with the prescribed stage (with young adolescents scoring in five different stages). Naomi Thompson (2018: 101) similarly found in her research that while 'elements of the adolescent and early adulthood stages do feature in the narratives of the young people' she spoke with, the reality of lived faith experience is far more complex and multi-directional than either model allows for. Instead, she argues, faith development is 'a more fluid phenomenon that moves forwards and backwards through these styles; belief can be expressed within different age groups and it can change and develop throughout a person's life with no final stage or endpoint' (Thompson 2018: 99). A second concern with these models is that they can create a hierarchy of faith positions that prioritises adults – and particular types of faithful adults – over children and young adults. The nature of any progressive model that builds towards an ideal type by definition perceives these stages as

[8] It is notable that in both cases we see that the pinnacle of faith development – supposedly based on scientific observation – correlates with the personal theological perspectives of the authors. For Fowler (1981: 204-7), his endpoint is openly influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr's ideas of 'radical monotheistic faith' – alongside influences from liberal mystical theology, eschewing literalism and embracing activism and near universalism – while Westerhoff's (1976: 98-9) final stage and most desirable endpoint has clear parallels with normative evangelical theology.

in some form incomplete or unideal. While adults may reach this, children and young people will always be to a certain extent deficient. Boyatzis (2011: 20) argues that this is reflective of developmental theory more broadly, with children being viewed as fundamentally immature and therefore, in this context, 'viewed merely as "spiritual becomings" rather than spiritual "beings."'

Each of these approaches to understanding religious socialisation – plausibility structures, chains of memory, and stage-based developmental-psychology – place an overwhelming emphasis on the cognitive aspects of religious formation and fail to fully account for the significance of embodied religious experience and practice on this process. Within Berger's (1973: 28) work, for example, the socially constructed world is understood to be primarily as an 'ordering of experience', thereby implying that within a coherent world order the cognitive aspects of the individual and society reign over and control the unreliable and inferior category of experience.

Religious Embodiment and Socialisation

As Mellor and Shilling (2010: 21) point out, however, 'religiosity is not just a matter of beliefs and values, but is to do with *lived experiences*, *practical orientations*, *sensory* forms of knowing and patterns of *physical* accomplishment and technique that impact upon day-to-day lives', and as a result 'analysing the embodied dimensions of religions is central to understanding their social and cultural significance' (emphasis original). The study of practices of socialisation of new generations into religious traditions, therefore, needs to account for these more embodied aspects as fully as it does the cosmological 'beliefs' that may be taught by a particular religious tradition or society. When considering religious socialisation and formation, studies of rites of passage in particular have long offered an important insight into the embodied and emotive practices through which young people are incorporated into societies and religious communities. This will be covered in depth in the following chapter, but it is important to note this strand of enquiry when considering the ways in which religious communities seek to reproduce themselves into the future by not simply convincing the new generations of the coherence and believability of their cosmology, but by repeating established embodied traditions and processes through which a young person might see themselves as transformed and incorporated fully into the community.

But as with religiosity more generally, embodied practices play a far wider role in the socialisation process of young people than simply in the ceremonial rites of passage. In

response to an overly cognitive disciplinary focus historically, David Morgan (2012: xiii) has argued that a shift towards 'materializing the study of religions' is needed. He argues that rather than an understanding of religion and particularly belief that prioritises the cognitive assent to certain propositions, scholars of religion need to be engaging with 'embodied forms of practice such as prayer, liturgy, and pilgrimage, their sensations of sound in corporate worship, their visual articulations of sacred writ, [and] their creation of spaces that sculpt sound and shape living architectures of human bodies' in order to fully appreciate the reality of lived religion (Morgan 2010: 2-3). As with many of the approaches looked at above these remain tied to a social experience, as the practices and feelings associated with belief are developed within the communal socialisation of family and friends (Morgan 2010: 5). As a result, Morgan (2010: 6) wants to ask not only '*[w]hat* [people] teach their children' with regards to religiosity, but also '*how, when,* and *where* do people teach their children *what* they teach them' (emphasis original). Understanding the practices of socialisation, and how these are experienced by the children at the heart of this, is pivotal alongside an understanding of the content of religious teaching at this stage.

Birgit Meyer (2008) places a similar emphasis on the importance of materiality in religious formation. However, while Morgan explores religious communities more broadly, incorporating the influences of family and friends in this, Meyer places institutions at the centre of this process. She argues that institutions and their embodied practices are essential to the development of individual religiosity – without 'the particular social structures, sensory regimes, bodily techniques, doctrines, and practices that make up a religion', Meyer (2008: 707) argues, 'the searching individual craving experience of God would not exist'. In these communities, particular 'aesthetic styles' are developed along with 'sensational forms', particular practices of worship that 'shape or even produce the transcendental in a particular manner', organising religious sensations and often highly dependent upon the institutional leadership (Meyer 2008: 708). The continuation of these sensations in the lives of participants and in their future generations of believers is dependent upon the 'existence of formalized practices that not only frame individual religious sensations but also enable them to be reproduced' (Meyer 2008: 710). Each of these material and experiential aspects needs to be, in some sense, passed on and remade by continuing generations of religious communities.

While Meyer and Morgan do not specifically look at how this occurs with regards to children or young people, Orsi dedicates a chapter to this task. Orsi (2005: 2) understands religion as

‘a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together’, relationships that ‘have all the complexities – all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on – of relationships between humans’. The divine beings with which these relationships are formed, he argues, are experienced by believers as active and *material* presences. As a result, he explores the manner in which Catholic children were raised to experience religious beliefs as material, with ‘gods and other special beings… as real to [them] as their bodies, as substantially *there* as the homes they inhabit’ (Orsi 2005: 73, emphasis original). For this to occur, he argues, there must be a materialisation of the religious world, and through this a particular embodied experience, what he calls a ‘corporalization of the sacred… the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body – in one's own body or in someone else's body – so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others' (Orsi 2005:74). In particular, he focuses on the rituals that children were expected to perform from an early age, both in church and in their own homes, for example being encouraged to experience and relate to the divine through one’s own body. This involves, for example, the construction of a Christmas scene for baby Jesus that is both material but also spiritual – “that is, made of prayers and acts of love and sacrifice” (Sister Mary I.H.M., quoted in Orsi 2005: 75).[9] They were encouraged here to create both the material, but also to behave in a way that embodied the scene through analogous physical practices – ‘It is in the child’s flesh that Christmas will be made real, tangible, and accessible. “Eating things the child does not like could make the straw,” Sister [Mary] advises, “being obedient the coverlet, being nice to others when playing with others, the pillow”’ (Orsi 2005: 75). The child, therefore, embodies and experiences the internal spiritual as they construct it in the external material. As a result, what was referred to in the Catholic community as ‘formation’ was not ‘a matter simply of shaping the intellect. What was formed in formation was the realness and presence of the sacred in the bodies and

[9] An element of embodied playfulness is notable here, an aspect which will become particularly significant as this thesis progresses. The role of play in Christian formation remains understudied, however has been noted in Strhan’s (2019: 57-9) ethnography of evangelical children’s work, as well as studies of commercially produced religious games, which Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris (2010: 1) show date from ‘at least the 1800s’ (see also Sachs Norris 2011). Orsi’s account also shares an interesting parallel with the account offered by Chris Boyatzis (2011: 24) of a young child playfully recreating communion with Wonder bread and grape juice, an exploration of religious ritual undertaken independently and away from the institutional space. Yet it remains under-researched, and as I shall show, this lack of scholarly attention is a stark absence when considering the sustained significance of play in Christian children and youth contexts.

imagination of children' (Orsi 2005: 76). While Orsi is clearly observing the specific nature of 'formation' within the American Catholic context,[10] his approach of looking at the *embodied and material* practices through which religious institutions seek to reproduce themselves in their children and young people indicates an important aspect that needs to be considered in the sociology of religion alongside the more cognitive focuses that have historically dominated.

It is clear both from academic study and the practices of religious institutions themselves that concerns over how to ensure the transmission of faith and practices to future generations is a central priority to contemporary religious groups – and this includes evangelicalism. While evangelical churches frequently share some approaches with the Catholic context that Orsi observes, and in other ways differ significantly,[11] the fears among older generations over the long-term survival of their faith is equally as strong. If we are therefore to understand youth work as in part a process of faith and subject formation in order to sustain the faith across generations, then it is important to understand this evangelical subjectivity prior to exploring the particular nature and emphases within evangelical youth work.

The Evangelical Subject

The rigidity of faith development models such as those outlined above not only necessitates considering individuals as within one fixed category or another – whereas the reality of lived faith experience is far more complex and fluid, as Boyatzis (2011: 27) shows – but also creates ideal types which are designed to describe vast swathes of the religious population at a time. This mistake is, of course, also possible in anthropological and sociological studies of faith communities, including this present thesis. The often-monolithic perception of evangelicalism that pays little attention to individual agency has been a difficulty with some

[10] The particular nature of the guidance Orsi observes in twentieth-century Catholicism has not been evident throughout history, however, and he outlines the legacy of the 'cult of childhood' dating back to the end of the eighteenth century that has impacted on pedagogy and perceptions of children in numerous different ways since (2005: 79-92).

[11] As Orsi notes, these differences were often not only intentional but proudly emphasised. The Catholic church, he argues, 'prided themselves on offering children direct access to the sacred, not what they imagined as the scaled-down, make-believe, Sunday school version of Christianity given Protestant children. Other Christians may have kept their children out of sacred space, but Catholic boys and girls played special roles in the church's liturgical life' (Orsi 2005: 82). This separation from (and reconstruction of) sacred space was clearly evident in the context in St Aidan's, and will be covered later in the thesis.

previous studies in the area, however more recent work has improved substantially – although the temptation for broad brush stroke presentations remains. This is important to consider when studying evangelicalism not least due to the vast range of variations that exist within a movement that is most frequently defined using the 'Bebbington quadrilateral' (Bebbington 1989:3). This is a classification that broadly requires some emphasis on conversionism, Biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (Bebbington 1989: 3), yet remains highly flexible in its usage. Variations exist geographically, politically, theologically and ecclesiologically. For the latter case, for example, Strhan (2019: 7) uses three broad strands in her research – 'conservative', 'charismatic', and 'open' – acknowledging that 'what it means to be 'evangelical' today means holding each of these definitions loosely, and examining the range of people and organizations who claim these terms for themselves, exploring both what they share and points of difference and tension, and the ways in which the meanings of these terms can shift over time'. Even within institutions that may appear straightforward to label across these strands, it is possible that the church will consist of members from across these definitional boundaries, and potentially those who would personally identify with a different tradition altogether (or may not even consider themselves Christians) as well as many with no awareness of the term 'evangelical' at all. Even while there is a lower likelihood of individuals having been raised in a different tradition, each of these variations remain possible within a youth context, especially if the young people consider themselves to be in the midst of formation processes. Attempting a unified model of 'evangelicalism' is therefore fraught with difficulty.[12] Through looking across these existing studies, however, we can gain valuable insights into the nature of contemporary evangelical subjectivity and the importance of understanding the formational practices of this subjectivity that are taking place with evangelical young people. In considering the evangelical youth group as a site of formation and transformation, it is important to understand the nature of evangelicalism into which they are being formed. I will therefore start with an overview of studies of contemporary evangelicalism – many of which emphasise evangelicalism's somewhat tempestuous relationship with modernity – prior to focusing on work around evangelicalism and youth.

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[12] Given the variety outlined above, it may be more fitting to discuss the study of 'evangelicalisms', akin to discussions concerning the anthropology of 'Christianities' as recognition of the diversity of this term.

Sociology of Evangelicals in Modernity

Although evangelicalism in Britain can be traced back centuries, broadly speaking the form of evangelicalism most recognisable around the world today – often called the "new evangelicalism" to mark the distinction with earlier forms (Marsden 1995: 3) – can be dated back to 1940s North America. Smith (1998: 13) argues that in the 1940s and 1950s, American evangelicalism developed 'an institutional infrastructure of impressive magnitude and strength', morphing in turn into 'one giant, national trans-denominational network of evangelical organizations' – a network that is now global. But we must be wary that awareness of the global interconnection within evangelicalism does not lead to an assumption of homogeneity across these different contexts. British evangelicalism, for example, retains significant distinctive characteristics – particularly, when contrasted with American evangelicalism, the nature of political engagement (Walton *et al* 2013: 85). The global spread of evangelicalism posed an interesting problem to the sociology of religion in the post-war decades. Debates around secularisation, not least from Peter Berger as outlined above, generally took the approach that conservative strands of religion (such as evangelicalism) were particularly vulnerable to the secularising effects of modernity. In his more confessional work *A Rumour of Angels,* Berger (1970: 24) argued that conservative religion had little future, with the development of neo-orthodoxy in Protestantism functioning as little more than a solitary conservative blip in the broader progression of liberal theology. Influenced by Berger, James Hunter (1983: 131-2) later argued that 'modernity is inimical to traditional religious belief', particularly when confronted with intellectual scholarship – '[evangelicalism] will have to realise the well-established fact that education, even Christian education, secularizes'.[13] Yet as evangelicalism (along with other forms of conservative religion) grew both in number and influence around the world over the second half of the century, the assumptions of secularisation began to shift.[14] Berger (1999: 6) exemplifies this, retracting his commitment to the secularisation theory and instead arguing that the opposite phenomenon was evident – pointing to the rise of movements such as evangelicalism and Islamic fundamentalism as 'a massive falsification

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[13] The belief that higher education is by necessity a secularising force was later challenged by Guest *et al* (2013).

[14] The rise of conservative forms of Christianity also proved a surprise to anthropologists. As Tanya Luhrmann (2012: 304) describes, rather than diminishing in significance or progressing along a more liberal, 'modern' trajectory, 'Christianity around the world has exploded in its seemingly least liberal and most magical form – in charismatic Christianities that take biblical miracles at face value and treat the Holy Spirit as if it had a voltage'.

of the idea that modernization and secularization are cognate phenomena'. While broadly moving away from the simplistic narratives of secularisation,[15] sociologists of religion in the twenty-first century have continued to show an interest in the complex relationship between evangelicalism and modernity.

This relationship remains a point of interest for scholars in part due to the prominence placed upon this within evangelicalism itself. While differing in intensity, a common feature of evangelical teachings is an emphasis on the 'fallenness' of 'the world' (that is, non-evangelical society), often emphasising particular characteristics of modernity that they perceive as bringing people and society further away from the will of God.[16] But this does not lead evangelicals to absolute separation from wider society – and in fact, often the opposite is the case. The significance of this perceived conflict with wider modern culture is such that Smith (1998: 89) argues that it has helped to foster a global evangelical subculture, strengthened by the fact that 'it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it'. He argues that evangelicalism is not, however, a separatist movement, and (particularly in the United States) is actively engaged with politics and society in order to try and bring the modern world (and those within it) closer to their vision. This approach, neither isolationist nor accommodationist, is what Smith (1998: 218) terms 'distinction-with-engagement'. While Smith focused on conservative evangelicalism, this approach is seen across different branches of evangelicalism. James Bielo (2011: 11) , for example, found this to be central to 'emerging evangelical' identity, while Strhan (2019: 205) found that the desire to engage with the world in order to bring about salvation was shared but 'understood in very different ways across the different churches' in her study. This desire to be distinct whilst simultaneously ''witnesses' for Jesus across all the moral milieu they inhabit' (Strhan 2015: 203) has been one of the recurring features of sociological studies of evangelicalism.[17] The extent to which

[15] Some sociologists of religion continue to argue passionately for the secularisation thesis, Steve Bruce (2001) being a prominent example.
[16] It is interesting to note the apparent similarities between this teaching and the secularisation thesis put forward by writers like Berger, with the condemnation of modernity as intrinsically secularising unless actively countered.
[17] Emerging evangelicalism, it has been argued, takes the distinctive approach of attempting to combat the challenges of modernity by actively engaging with 'late' or 'post' modernity as a central aspect of their identity (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 22; Bielo 2011: 17). This can, for example, take the form of an orientation towards the "ancient-future" – posited prominently by American theologian

evangelicals understand themselves as – or desire to be – separated from the wider non-evangelical culture, and the form this may take, is an important feature of adolescent evangelical subjectivity as they explore and determine the nature of their own personal relationship with faith and wider culture.

A further layer to the evangelical relationship with modernity is proposed by Mathew Guest (2007), in his study of a charismatic evangelical congregation in York. In considering the nature of contemporary evangelical subjectivity, Guest (2007: 77) argues that the emphasis upon the individual subject in modernity has created extensive 'spiritual diversity' within the congregation which, while 'affirmed as a positive feature' by the vicar, 'signalled a loss of direction' for many in the congregation. The impact of this emphasis on the individual in modernity is particularly evident within charismatic congregations dependent upon innovations that are conventionally oriented around 'expressive individualism', Guest (2007: 108) argues. This is, however, 'precarious and unstable' due to the fact that believers 'turn away from external tradition for a sense of meaning, instead appealing to the resources of their subjective selves' with the result being that their 'religious identities become increasingly diverse and disconnected' (Guest 2007: 108).[18] Yet despite this precarity, as with Smith's work discussed above Guest (2007: 119) argues that this erosion of boundaries in contemporary charismatic evangelicalism can have a strengthening effect on members when engaging with wider modern society, serving a 'prophylactic function'. This is due to the fact that their personal testimony narratives,[19] in which their experiences of universal divine order and immanence – with Jesus as an 'ever-present guide and friend' – are emphasised and woven into their everyday experience, mean that 'the distinction between the sacred and the secular becomes meaningless', and so the world beyond the church is 'effectively integrated into a single meaning system' (Guest 2007: 119).

Robert E. Webber (1999) – an intentional desire to actively draw on and meaningfully engage with traditional structures and practices such as monastic communities, integration of pre-Reformation theologians, using icons, and others that would be alien to much of contemporary evangelicalism (Bielo 2011: 70-97). Regardless of whether these practices can truly reclaim the 'chain of memory' in the formation of Christian faith in the manner outlined by Hervieu-Léger, this nevertheless shows one form of engagement with, and counter to, trends of modernity from contemporary evangelicalism.

[18] This appears to have interesting parallels with the work of Harvieu-Léger, but also contrasts with the shift towards engagement with tradition in emerging evangelicalism.

[19] Testimony narratives will be discussed in greater depth later in the chapter.

This argument that the evangelical subculture can realistically provide ‘a response to fragmentation [perceived in secularising modern society] by holding out a promise of certainty’ (Strhan 2015: 198), as proposed by both Guest and Smith, has been challenged in more recent literature. In adopting a more holistic ethnographic approach Strhan explores evangelical subjects outside of an exclusively religious context. She finds that while evangelicals may *desire* the coherence of the divine subject, they are in reality caught in constant conflict with multiple influences and roles causing far more incoherence than is often portrayed. Conservative evangelicals, Strhan (2015: 203) argues, ‘engage in interactions through which they seek to separate themselves from others, as ‘exiles’, forming themselves as oriented towards different values than those they describe as dominant in wider society’. Within this, statements from leaders articulate ‘a tension between universalizing modern processes and traditionalist moral positions [that] reinforce this narrative of a distinctive moral identity, their sense of being ‘aliens and strangers’ and increasingly counter-cultural’ (Strhan 2015: 203). Yet the reality for congregants is more of a struggle than the idealistic narratives of leaders, as ‘this distance from ‘others’ can be hard work to maintain, as members of the church simultaneously live within, are shaped by, and find comfort in these same secular spaces’ (Strhan 2015: 203). The integration with external subjectivities need not necessarily lead to the tension and conflict observed by Strhan, however. Lydia Bean's (2014) comparative study of Canadian and American evangelicals showed how the different cultural attitudes impacted upon the formation of religious subjectivities. This was not simply a case reflecting wider national contexts, however, but rather ‘evangelicals drew on discourses about national identity for distinctively religious purposes to strengthen their subcultural identity as evangelical Christians' (Bean 2014: 180). Likewise, Omri Elisha’s (2011: 2-3) study of evangelical megachurches argues that their ‘moral ambition’ is a result of a web of influences both within and outside of the evangelical environment including the ‘multiple and at times conflicting historical, cultural, and theological influences that coexist within those contexts’.

It is impossible for these believers to live solely within their theological bubble and therefore fully escape the influence of wider cultural spaces, discourses, and subjectivities – not least due to the central focus on engagement in order to evangelise. The ‘evangelical subject’ is thus not a singular or ‘pure’ object of study, wholly detached from the surrounding world. It is clear that approaching evangelicalism as a coherent, impenetrable, and consistent thought-world that functions independent of and in opposition to that of ‘modernity’ is flawed. While strands of evangelicalism may emphasise a binary division

between insider and outsider, saved and damned, sacred and secular, the lived reality is considerably more diffuse and fragmented. As I shall argue in Chapter 3, this binary model takes on a particular characteristic within evangelical youth work – an area central to evangelical theology and practice, yet consistently understudied, both in sociological and anthropological studies. Despite this, the insights of anthropology can speak to the priorities that may be present in evangelical youth work. Most prominently, we see how narratives centring around the formation of the believing self are prominent features of evangelical adulthood.

Testimony, Authenticity, and Self-Understanding in Evangelicalism

Narrating the Formation of the Christian Self

As with the sociology of religion, the rise in prominence of evangelicalism in the latter decades of the twentieth-century led to a re-assessment within the anthropology of Christianity, with both Joel Robbins (2014: 157) and Coleman and Hackett (2015: 1-2) locating the turning point in the anthropology of Christianity around the turn of the millennium. Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, both in the 'Western world' and across the globe, have become prominent points of interest in the recent anthropology of Christianity, and one of the key themes that has emerged from these studies has been the significance of conversion and testimony in the continual development of the evangelical subject. As I have already mentioned, conversion plays an important role in evangelicalism – even amongst those who have grown up in a Christian environment – and this emphasis has a significant impact on perception of personal identity. Key biblical texts for evangelicals proclaim that in conversion, along with the sacramental ritual of baptism, the believer will in some sense be transformed – the old self is perceived as 'dead', akin to Jesus' death on the cross, before a new self is 'raised' into 'new life in Christ'.

However, it is not only the conversion process itself that is significant, nor is it the sacrament of baptism. As Webb Keane (2007: 216) points out, within Protestantism 'baptism cannot in itself be sufficient to make one a Christian, for that would be a kind of magic—good enough for Catholics and other heathens, perhaps'. As a result, the manner in which

conversion experience is articulated – most notably in the form of testimony[20] or regular affirmations of faith – becomes significant. Anna Stewart (2013: 7) observes that 'anthropologists working in diverse geographical fields have found that for members of Charismatic strands, the assertion of personal faith is an important ritual practice', while Keane (2007: 216) argues that concerns over the emphasis on the ritual of baptism lead to repeated narratives of testimony becoming a significant part of Protestant practice, as believers must 'confirm their true faith in a public performance… And such confirmations… work to transform individuals'. As Guest (2007: 116-7) observed in his study of a British evangelical church at the turn of the millennium, many evangelicals will have a readily constructed and colourful testimony narrative at hand to be able to draw on or retell if needed, providing 'individuals with a narrative form through which to construct their spiritual biographies and make sense of their experience in terms of divine order'. The public performance of testimony also offers members the opportunity to perceive and emphasise God's intervention in their lives, overcoming fears of disorder, chaos, or insignificance in the cosmos – 'By re-interpreting what might be described as the mundane into something that has been touched by the divine, congregants are imposing a theological framework which bestows plausibility onto their lives and grants them spiritual significance' (Guest 2007: 115). This ability to create and uncover cosmic structure and plausibility through constructing and recounting a coherent life narrative, outlining clear moments where divine intervention is the only explanation for various elements, may be a valuable resource for contemporary evangelicals if the difficulties of plausibility in a pluralistic society suggested by Berger are indeed the case.

When considering the content of these narratives – often designed to be publicly narrated and even performed both as tools of evangelism for non-believers and of encouragement for believers – we can often see the values and priorities of the group emerging and being reinforced. For example, in an evangelical environment that seeks to draw stronger

[20] 'Testimony' has two broad meanings within evangelicalism, both of which involve the public articulation of faith experiences. Most prominently, it is an autobiographical narrative that primarily covers the individual's journey towards and experience of conversion, but also often includes some outline of their progression of faith in the time since that moment. While these narratives often cover years or even decades and can be very carefully constructed and rehearsed, the second form of testimony concerns single (and usually recent) events such as answers to prayer or experiences of the divine. If these are deemed significant enough, they may be incorporated into the greater autobiographical testimony, but often they are expressed only as reflections on recent experiences in order to encourage the audience that God is 'at work'.

boundaries between the faithful and the 'secular', a stronger emphasis may be placed on the division (particularly in moral behaviour) between the pre- and post-conversion selves, as well as the differences between the faithful evangelical self and the perceived 'secular' self that is the norm in wider society. Guest (2007: 115-6) found that many congregants he spoke to 'stressed conversion as a passage from chaos into a new order, as the door into a new freedom, a freedom *from* corruption and decadence' (emphasis original). The nature of this narrative means that articulating the 'chaos' and 'corruption and decadence' is as important a feature of the story as is the 'new order' and the 'new freedom'. An emphasis in the articulation of these experiences on clear division between the old and new self – chaos and order, secular and sacred, immoral and moral, fallen and saved – appears to reinforce the forms of binary models that are identified by Smith as fundamental to the strength of contemporary evangelicalism. Yet, as with that assumption more broadly, the reality is often more fraught and complex as believers struggle to exist wholly and cleanly in the 'new life',[21] contributing to the struggles with coherence as outlined by Strhan. While foci across different churches may differ, the dominant story of conversion narratives is one of transformation of the self – an aspect that lies at the heart of this study.

An Authentic Narrative

Martijn Oosterbaan (2015), in his work amongst Pentecostals in Rio de Janeiro, develops the idea of public performance of testimony, and the rehearsed confession of past sins, and relates it to the concept of 'authenticity' – the perceived relationship between external actions and internal belief.[22] Using the example of Brazilian gospel singer Elaine Martins, he points to the repeated sections in her performance – both live and recorded[23] – in which she 'reveals instances of her past to convey that she once led a sinful life until she was saved from the harsh and dangerous *favela* life and was able to bloom and grow into a respected gospel artist' (Oosterbaan 2015: 162). While in the case of Martins the primary purpose of

[21] Kendrick Oliver's (2014: 886) analysis of Charles Colson's testimony narrative – 'the best-known book-length conversion narrative of the twentieth century' – outlines the reservations that Colson had with the extent to which his conversion was presented as a permanent and complete change.
[22] This concept of all-encompassing authenticity as a spiritual aspiration appears to align with the focus from Strhan's (2015: 145-152) respondents on 'coherence', desiring the coherence that they see in the divine but fail to reflect in their own lives as they are pulled between different environments.
[23] It is interesting to note the significance of testimony being evident even in evangelical media forms. It is common for major figures in evangelical media (either hosts/guests in non-fiction forms or heroic characters in fictional forms) to repeat their testimony, or for the plot to track the testimony narrative directly. It is arguably one of the most significant elements for a media form defining itself as 'beneficial' as opposed to 'secular'.

this might have been to convince her audience, for others – such as Bielo's (2011: 17) participants who, when asked about their desired religious lives, 'repeatedly returned to one word: authentic' – the desire to be 'authentic' is not just important with regard to how they are perceived by others, but their own formation of subjectivity. It is therefore not only the experience of conversion which impacts upon the evangelical formation of subjectivity, but the public and private narratives that emerge and are reinforced through their re-articulation in the form of testimony.[24] As Peter Stromberg (1993: 15) observes in his analysis of evangelical conversion narratives, 'a change in the believer's life is sustained only to the extent that it is continually constituted' — and 'change is constituted above all in talk'.

The idea of authenticity is one that recurs in different forms throughout contemporary studies of Christianity, particularly in congregational consideration of idealised faith in contrast to an 'inauthentic' other. In Bielo's (2011: 197-8) work we see a fear of 'lost authenticity' in conservative Christianity, a sense that the church has 'lost touch with "real Christianity", and through the emerging movement American Christianity might 'recapture an "authentic faith"'. Of course, those who are viewed as 'inauthentic' do not perceive this in themselves. In Strhan's (2015: 122) study of conservative evangelicalism she outlines a sharp distinction between 'authentic' Christianity (that which revolves around a firm commitment to Christian scripture) and others, not only the non-religious but also 'inauthentic' Christianity, in particular traditions that 'place greater emphasis on ritual or emotion'. Amy Wilkins (2008: 244) points to the ongoing task among student evangelical 'Unity Christians' of 'achieving authenticity', relying on both correct performance of identity and an 'alignment of "inner" selves' with these external performances – with superficial performances quickly rooted out. Authenticity is a value sought after in evangelical relationships (Strhan 2019: 152), while outside of the evangelical context Rachel Hanemann (2016: 243-4) found that the students at the Catholic secondary school she studied prioritised 'authentic expression' of self both in their friends and in themselves. While Hanemann (2016: 244-5) argues that this drive for individualism and authenticity led to a

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[24] Theologian and youth worker Andrew Root (2017: xvi) is highly critical of the desire for uncovering or developing 'authentic' or 'real' faith, particularly as it is articulated in literature around youth work as a solution to declining youth religiosity – 'It appeared that faith alone wasn't powerful enough to defy the cultural flows. But maybe if we really meant it, really tried, really cared, offering people consequential, robust, vital, super faith, then Nones would decrease and the infection of [moralistic therapeutic deism] would clear up'.

number of students rebelling against the teachings of Catholicism encouraged at their school, for those who did commit to the faith the perception that it was an intentional and authentic personal decision, following an individual process, was an essential feature of this faith formation.

Spirituality in the Age of Authenticity

It is this emphasis on intensely personal process and decision that Charles Taylor (2007: 473) argues lies at the heart of spirituality in the contemporary "Age of Authenticity" – an era originating in approximately 1960. Within this age in which individuals are reluctant to uncritically embrace institutional narratives, it is understood that 'each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside' (Taylor 2007: 486). Authenticity relates to the outliving of individual agency and, above all, *choice*, with 'bare choice' seen as 'a prime value, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain' (Taylor 2007: 478). This is extended to the realm of religion – or, more likely, 'spirituality'. Personal spirituality must be centred on an authentic individual choice as a part of an individual process or journey: 'I have to discover my route to wholeness and spiritual depth. The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience. Spirituality must speak to this experience' (Taylor 2007: 507). This is not to say that individuals will entirely leave traditional institutions – even those that appear to stand contrary to these individualist tendencies – but rather that they will settle in these institutions as a result of an individualised journey: 'while the spiritual seeker in our secular age is on an individual quest, that quest might actually end up with a conversion to Roman Catholicism that cuts against the libertarian individualism of the quest itself' (Smith 2014: 90). It is this quest, inescapably emphasising authenticity and individualised choice, that lies at the heart of Hanemann's accounts of adolescent journeys towards Catholic confirmation, as well as other processes of conversion and faith formation – such as that within evangelicalism.

It is evident that the form of evangelical subject desired in adult contexts is one that is both authentic and coherent, consistent across the internal and external self, and in some form standing apart from their wider non-evangelical context. Central to this is the understanding of the conversion process, narrated both to oneself and to others through a testimony narrative that focuses on the difference between the pre- and post-conversion self. Yet within the youth work environment we see a space of active formation, of anticipated and perceived 'incompleteness' in which the evangelical seen in studies of adult

contexts is not yet fully realised. The purpose of this study is to explore this context in greater depth and understand the nature of formation within these spaces. It is therefore important to have a specific understanding of the nature and history of evangelical youth work.

Children, Youth Work, and Socialisation in Evangelicalism

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, dedicated Christian groups for children and young people date back centuries, with focuses shifting over time. Considering the post-war legacy of this work, we see that as young people formed in this work have grown to become influential adults in the movement this emphasis on youth work has become influential on the wider movement. As Pete Ward (1996: 20) argues, the current strength of British evangelicalism owes a great debt to the role of youth work and young people in its history – 'Youthwork is by no means marginal to the study of evangelicalism. Indeed, it is one of the chief formative influences within the subculture'. Over in America, the emphasis was similar, as the 'neo-evangelicals' of the post-war period 'turned particularly to youth ministry organisations' in order to 'engage mass society', with organisations such as Youth for Christ, Young Life, and Campus Crusade 'making a major impact' (Root 2017: 75-6). The focus has not been a static one, however, and there have been and still are dynamic shifts in the ways in which evangelical groups understand and enact work with children and young people. These have been driven in part by wider social factors, such as the shifts in children's agency and power over the past two centuries as outlined by Oswell (2013) and passing pedagogical fashions, but also by internal priority shifts and the adoption of new psychological-developmental concepts such as the theories of faith development outlined above. These shifts, crucial to an understanding of contemporary evangelical youth work, will be explored below.

From Outreach to Nurture

In her study of the history and contemporary state of young people in the church since 1900, Thompson (2018: 97) argues that there has been a fundamental shift in institutional focuses away from one of *outreach* – that is, a desire to draw young people in who had no prior experience of church, which was a defining feature of the 'Sunday School era' – to one of

nurture .[25] This concept of nurture – an emphasis on ensuring that those children and young people already in the church remain involved into adulthood – is broadly similar to the perceived goals of socialisation within a religious institution outlined above, focusing on transmitting the beliefs and practices of parents to their children (Thompson 2018: 97). This focus stemmed from a steep decline in Sunday School attendance that led to, and was then exacerbated by, the adoption of a 'family church' model, which Thompson (2018: 29) argues was 'largely implemented to meet church rather than community needs' – notably the retention of young people within the institutional church.[26] But the focus on retention through nurturing is not a model that simply hopes that a child that is formed within and inducted into the community will automatically stay within it. Rather, in keeping with a 'wider evangelical discourse that has grown in dominance since the mid-twentieth century' (Thompson 2018: 98), it is one that is designed to lead the child or young person to a point of active religious decision – 'The aim of Christian nurture… is to enable the child in the end to face a radical challenge. The nurturer must have a real choice in mind: belief or disbelief', a choice that should be 'initially presented' to the child in early adolescence (Consultative Group on Ministry among Children 1981, cited in Sutcliffe 2001: 119). Conversion, central as it is to evangelical theology and life, is therefore viewed as necessary not only for those who have only recently begun to engage with Christianity but also for those who have grown up in the church, in the form of a decision by which faith is in some form adopted in a new way. As the quote above states, adolescence often emerges as a central period in this process. The nature of youth provision therefore is of primary significance under this theology.

This focus on nurture leading to eventual decision-based conversion does not mean that churches and Christian youth workers no longer hope to engage with those who have not

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[25] The term 'nurture' implies an emphasis on relationship in engaging young people with the church, which while present was not necessarily novel – Thompson (2018: 98) shows that relationships were 'a key part of the child-centred pedagogy that the Sunday Schools sought to implement earlier in the twentieth century', as well as the original idea behind the 'family church' model. In her contemporary research she found this to be central to the young people she interviewed, and it was recognised by churches that 'relationships are crucial to young people's continued engagement with Christianity', though relationships between the young people and the wider church were often not established (Thompson 2018: 98). As I shall show in Chapter 4, the peer relationships fostered in the St Aidan's environment were central to the formation of the young evangelical subject in this context.

[26] Thompson notes a 1991 Church of England report which 'acknowledges that, if viewed as an evangelistic tool, 'family church' was unsuccessful' as the percentage of young people attending church coming from non-church families had plummeted, with success instead being found in 'retaining young people in Sunday School for longer (seven and a half instead of six years on average) and in doubling the percentage making the transition to church membership' (2018: 49).

grown up in the faith. As Thompson (2018: 107-9) outlines, an attempt to emphasise both nurturing *and* outreach is common within church contexts However, this can often result in tensions between youth workers and young people on the one hand, and the church leaders and wider congregation on the other, with contrasting views on priorities. Nick Shepherd (2016), an experienced Anglican youth work practitioner and advisor, has (potentially inadvertently) summarised the perceived tasks of the contemporary Christian youth group in the title of his book on the topic – '*Faith Generation: Retaining Young People and Growing the Church'*. Within this simple title, we see five expectations of church youth groups: that they would retain existing young members; draw in new members (and therefore); grow the Church as a whole; 'generate' faith in these young people; and raise a 'generation' that shares the Church's faith. The shift towards a nurture-based approach has not necessitated a shift away from the desire to engage with those from outside of church backgrounds, and the perception of adolescence as a particularly significant period for the individual commitment to faith – whether the individual has grown up inside or outside of a church environment – means that there are the same expectations of faith development for those with and those without Christian backgrounds.

Choice and Conversion

The notion of religious choice is central to Shepherd's work, arguing that believes that the impact of pluralism has been to increase the perception of this choice among young people, consequently being a significant contributing factor not to religious vibrancy but rather decline (Shepherd 2010: 149). This marks a significant shift and a challenge for youth work, argues Shepherd (2016: 5), as it means that 'the eventuality of future generations forming and expressing a vibrant Christian faith is no longer a 'natural process'. It does not happen automatically'. This implies that prior to pluralism, as per Berger's model, there was a period in which the religious monopoly was such that choice was not even considered as the religious worldview into which one was raised was adopted as a 'taken for granted' reality. Shepherd's theory relies upon a clear distinction between the faith of children and that of adults, utilising the work of Duncan MacLaren (2004: 101) to argue that it in adolescence that the choice to believe or not is 'forced upon young people'. 'As individuals begin to move from childhood to adult faith', Shepherd (2016: 25) argues, '– or consider faith for the first time as young adults – there are challenges to faith that become barriers or blocks to faith formation'. These challenges, he says, 'revolve around the issues of *choice, sense* and *use*': the choice to believe; the sense of God in one's life, developed through experience; and using that faith and the community of believers to structure one's life and behaviour (Shepherd

2016: 171, emphasis original). With ‘the time of youth [being] particularly susceptible to the impact of secularization’ (Shepherd 2016: 31), ministry among adolescents becomes pivotal in the survival of the church and the battle against these three challenges.

For Shepherd, the fact that faith has become (not exclusively, but significantly) a matter of choice is a wider sociological development that has emerged as a result of broader (and predominantly secularising) shifts within society. Within this context, dedication to a certain faith position is perceived as a wholly optional and intentional act, with the challenge for institutions centring on adolescence. Yet this apparently sociological perception has clear similarities with evangelical theology. As I mentioned above, conversionism is an important feature of evangelical theology, and while divine action is often highlighted in narratives surrounding conversion, a moment of decision is a regular feature in these narratives. The decision may, for example, be described in such a way as to mirror the point of realisation and repentance that strikes the youngest son in Jesus’ ‘Parable of the Prodigal Son’ before he changes his ways and returns to his father (Luke 15:11-32).[27] This is true not only for new converts or those who have been distant from the church for an extended period but also for those brought up in the faith – as indicated by Shepherd’s work above. ‘Inheriting’ the faith of one’s parents is not seen as sufficient beyond a certain point, with the emphasis being on the individual to make a personal commitment. In fact, the aspect of choice over and against institutions has been in evidence in Protestantism since its origins, with believers soon encouraged to separate from the institutional Catholic church and either join or form their own congregations that were more in keeping with what they believed the teachings of the Bible to be.[28] While figures such as Shepherd might see this apparent sociological shift towards conceptions of free religious choice (emphasised in adolescence) as posing a threat to the church, destabilising the previous ‘sacred canopies’, it is nevertheless an approach to religiosity that is natural to the evangelical (and more broadly Protestant) theology. While

[27] See, for example, the account of ‘Tom’ in Guest’s (2007: 116) study of a British evangelical church. In the course of narrating his faith story to the congregation, Tom describes himself at his lowest as ‘‘in the pig swill’, just like the lost son’, before he returned to church and ‘said he’d do anything, just live a simple life, just be a simple Christian, and begged God to forgive him’.

[28] This is despite the emphasis placed by the key early figures within Protestantism on both predestination of the saved and salvation *sola fida* (by faith alone), which rejects the possibility of *any* human involvement in salvation, including the act of choice. For Martin Luther, ‘God provides everything necessary for justification, so that all the sinner needs to do is to receive it. God is active, and humans are passive, in justification… Even faith itself is a gift of God rather than a human action’ (McGrath 2017: 339).

Shepherd's work might more appropriately be categorised as practical theology, the excessive influence of European Protestant assumptions of religion on the study of religion, particularly the emphasis on a cognitive concept of belief, has been discussed and disputed.[29] Studies of this area must therefore be wary of inadvertently incorporating Protestant (and particularly evangelical) theological assumptions onto sociological constructs in a way that privileges the evangelical understanding of faith formation against other forms.[30]

Practices and Debates within Evangelical Youth Work

In order to contextualise the findings at the centre of this thesis – particularly considering the absence of ethnographic study of evangelical youth group, as discussed in the following section – it is valuable to explore in greater depth the nature of British evangelical youth work. As already noted, Christian youth work dates back to at least the nineteenth century (Griffiths 2007; Thompson 2018) and has been constantly dynamic since then in response to cultural, ecclesiological, and political shifts. While secular youth work became professionalised in the post-war years – particularly marked by the publication of the Albemarle Report in 1960 (Ministry of Education 1960) – Christian youth work remained largely voluntary for a number of decades after this, aside from individual wealthy churches able to provide their own training and resources (J. Griffiths 2013: 41). As a result of this requirement for wealth and the particular focus on evangelism and conversionism, larger evangelical churches emerged as dominant in defining contemporary youth work culture (J. Griffiths 2013: 41-2).[31] By the 1980s many Christian youth workers were encouraged to draw

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[29] Malcolm Ruel (1982) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978), for example, offer classic critiques of the influence of Protestantism on the notion of belief in the study of religion. As noted above, Morgan (2010) recognises these difficulties but seeks to retain the concept while broadening its meaning to incorporate material practices.

[30] Interestingly, Shepherd's model of faith formation – as with many other approaches that focus on a pluralist context – appears to take non-religion as a default mode in society not only in the sense that this is the most frequent faith standpoint, but also the idea that *un*belief is not something that requires formation. Without careful guidance from parents, religious leaders, and the wider community, the potentially religious individual will not be formed into this faith but instead slide into unbelief. Recent research into contemporary unbelief has started to question the passivity of non-faith formation amongst children. Work undertaken by Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe (2019) has found that the forms of non-religious transmission taking place in homes was often implicit (for example through the gentle mockery of religion), while there were more explicit forms of socialisation in schools (for example in RE lessons and practices of collective worship) in a manner that often created a binary between religion and nonreligion, and through which children would be able to articulate their nonreligion and form it socially with peers and teachers.

[31] Interestingly, Joanne Griffiths (2013: 43-4) also notes the relationship between evangelical youth work and the 'burgeoning ecumenical movement' in the 1960s and 1970s, with evangelical youth workers soon 'engaging with a kaleidoscope of spirituality and styles of worship'.

on the 'experience, professionalism, and resources of the Local Education Authority – (LEA) funded youth service', with an accompanying shift towards professionalisation and formal training (Ward 1996: 72-3). Yet Ward (1996: 73-5) notes that this led to a discomfort within evangelicalism due to the secular nature of this training, with Ward arguing that this was ultimately detrimental to the fundamental mission of Christian youth work. As a result of this anxiety, British Christians developed a new approach to training that incorporated both professional youth work validation as well as missional and theological training (J. Griffiths 2013: 53). The first course – ran by the Centre for Youth Ministry – opened in 1998, and many others have opened since aimed at professionalising Christian youth workers (J. Griffiths 2013: 11).[32]

This professionalisation, however, brings to the fore one of the ongoing tensions in Christian work with young people: the relationship between youth 'work' and youth 'ministry'. While precise definitions differ, Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010**:** 23-4) explain that youth work is 'seen more broadly as educative, not overtly Christian, community focused and with a mission agenda at the social action end of the spectrum', while youth ministry is 'work with young people who are already part of the Church and incorporates evangelism and discipleship'.[33] While Danny Brierley (2003: 3) sees youth 'work' as secular and youth 'ministry' as sacred, it is nevertheless for him not a binary state. Instead this is a spectrum, with a Christian minister at one end and secular youth worker at the other, with the 'task of Christian youth work is to 'join up' the theological basis, identity and character of being a Christian minister to young people with the philosophy, values and ethics and forms of practice of youth work' (Shepherd 2014: 5). These continue to be elements that Christian youth workers negotiate in determining their practice – often contributing to the tensions experienced between themselves and senior church leadership. For writers such as Ward (1997: 26) and Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010: 25), what fundamentally distinguishes a Christian youth worker – as opposed to a youth worker who is Christian – is the emphasis on passing on the Christian story to a new generation. Through this we see the longstanding relationship between

[32] Joanne Griffiths (2013: 12) argues that this has not been a straightforward development, however, with many Christian youth workers 'inhabiting a *betwixt and between* place; somewhere between the Christian and the secular' (emphasis original).

[33] These categories can be seen alongside those of 'outreach' and 'nurture' explored by Thompson (2018) as outlined above.

approaches to Christian youth work and Christian missiology.[34] Indeed, both Shepherd (2016: 38-40) and Terry Linhart (2014) argue that youth ministry has been understood as a missional activity since its origins. Linhart (2014: 176) argues that Christian youth work is 'inherently missional' purely because it involves 'a step across… between the world of adults and that of young people', with a result being that youth workers frequently negotiate their relationship with youth culture utilising similar approaches to those of missionaries in foreign lands.[35]

While the distinction in message is crucial, there remains a key practice emphasised in both Christian and secular youth work – that of 'informal education'. Simon Davies (2014: 196-8) argues that this has five key elements: a context 'relatively free from high levels of ownership and control by adults' resulting in an 'intentional equalizing of power relationships'; activities designed to foster conversation and relationships; natural conversation as the 'tool for learning' that generates 'support, love, challenge and laughter'; a raising of 'critical awareness' of participants through reflection and dialogue in the form of conscientization; and finally empowerment of young people as central in their own learning and change.[36] Beyond these academic works, we can gain a wider insight into how this is manifest in contemporary British evangelical youth work through looking at the 'session resources' provided by *Premier Youth and Children's Work* magazine – the 'UK's leading magazine for Christian youth and children's workers and volunteers' (Premier Youth and Children's Work Magazine 2020a). These resources reveal norms in youth work practice, including guidance for reflective practices and sermon guides as well as sections dedicated to discussion topics, games, and guides to engaging with mainstream popular culture such as movies and music (Premier Youth and Children's Work Magazine 2020b). It is therefore reasonable to assume that these elements – discussions, games, and active interaction with popular culture – are common features within contemporary Christian youth work practice in Britain. One immediate observation here is the difference between these normalised practices and that

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[34] Another key concept here is the idea of missional youth ministry being 'incarnational', that is, 'predicated on the ongoing presence of the youth worker with young people and a theological understanding around the incarnation', with a particular focus on crossing 'cultural boundaries in order that the gospel might become known in that context' (Shepherd 2016: 40-1).
[35] In his writing on youth ministry, for example, Steve Griffiths (2013: 26-30) utilises approaches designed by H. Richard Niebuhr to show how Christian youth workers can engage with the distinctive cultures of young people.
[36] This latter element, Davies (2014: 198) argues, 'connects with the hopes and aims of youth ministry, moving from dependence to interdependence', an important aspect in the context of this study.

which would be anticipated within adult services. With regards to discussions, for example, Thompson (2018: 183) notes that '[in] contrast to traditional church services, these youth groups allow for dialogue, for questioning, and for the formation of authentic and critically thought-through faith'.

It is in the nature of youth work to create spaces that are age-specific, and Christian contexts are no different. Whether inspired by the stage-based models of developmental-psychology or the wider structuring of education, these non-adult spaces are arranged according to age categories that are often as specific as the size and resources of a church can sustain.[37] Yet while the separation of under-18s into age-oriented groups incorporating activities and focuses that are perceived as 'age-appropriate' is the overwhelming norm in evangelical youth work, there is an increasing movement advocating for a new model. The 'intergeneration' movement argues that Christian communities of all stripes are 'lamenting the silos created by age-segregated ministries', and as a result are seeking for ways to 'bring the generations back together' (Catterton Allen and Barnett 2018: 17). Within this movement, criticisms of age-specific groups frequently centre on the lack of sustained engagement. Dean and Foster (1998: 30) argue that the isolated nature of youth groups from the wider congregation mean that young people are likely to leave the church upon leaving youth group, and as a result 'the Christian youth group is notoriously unreliable for fostering on-going faith'. Likewise, Jason Brian Santos (2018: 43-4) argues that "age and stage" ministries were appropriate for the post-war generation, but have led to a point whereby youth spiritual formation is pushed to the margins of 'the corporate life of the church to be formed primarily in […] peer-oriented, largely fun-and-games, snack-filled programming'[38] – environments that are essentially (in his understanding) superficial and with limited likelihood for long-term transformation or continued engagement with the church. Those in favour of intergenerational practices therefore propose a form of worship in which age-segregation is far less significant. Instead, 'a congregation intentionally combines the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community'

[37] The large evangelical festival New Wine, for example, provided six separate groups for different age categories between 0-18 years old when I attended as part of this research in 2018.
[38] Santos here draws on an article by Stuart Cummings-Bond (1989: 76) in which he describes this form of church structure as akin to a "one-eared Mickey Mouse", in which the youth activities (here representing the 'ear') are so peripheral to the main body of the church community that they are barely connected and do not overlap.

(Catterton Allen and Ross 2012: 17). Relationships and open discussion and dialogue remain important (McCoy 2018), but experiences and views are shared across generations rather than simply between peers. This is not the space for an extensive analysis of this movement, but its existence reinforces the fact that evangelical Christian youth work is, ordinarily, an age-specific space with dedicated and distinctive practices oriented towards that age group.

Studies of Evangelicalism and Youth

Despite the significance of youth work within evangelicalism and the academic interest in evangelicalism more broadly, ethnographic work on evangelical youth is sparse. The studies that have focused on evangelical young people – most notably Smith *et al*'s long-term 'National Study of Youth and Religion' (2005, 2009, 2011)[39] – have predominantly been large-cohort quantitative studies attempting to understand youth religion as a wider phenomenon beyond evangelicalism. Similarly, the study by Sylvia Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010: 3) into the faith of 'Generation Y' as young people draws on interviews with over 300 8-23 year olds in England who had engaged with Christian youth projects, along with youth workers, offering invaluable insights into the experience of these groups from the perspective of young people themselves. Yet there remains a lack of ethnographic study into the nature of youth evangelicalism in particular within the sociology and anthropology of religion.[40] This is despite a growing interest in religion and youth in sociology and religious studies over the past decades, evidenced by the fact that Youth And Religion was one of the central focuses of the Religion and Society research program in the United Kingdom (Religion and Society 2020). As Wilkins (2008: 92) states, 'evangelical adults are the subject of a wide range of academic work, but little academic attention has been given to evangelical youth'.

[39] This study has been highly influential, and has since been analysed by other writers, such as Kenda Creasy Dean (2010). Dean (2010: 3) summarises these findings in saying that 'American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school'. Abby Day's (2009: 265, 269) interviews with British teenagers broadly agreed with the findings of Smith *et al's* studies, in particular emphasising the significance of family, peers, and other significant others in the formation of beliefs and personal narratives over the influence of institutional religion.

[40] While Nick Shepherd (2016) utilised ethnographic methods in his research of evangelical youth groups, as discussed above his approach would be more accurately considered practical theology rather than sociology of religion.

In those studies that do incorporate evangelical 'young people' – including Wilkins' – the focus appears to be almost exclusively on those aged 18-30. Wilkins (2008: 5) focuses on members of a university Christian group, Ruth Perrin's (2016: 22-7) study of bible reading amongst young evangelicals is based intentionally in churches with high student membership and focuses upon those aged 18-33, and Strhan's (2015: 13) congregation (while not necessarily chosen for this reason) had a significant student membership, with a student bible study group being a major site of study. Likewise, while having less of a focus on students, Daniel DeHanas' (2016) comparative research of political engagement in young Muslim and Pentecostal communities in London nevertheless focuses on those aged 18-24. This is not to say these studies are not valuable – as Strhan (2015: 13) says, British evangelicals have devoted 'significant attention and resources to students' with large national institutions such as the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, and this period of life plays a considerable role in the formation of evangelical subjectivity for many. More recently, Strhan (2019) has undertaken research into how different evangelical churches engage with children, highlighting their agency and the relational processes at play across the spaces of school, church, family life, and the local community. There remains, however, a notable absence in the ethnographic literature between evangelical engagement with childhood and student/young adulthood. This thesis seeks to bridge this research gap.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis seeks to address four main research questions. Firstly, what is the nature of adolescent evangelical subjectivity within this context? Secondly, how do the particular practices and processes within this group function in order to foster this subjectivity? Thirdly, how does this adolescent subjectivity compare with existing understandings of adult evangelical subjectivity? And finally, to what extent does this group function as a space of formation and transformation into evangelical adulthood?

Through data drawn from a year of participant observation in an evangelical youth group in London and interviews with members, leaders, and former members, this thesis explores the nature of evangelical subjectivity in that period before 'adulthood'. I will argue that the distinctive practices and attitudes towards teenagers in this context stems from the nature of adolescence in evangelicalism (as with wider society) being understood as a liminal phase, through which the 'complete' adult subject is being formed but is not yet finalised. Having considered in this Introduction the importance placed on transformation within

evangelicalism and previous understandings of evangelical subjectivity, in the next chapter I will firstly explore the importance of intersubjectivity in this project. Following this I will outline the particular theoretical approach through which this research seeks to understand the processes of transformation present, that of rite of passage.[41] While these practices may not follow the appearance of a traditional ceremonial rite of passage, this framework nevertheless offers a lens through which to understand transformational practices. In Chapter 2 I will outline the methodology used in order to understand these practices and experiences, including the importance of the ethnographic approach and the process of arriving at the research question, as well as describing the field site and reflecting on my position within the group.

Through my findings chapters I will explore the extent to which different characteristics of a rite of passage are present in the group, and the role each of these play in evangelical subjectivity in this context. Firstly, in Chapter 3, I will discuss different forms of separation experienced by members of PM. This will consider spatial separation from the main congregation, but also the ways in which these young people are expected to be distinct within their non-Christian environments – described as being "ambassadors for Christ". I will therefore explore the dual separation and liminality experienced by these young people, separate in some way both from 'the world' and from adult evangelicalism, standing in between religion and the secular, childhood and adulthood. Through exploring each period of a group session and the role of peer relationships within them, Chapter 4 looks at the nature of *communitas* within the separate space of PM, and the wider significance of peers in the formation of adolescent evangelical identity. Finally, Chapter 5 will explore the nature of 'anti-structure' within this group, in particular the 4rv – an uncertainty that is acceptable due to the liminal nature of the adolescent in this space. In contrast to the conventional sermon-driven pedagogy of adult contexts in which the authority of the speaker is unwavering, the approach of PM encourages questioning, engagement from peers as well as adults, and opportunities to challenge normative teachings. This both enables and encourages a level of uncertainty that is possible within the liminal prior to the certainty that

[41] Throughout this thesis I have predominantly chosen to use the more specific term 'rite of passage' as opposed to the broader term 'ritual process'. This is in order to argue for an application of the term in Western modernity that is more aligned with the original theoretical emphases – even in contexts which may not initially appear as rites of passage – and looks beyond activities that may be social markers but in other ways do not fit the original, *transformative*, criteria (such as passing one's driving test).

is desired to come in ‘adult’ evangelicalism. The thesis will conclude by reflecting back on the nature of the adolescent evangelical subject and, through interviews with former members of PM, explore the consequences of this subject formation in early adulthood. Comparisons with the emerging church movement will show that it is possible to have some continuity into adulthood, but these are marginalised outside of the permitted liminality of adolescence. Finally, I will outline the contributions of this project before proposing new areas for research.

Chapter 1: Rites of Passage and the Formation of the Religious Self in Adolescence

Introduction

Gaining an understanding of the experience of an adolescent attending this evangelical youth group over a number of years, and the impact this might have on their formation as evangelicals, necessitates theoretical approaches that consider both the individual and the collective as both the subject and the group are constantly formed and reformed together over time. Yet it also requires taking consideration of the institutional desires behind the group and the potential conflicts that may arise as these desires encounter and potentially clash with the desires of the youth group both as individuals and a social, peer-driven group. The separation into age-specific groups may indicate an institutional expectation that while adolescents might have a particular approach to and understanding of faith at that stage of life, once reaching adulthood each member would have shed childhood religiosity and individually reached a point of 'adult' evangelical faith, ready to engage with the adult evangelical church world as a result of an experience of transformative conversion. Yet as I have emphasised, this is also a process that highly values individual religious choice, and the institutional aspirations ultimately may not be shared by the adolescents themselves – even amongst those who are heavily involved in the church-led youth activities. Highlighting youth agency and the power adolescents hold in their own development – as well as that of their peers – involves recognising the extent to which institutions are limited in their ability to form subjects to a precise mould. Approaches that emphasise solely the significance of institutional contexts (such as churches, schools, and families), and the extent to which they 'succeed' or 'fail' in moulding young people in a supposedly idealised form ignores this agency of young people, instead perceiving them as clay in a potter's hand, with the final outcome dependant on the skill of the potter and the steadiness of the wheel. This thesis seeks to avoid this pitfall by highlighting the voices of the young participants and their involvement in the ongoing creation and reconstruction of individual subjectivity and wider group culture, while also exploring the institutional desires – and the practices that are put in place to bring these about. This chapter outlines some of the theoretical approaches that I shall be drawing on to undertake this research.

Having explored the nature of contemporary evangelical subjectivity in the Introduction, and in particular the relationship with modernity, in this chapter I will first focus particularly on

the nature of intersubjectivity and the role of significant others on the formation of the individual religious subject. However, within a religious context, particularly one such as evangelicalism, this is extended further beyond fellow believers as the concept of *divine* intersubjectivity must be taken into consideration. Yet this study is not interested purely in religious subjects, but specifically *adolescent* religious subjects, and the particular characteristics of this life stage are important to recognise beyond the purely religious, and as a result this will be covered next in this chapter. Following this, I shall move on to exploring ideas around *rites of passage*, an important concept in the anthropology of religion and one that has seeped from the academy and into wider consciousness. As traditionally understood, these rites have played an enormous role in the transformation of children and young people into adults in societies across the world, with adolescence being a key period for these to occur. While these approaches have been criticised, as I shall outline, they also provide a valuable point of comparison with the processes undertaken in the evangelical context as they seek to form and foster both current and future evangelical subjects. Having explored approaches to rites of passage more broadly I shall then focus on two aspects of the ritual process in particular, both elements emphasised by Victor Turner – those of *liminality* and *communitas.* These ideas will become important in understanding the peculiar nature of the youth group when considered in the context of the church as a whole and the attitudes towards faith held by young people that exist within them. Through an analysis of the findings in later chapters we shall see the extent to which this group mirrors patterns of practice and experience that have been identified in rites of passage and the role this may play in the formation and transformation of the evangelical subject during these late teenage years.

Intersubjectivity and the Religious Subject

In the Introduction I outlined existing research into contemporary evangelical subjectivity, in particular as it relates to modernity. As described, evangelical subjectivity is never formed within a bubble and is influenced by the wider cultural environment, with subjectivity fundamentally situated in and shaped by specific temporal, cultural, and geographical contexts (Blackman *et al* 2008: 14). In considering the formation of a religious subject, we must take seriously the institutional contexts in which formation is desired to take place, the role of significant others (including the divine), the impact of social structures such as gender, class, and ethnicity, and the individual agency of the person at the centre, as well as the embodied and emotive experiences of each of these influences.

Alongside the influence of wider cultural forms, the role of others with whom individuals form significant relationships is important to recognise in the formation of subjectivity. Daniel Miller (2008: 6) argues that one of the assumptions with the broader development of modernity and post-institutional communities is that 'fragmentation, individualism and anomie… [would] follow from the absence of societies and neighbourhoods'. However, his research into households on a single nondescript street in London – intentionally avoiding the conventional starting point of a pre-existing structured institution, community, or cultural group – found that relationships remain central to the development of individual subjectivity and identity. Indeed, he argues that for most people what matters most in their lives is 'whether or not they experienced a number of significant and fulfilling relationships', and as a result he believes that 'individuals are, in large measure, the products and not merely the agents, of those relationships' – not just with people but with objects (Miller 2008: 286). Even without the more formalised relational links found in institutional attachments,[42] relationships continue to be of central importance to the formation of subjectivity. In modernity, Miller (2008: 296) concludes, 'the alternative to society is not a fragmented individual but people who strive to create relationships to both people and things'. As Gordon Lynch (2010: 42) has argued, if researchers follow in the modernist ontological understanding that 'we exist as autonomous individual selves',[43] then we fail 'to recognize the ways in which our lives are embedded and negotiated through networks of relationships with family, partners, colleagues and friends, as well as through face-to-face, mediated, or imagined relations with other communities'. Within the sociology of religion this becomes particularly important, due to the traditional focus upon rational, cognitive, and solipsistic constructions of religious meaning and identity, with the result that issues of embodiment and intersubjectivity (amongst others) have been often overlooked. In looking at these deeper, intersubjective, aspects of the self, Lynch (2010: 43) argues, we can 'provide

[42] Miller (2008: 284) observes that '[t]here are some vestiges of collectivity in the street, for instance the church and the pub, but most people make limited use of these'.

[43] Alongside this focus on the individual, it must be noted that as a result of the association with Western modernity (Boon 2007) some scholars have questioned the extent to which certain approaches to subjectivity, and the concepts contained within – specifically modernist understandings of agency and freedom – can be legitimately applied to religious individuals and movements. Saba Mahmood (2005), for example, challenges the use of concepts such as autonomy by Western liberal academics in their critiques of Islamic groups. Mahmood (2005: 11-14) argues that assumptions that all will desire 'freedom' in terms of absolute autonomy to express one's own will 'unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendent will, and tradition' are far from universal and are instead 'profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions'.

richer accounts of the nature and basis of human agency beyond notions of individual reflexivity and autonomy… [in order to] understand more clearly the nature of lived religion'.

If we are to understand belief in an evangelical youth group as more than simply cognitive assent to certain propositions, as argued in the Introduction, then the relationships through which this belief is formed and maintained is an essential point of study. David Morgan (2010: 7), who advocates strongly for a broader conception of belief beyond an overly cognitive focus, defines belief instead as ‘a *shared imaginary*, a *communal set of practices* that structure life in powerfully aesthetic terms' (emphasis added).[44] These can occur outside of any institutional contexts, as practices and feelings associated with belief are developed within the communal socialisation of family and friends (Morgan 2010: 5). All aspects of religion and belief, including mediated and embodied aspects, originate out of intersubjective human communities – even those which are as unique and disparate as those cosmologies unpacked by Miller (2008: 294-5). For those involved in institutional contexts, however, these are central points of spiritual formation, particularly in the form of collective embodied behaviour. As highlighted in the Introduction, Birgit Meyer (2008: 708) places great emphasis on the significance of religious institutions and their embodied practices on the formation of the individual religious subject, with particular ‘aesthetic styles’ and ‘sensational forms’ developing within these contexts that ‘shape or even produce the transcendental in a particular manner’ and organizing religious sensations. Therefore, even though these sensations are experienced as individual and are often deeply personal, they are ‘socially produced, and their repetition depends on the existence of formalized practices that not only frame individual religious sensations but also enable them to be reproduced' (Meyer 2008: 710). This anchoring in and emergence from a wider social context means that they also serve to reinforce the ‘taken-for-granted sense of self and community’, a common sense acknowledged by the majority without question ‘exactly because it is grounded in shared perceptions and sensations’ (Meyer 2008: 715). Congregational studies have often highlighted the significance of these factors.

[44] Some have commented, occasionally flippantly, that cognitive theological belief is of relatively low priority for membership in the Church of England. In an address to the Prayer Book Society, author Alan Bennett (1994: 542) once observed that ‘in the Anglican Church whether or not one believes in God tends to get sidestepped. It’s not quite in good taste. Someone said that the Church of England is so constituted that its members can really believe anything, but of course almost none of them do’.

Anna Strhan's (2015: 13) accounts of the 'Rooted' Bible study groups at a conservative evangelical congregation explore how formalised discussions about faith matters between members are used as a key method by which 'individuals were incorporated into [evangelical] culture',[45] but she also looks beyond these more overtly cognitive aspects of communal subject formation towards other embodied or mediated elements. She argues that the embodied practices adopted by and shared within the community play a significant role on the nature of individual subjectivity particularly in the context of a potentially hostile external culture, as the 'forms of practice internalized through their participation in church life mean that [individuals] have a strong sense of belonging to a bounded community and of the symbolic lines of division marking out the boundaries of their belonging' (Strhan 2015: 201). The embodied 'collective practices' enacted within the community assist in their efforts to 'cling to what they believe through their connections with and established accountabilities to each other and to God', even in the face of the uncertainty and doubt that comes with their experiences in wider 'secular' environments (Strhan 2015: 201). These practices also serve to bring them together as a community, defining their individual and collective identities over and against the external culture – as well as other forms of evangelicalism. Mathew Guest (2007: 109) develops a similar theme in his study of a charismatic congregation, arguing that 'it is in dialogue with shared experiences and interpretations of charismata that the subjective identities of these parishioners take on their present form'. Again, we see that collective embodied practices form an important part in intersubjectivity, and as a result in both the collective identity and individual formation of subjectivity. In searching for an understanding of youth evangelical subjectivity in the context of a youth group these embodied elements will be an important factor to observe, particularly considering the likelihood of distinctive social and embodied practices rarely seen in adult congregational settings.

Divine Intersubjectivity

If intersubjectivity is concerned with the significance of relationships to the development of individual subjectivity, divine intersubjectivity focuses on relationships with sacred or divine figures. For decades this was largely overlooked by social scientists, often behind the claim of 'methodological atheism' (Berger 1973: 106). This approach of 'bracketing – or refusing to

[45] See also Bielo (2009) for further information on evangelical small group Bible study practices.

consider – for the purpose of sociological study the ultimate reality of such religious objects as God, angels, or cosmic unity' (Porpora 2006: 57) resulted in underrepresenting the extent to which religious individuals develop relationships with sacred others and therefore the significance of this upon subjectivity. When this element is recognised, it becomes clear from ethnographic studies that for many believers the relationship they desire to be most significant in constructing their subjectivities is that with the divine. When this is overlooked by scholars, therefore, the work can appear to be able only to offer a cursory and superficial understanding of religious identity, ignoring an element that would be perceived by participants as one of (if not *the*) most significant features of their faith. As a result, Lynch (2010: 49) challenges researchers of religion to consider whether it is 'possible that sacred objects, with whom adherents form emotionally charged relationships, could also be thought of as having some form of subjectivity?'. While the agency exhibited by sacred subjects could not be seen as 'the same kind of agency demonstrated by empirically observable human beings' (Lynch 2010: 49), Lynch points to Latour's (2005: 71-2) argument that agency can be attributed to anything that 'might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on' – and there is no reason, Lynch argues, why this cannot also be applied to the sacred subject. The fact that the individual encounters that subject in the context of a community, 'through sedimented and evolving patterns of discourse that extend back into the past and into a wider imagined community of faith in the present' means that 'the individual adherent experiences the sacred subject as a life and reality beyond themselves' due to the long and established patterns of discourses interacted with and narrated by larger groups of adherents (Lynch 2010: 50). The relationship with the perceived active divine subject, external to the individual believer, is thus experienced in a manner that will have significance in a manner not dissimilar to the intersubjectivity within a human community.

This would appear to be particularly important within evangelical communities, in which the personal imminent relationship with the divine is highlighted. Tanya Luhrmann (2012: xv), in her study of the evangelical relationship with God, argues that modern evangelicalism focuses on 'an intensely personal God, a God who not only cares about your welfare but worries with you about whether to paint the kitchen table', while Guest (2007: 106) links the understanding of God as an intensely imminent being experienced personally through daily encounters, directly to the growing focus upon the subject within religious movements. This is applicable not only to adult believers, but also to adolescents. Nick Shepherd argues that

for the Anglican teenagers in his research,[46] the personal and relational presence of God is an important source of identity. Central to their expression of faith is the fact that 'God is personally there for them', as "someone to be there in all your decision making", in the words of one participant (Shepherd 2010: 153). Shepherd (2010: 153) argues that for these young people, being able to talk with a relational God in prayer offers a 'tangible aspect of faith', and ultimately contributes towards the 'reflexive management of self'. But this intimate relationship with divine figures is not restricted solely to evangelicalism. Robert Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005) explores the significance of divine intersubjectivity upon Catholics in mid-twentieth century New York, including his own Uncle Sal. He argues that Sal held active relationships with the Virgin Mary and various saints (in particular Blessed Margaret of Castello), relationships reflected through (but independent of) institutions and material objects. For Sal, Margaret was 'really present to him and could be addressed as such', and significantly was understood as someone who 'reflected [Sal] in heaven', through sharing his physical disabilities (Orsi 2005: 12, 45). Interestingly in Orsi's narrative, this divine other was encountered through the very institutional forces that were diminishing Sal's position as an active agent, and yet this encounter and relationship served to develop and strengthen his subjective perception. He encounters Margaret as herself an active subject, a being like him and yet close to God, reflecting and representing him in the heavenly realm. As a result, through this stream of interactions we see the complex relationship between human and institutional intersubjectivity and divine intersubjectivity, relationships that are fluid and occasionally contradictory and yet can be of immense personal value to individual religious adherents. The fact that these sacred others are encountered through long-standing religious institutions means that divine beings can be perceived as subjects to the extent that they 'have a kind of separate life, formed through past histories of discourse and mediation, which pre-exists the contemporary adherent and provides the context within which any relational encounter with the sacred other is possible' (Lynch 2010: 52).

Along with relationships with divine figures, scripture has been shown to lie at the heart of how many evangelicals come to form their subjectivity – or, at least, this is their desire. In asking her participants how best to understand the difference that their faith made to their lives, Strhan (2015: 138) states that 'several people told me that to answer that, I ought to

[46] Shepherd does not specify whether the groups he was working with would identify as evangelical, but many of his findings appear to be applicable to an evangelical environment.

read the Bible'. She notes that 'evangelistic impulses' will contribute to this desire for her to read the Bible, but argues that more importantly it demonstrates that 'one way they experience their lives as distinctive from those around them is shaped by their relationship with the Bible' (Strhan 2015: 138). The centrality of the Bible for the formation of evangelical subjectivity is 'bound up with their conviction that through the Bible they experience God', with the scriptures and the divine serving as social agents (Strhan 2015: 138). Scripture is seen by many evangelicals as an active agent, 'at once a closed canon and an open book, still alive, a living Word' (Webster 2013: 28). The balance between the priority of scripture and personal experience in understanding individual relationship with God, and therefore the impact of this upon subjectivity, will vary between church cultures – with conservative evangelical congregations such as Strhan's and Webster's likely to place more emphasis on scripture, and charismatic evangelicals such as those in Luhrmann's contexts more likely to highlight spiritual experience. However, it is likely that in most evangelical contexts both elements will be understood as significant in the formation of evangelical subjectivity to a greater or lesser degree.

Intersubjectivity and Adolescence

While this research shares similarities with congregational studies, as will be explored in the following chapter, the significance of a focus on adolescence should not be ignored – particularly with regards to intersubjectivity and the importance of peer relationships during this period. Studies of adolescent behaviour, development, and psychology have frequently noted the particular significance of peers during this period,[47] something that is echoed in the common concern amongst schools and parents of the perceived dangers of peer-pressure or 'falling in with the wrong sort' as teenagers shift away from the dominant influence of parents. It is worth noting at this stage that 'adolescence' can be understood in two deeply intertwined but separate ways. The first is a biological and sexual maturation, associated with puberty, which is universal and exists across multiple species. While puberty is a biological fact, social and cultural factors (such as diet) can have a significant impact on its onset and progress, and as a result the exact age range for puberty is not permanently set naturally (Grimes 2000: 108). The second is socially oriented and is usually understood as the

[47] See, for example, Phil Erwin's (1998) study of the nature and significance of friendship in childhood and adolescence, John Cotterell's (2007) research into the 'social networks' of adolescents, and Valerie Hey's (1997) ethnographic study of female friendships in two secondary schools.

period between distinct childhood and adulthood. While this is usually recognised in some form across cultures (Grimes 2000: 108) and can even be recognised in social behavioural shifts among non-human animals (Blakemore 2018: 4), it is strongly connected to distinct social contexts – including socially determined markers of its beginning and end. But despite this variation it appears to be the case – throughout history and cultures – that social acceptance is a primary concern during this life stage.

Neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2018: 31-4), in her study of the adolescent brain, argues that 'friends are more important during adolescence than at any other stage of life,' with acceptance by peer groups being vital as the 'need for social acceptance by one's peers plays a pivotal role in a lot of adolescent decision-making'. Of course, friendship is also an important part of adult life, but the particular impact on adolescence appears to be significant. A study undertaken by Blakemore (2018: 33), in which individuals of different age-groups were asked to participate in a driving simulation game that offered rewards for successful risk-taking, found that while adolescents were similar in their risk-taking behaviour to other age groups when playing the game privately, when asked to play while three friends watched 'adolescents took almost three times as many risks as when they were alone, and young adults took nearly twice as many risks'. In adults, however, 'the presence of peers had no impact on risk-taking' (Blakemore 2018: 33). This acceptance of physical risk in adolescence is not due to a lack of awareness of risk – Blakemore (2018: 40) shows that they appear to have a good idea of risk, even an *over*-estimation – but rather due to a hypersensitivity to social-exclusion, a sensitivity that appears to have an evolutionary foundation based on long term consequences into adulthood, a sensitivity that can also be seen in other species.[48] This sensitivity develops in part from the development of a sense of self that is, for the first time, tied to 'the ways in which other people see us' as we go about 'constructing who we are and how we are seen by others' (Blakemore 2018: 19-20). Our 'social self, the way other people view us' becomes a central feature of adolescence, and this

[48] Blakemore (2018: 38-9) points to a study that shows that adolescent rats who are deprived of contact with others experience a greater level of stress than those at any other points of life, impacting the development of the prefrontal cortex and leading to an increased likelihood of depressive behaviours, anxiety, and abnormal sexual behaviours in adulthood. Observations of human adolescents who have experienced social stresses have shown that they are more likely to suffer from behavioural consequences in adulthood, to the extent that 'mechanisms and behaviours promoting peer acceptance can be considered adaptive. That is, it might be evolutionary beneficial for adolescents to do their utmost to be accepted by their peer group, so as to avoid being socially isolated' (Blakemore 2018: 39).

exists as much in imagination as in experience as we become focused on 'how we appear to others and how they will judge us'[49] (Blakemore 2018: 23-4). These 'others' are not just anyone during adolescence. In this period, 'one group of people stand out as being exceptionally significant: our friends, other adolescents – people like us' (Blakemore 2018: 30). Later in adolescence this centres more specifically around particular groups of peers, Blakemore (2018: 117-8) argues, as we 'start to place more weight on the identities of other people, perhaps because self-identity and how others view us become increasingly important to us as we establish ourselves as a member of our peer group'. In exploring and establishing a sense of self during adolescence, intersubjective relationships with peers (and in particular those ones identified as friends) are significant in a way that is not matched at any other time of life.

danah boyd's (2014) rich ethnographic study of adolescent social media use in America gives further insights into the significance and influence of peers during this time. She argues that while the technology may be novel, the primary experience that teenagers desire from their usage is not – 'a space to hang out and connect with friends' for a generation who have been denied these opportunities in public spaces (boyd 2014: 5). Drawing on the idea of adolescence as liminal experience, boyd (2014: 17) argues that friends are an essential part of the transition to adulthood through offering both companionship and support but also in 'providing a context beyond that of family and home' and an 'opportunity to create relationships that are not simply given but chosen'. The interviews and vignettes within the work continue to show the pre-eminent importance of peer-based relationships for the teenagers on which her research was focused, with new media serving predominantly as a means by which these relationships can be formed and developed in order to better understand and construct self and the social world as they take their steps into adulthood. These two studies offer a glimpse into the significance of peers on formation of the self in adolescence, and further evidence for the importance of intersubjectivity in this project. Young evangelicals do not exist solely within a theological and cultural bubble, and peer relationships are as significant in their formation as they are for any teenager – both within and outside of their institutional church structures. In light of the evangelical emphasis on

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[49] This is even the case when peers are not physically present and when they would have no knowledge of the situation in question, for example the feeling of embarrassment when playing a board game with parents as a result of presumed judgement from an "imaginary audience" (Blakemore 2018: 25-6).

personal, intentional commitment to faith identities in this age, independent of the 'automatic' faith of their childhood associated with their family, the fact that the 'chosen' relationships with peers serve as significant influences on wider subject formation at this age range means that observing and understanding these friendships is crucial to developing an understanding of the development of evangelical subjectivity during adolescence.

Evangelical subjects in modernity cannot be wholly formed within their church environments, and the influences that surround them outside of these religious contexts can bring about a challenge to the desired coherence of their religious subjectivity. In other situations, these wider cultural influences may be interwoven with their religious subjectivity, potentially inspiring new directions for the religious subject, rather than shattering it or stripping it of religious distinctiveness. Beyond these institutional and social influences, the significance of relationships and intersubjectivity cannot be overlooked. Through shared imaginaries and embodied practices the subject is formed in community with others, an aspect that is particularly significant in the context of a religious congregation. Whether outside or within these institutional contexts, the personal relationships formed with close others are important points of reciprocal subject formation, taking on particular significance in adolescence during which relationships with friends are of more importance and influence than any other stage of life – in particular with regards to formation of the sense of self.

Observing the ways in which these different factors interweave in this formative environment will be an important focus of the fieldwork research and the interviews. However, these are aspects that may be equally present in a secular environment as in a religious one. It is in the focus on divine intersubjectivity, on encountering the divine and being changed in this encounter, that the experiences take on a particularly religious character. In an evangelical environment we might expect this to place emphasis on an intimate personal relationship with God, a relationship that is expected to be a source of strength and comfort, as well as challenge and transformation. This encounter may happen through structured elements of a service such as sung worship or the sermon, or in private or collective religious practices such as prayer and reading of scripture, or in experiences separated from any specific practice. The religious subject in this environment is formed in relationship with the divine subject. What is also expected within the evangelical subject in particular, however, is a powerful *transformation* as a result of these encounters with the

divine. The following section explores one possible model through which we might understand how this transformation is expected to take place.

Rites of Passage

This transformation of the self is expected whether the individual is approaching evangelicalism for the first time as an adult or has grown up within a church environment. The adult evangelical subject is anticipated as something qualitatively distinct from that of the child; the new evangelical subject distinct from their previous, non-evangelical self. The conversion 'experience' – central to the evangelical understanding of personal faith – is understood as something that goes beyond a gentle transition from a pre-converted to post-converted state. The language of being 'born again', a 'new life' replacing the old, suggests not simply a deeper understanding of theology, or an education in a new style of worship, but rather a radical and permanent transformation of the self occurring on a deeply personal and sacred level. Whether a church follows a 'stage-based' model of faith formation or not, the division into age-based ministries for under-18s suggests that this transformation is expected to occur prior to entering into the faith of 'adulthood' around which the main church structures are oriented. Therefore, for those growing up within the church context at very least, adolescence becomes a key period for encountering this conversion experience, whether in a sudden moment of divine encounter or a gradual period of rebirth. I will argue that what is seen and experienced in these spaces can be productively approached through the lens of ritual process. The perception of adolescent spirituality as a not only transitional but ideally *transformational* period between childhood faith and adult faith, complete with distinct contexts, practices, and expectations, leads to consideration of the concept of *rites of passage*, through which an individual is transformed from one state of being to another, and in particular the ideas of liminality and *communitas*. While there may or may not be formal rites of passage present in an evangelical youth context (particularly in practices of adult baptism and confirmation), these are, I believe, only a single (and optional) factor of a wider process that follows many of the expected patterns of a rite of passage. I argue that in seeing the evangelical approach to youth work through the lens of rites of passage we may gain a new insight into the structure that underlies this transformation from evangelical childhood to adulthood, and 'old life' to new.

Van Gennep, Victor Turner, and Beyond

The theory behind rites of passage and their significance stems from French folklorist Arnold van Gennep's writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. His research covered rites from around the world that celebrated shifts in life stages – birth, betrothal, marriage, funerals, and (most pressingly here) adolescence and initiation.[50] He argued that among 'semicivilized peoples… for every one of these events' – as well as transitional moments such as advancing to a higher social status or entering into a new social group – 'there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined' (van Gennep 2010: 3). Life for van Gennep is made up of these patterns of transformation and passage between stages, and in their complete form each of these rites, he believed, could be divided into three phases: 'separation from the community, transition into an especially formative time and space, and reincorporation back into the community' (Grimes 2000: 6).[51] The model utilises spatial metaphors in order to explain the process of transformation, for example likening a rite to the crossing of a national border – at the threshold point, as one is in between two states, one is required to perform a ritual in order to proceed into the new territory. In modern terms we might use the image of an airport terminal: having been physically separated from the previous state, the traveller is faced with the security and customs requirements as the ceremonial performances necessary to guarantee safe passage – with those who fail to complete the ritual appropriately either returned to their former state or retained, potentially indefinitely, in the 'in-between' state within the airport itself, lost between two states.

Societies and religions around the world are littered with ritual practices, but the key aspect of a rite of passage is its *transformative* nature. As Ronald Grimes (2000: 7) notes, to 'enact any kind of rite is to *per*form, but to enact a rite of passage is also to *trans*form' (emphasis original). They permanently shift the individual into a new position – from bachelor to

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[50] Van Gennep (2010: 66-7) is firm in the separation of what he terms 'physiological puberty' and '"social puberty", and thus insistent that 'initiation rites' should not be referred to as "puberty rites", as there is no consistent cross-cultural link between the physiological changes and initiation practices.
[51] While he believed that all rites of passage could hold each of these stages, there were also those that emphasised particular elements and thus became subcategories of the larger framework: rites of separation, prominent in ceremonies such as funerals; transition rites, such as those marking pregnancy, betrothal, or initiation; and rites of incorporation, such as birth and marriage rites (van Gennep 2010: 10-11).

husband, princess to queen, or child to adult. This was particularly significant for Victor Turner, writing in the second half of the twentieth-century, who 'stood conventional ritual theory on its head' by refuting Emile Durkheim's concept that ritual served to maintain societal status quo and instead argued that *genuine* ritual was 'deeply subversive and creative', as well as transformative (Grimes 2000: 121). That which was not transformative was not ritual, but rather was ceremony. Turner still relied heavily on van Gennep's three stage model, though placed particular emphasis on the second phase: the transitional (or liminal) phase. It was during this period that Turner believed lay true transformation and creativity, in which a person and a community were deconstructed and rebuilt in a new form. This will be covered in greater depth below, as it is the aspect most relevant to the adolescent experience within my study. While the liminal phase is of particular importance here, it is nevertheless important to discuss the nature of separation and incorporation.

Frequently, but not universally, separation involves the physical distancing of the initiates from their ordinary or former context to a different space – potentially one that is explicitly marked for this ritual purpose. Turner (2008: 100) notes, for example, the instillation rites of the *Kanongesha* of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia, which 'begins with the construction of a small structure of leaves about a mile away from the capital village' to which the chief-elect and his wife must travel in order that his commoner state might 'die' during the liminal stage of the rite. The chief is thus separated from the wider community in order to indicate that their former state is ended, ready for the new one to be formed prior to re-entry into the community. In the case of a collective rite, such as the circumcision ritual noted by Edith Turner (2012: 174-182) (but witnessed by Victor Turner on a joint research trip), initiates may be separated from the opposite gender or those of a different age. Yet it is not only a physical and social separation that takes place at this point; there may also a separation from communal norms and practices, or even from the usual understandings of time – 'The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both' (Turner 2008: 94). This separation from social structures is necessary in order to facilitate the period of 'anti-structure' that breaks away from existing social norms and may even bring about *social*, as well as individual, transformation.

Following the liminal period, which is discussed at length below, the re-incorporation rituals can take place. These practices mark the point at which the transformed individual is

welcomed back into the community in their new state.[52] These may be mundane – simply stepping through a door that was off limits prior to the liminal ritual acts, as in the case of a traveller finally passing through the customs gate in the airport example. However, this act of incorporation might involve a grand celebration, such as in the female maturation ritual in which Edith Turner (2012: 170-172) participated. After three months in a designated hut, the 'coming-out day' occurs and the local women who have been guiding the neophyte through the process bring her to a secluded spot in order to be anointed, dressed, and readied for 'her final display' (Turner 2012: 171). Starting out in the bush, she charges out in front of the entire local community who have gathered to see the new woman for the first time, as she passionately performs a dance – something that the younger, uninitiated, girls attempt to mimic in vain (Turner 2012: 172). Even in the airport example, one can imagine the traveller being welcomed on the other side of the threshold exuberantly by family and friends who had undertaken the journey and its rituals before them, ready to celebrate the first steps in their new land. The incorporation process is a recognition by both the community and the individual that the transformation has occurred and is complete, and a new being is present in the community.

Liminality

Between separation and integration lies the liminal phase, the element which Victor Turner saw as key in the entire process – particularly within initiatory rites – as being the period in which old selves, now removed from their previous environment, are deconstructed and new selves are formed before reincorporation into the community.[53] This period can pass in a moment – as with Christian baptism (Strhan 2019: 174) – or can last months or even years, as is the case with many of the examples drawn out by Turner himself. In this state, the initiates are stripped of their 'preliminal and postliminal attributes', often to the extent of becoming essentially stripped of their identity (Turner 2008: 102). They are variously described as 'a blank slate', 'merely entities in transition, as yet without place or position',

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[52] The term 'incorporation', as David Yamane (2014: 10) observes, literally means 'being made part of the body (corpus) of the group'. In the context of a Christian congregation this carries resonances of the description of the wider Church as the 'body of Christ' by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, and Yamane (2014: 13) points to the conclusion in the Catholic initiation he is studying which marked 'the aggregation of the catechumen into the mystical body of Christ', that is, the Church.

[53] As with the descriptions above, the representation here is something of an 'ideal type' of the liminal process and experience as described by Turner, with the assumption of significant similarities (beyond the superficial differences) and efficacy across practicing cultures.

‘neither here nor there’, and fundamentally ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner 2008: 103, 95). They are supposed to exist in the state between states, yet to be shaped. This experience is expected to reach deep into the individual as it ‘takes over the souls of those going through it’, as Edith Turner (2012: 183) writes. Having been separated from the community, both geographically and socially, the group are now on the margins of society, existing separately and without their previous worth. Behaviourally, the initiates in Victor Turner’s (2008: 95, 103) models are often characterised by their humility and submissiveness to the authority of the community, as well as silence in the face of the necessary or even apparently arbitrary ordeals. This is part of the stripping process – as though ‘they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be refashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life’ (Turner 2008: 95). These ordeals ‘represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society’ (Turner 2008: 103). Again, this exposes the often-extreme nature of Victor Turner’s examples, but the emphasis here is placed on the breakdown of the previous structure, both with regards to personal identity and social status, but also behavioural norms, possible only due to the separation from the ordinary. The experiences described by Turner in his observations of liminality sound at moments harrowing, but the notion of “anti-structure” – the term he uses for this phase in which ordinary expectations are removed – is understood as potentially freeing, with new possibilities emerging that were previously impossible. As Edith Turner writes, ‘[m]uch of what has been bound by social structure is liberated in liminality’ (2012: 183). This includes a subversion or entire removal of power structures, an aspect that is of particular importance in the development of *communitas*, described below. But it goes beyond merely a removal of an old power system, and Turner (2008: 106) draws out numerous elements in liminality which he believes are indicative of the total subversion of ordinary systems, their binary opposites.

Once the separation and deconstruction of past self has been completed, the formation of the new self can take place in the anti-structural context. This may take place in the form of explicit teaching and guidance, rehearsals of future ritual practice, experiences that are intended to develop desirable traits, or any number of other pedagogical approaches. But this aspect of liminality is understood as going beyond simple education or training, instead taking on a spiritual power, one that not only develops the individual but actively transforms

them – ‘The wisdom (*mana*) that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte’ (Turner 2008: 103). While on some level ‘anything that people learn that they did not know before entails the passage from some small level of knowledge to another’ (Turner 2012: 187), this does not necessitate the transformative, transgressive, transcendent, experience of the liminal. Formal education *alone*, for example, would therefore not equate to a rite of passage without other transformative elements – as explored in Christie Kulz’s work, described below. Equally, for the liminal to be transformative there need be no intentional act of pedagogy, particularly if there is a belief in a deeper sacred power in play in the act through which the participant might be transformed. It appears that often, within the examples offered by Victor and Edith Turner at least, both human-led pedagogy and spiritual power are experienced as a part of the transformation within the liminal phase of a rite of passage. It is also important to note that the liminal phase in Turner’s writing is not only one in which old knowledge and practice is passed on, but it is also a generative stage in which creativity can flow. Liminality is a condition in which ‘myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art’ are ‘frequently generated’ (Turner 2008: 128). As Grimes (2000: 121) describes it, for Turner ‘liminality is not just a phase in an initiation rite but any betwixt and between “space” in which cultural and ritual creativity are incubated… ritual is a hotbed of cultural creativity; and its work is to evoke creativity and change, not to buttress the status quo’.[54]

While Victor Turner broadly follows the structure laid out by van Gennep, he also makes clear that the experience of the liminal need not necessarily be followed by a ritual of incorporation, with the liminal state instead being a permanent one. He suggests the Christian tradition as an example of this, wherein ‘what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalised state’ (Turner 2008: 107).[55] In particular, he argues, the institutionalised environment of the Benedictine monastery fosters an environment in which

[54] Strhan argues that agency is central to this creative output. In her study of rites of passage in three evangelical churches, she found that when children were offered more agency in the performance of rituals ‘they usually did so enthusiastically, and brought to these moments their own distinctive creativity, meanings, and enjoyment’ (Strhan 2019: 190).

[55] Turner (2008: 107) also draws on language of the Christian as a ‘stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveller’, reminiscent of the language noted by Strhan (2015: 203) in her study of conservative evangelicals, with the self-understanding as ‘aliens and strangers’ in the world.

transition becomes ‘a permanent condition’, with practices such as communal living separate from mainstream society, a focus on self-discipline, and an ascetic life of poverty, abstinence, and solemn obedience to an authority (Turner 2008: 107). A more contemporary comparison might be found in the forms of community discussed by Tanya Erzen (2006) in her work *Straight To Jesus*. Erzen’s (2006: 3) study of predominantly evangelical ‘ex-gay’ ministries in the United States examines a process whereby participants seek not only a religious transformation through encounter with the divine, but sexual transformation away from their same-sex desires. In many ways the practices utilised to try and achieve this transformation mirror those of the traditional rites of passage described above – the group are physically and socially separated from mainstream evangelicalism and wider culture, an overwhelming emphasis is placed on the collective bonding of members going through the shared experience, and the process concludes with a formal graduation ceremony prior to reincorporation into the wider world (Erzen 2006: 216-8). At this point, the men were handed personalised certificates confirming that they had “successfully completed the 2000 Steps Out program” (Erzen 2006: 218). While the state of the participants during their time on the program is undoubtedly a liminal one, and expectedly so – deconstructing the former self and constructing a new self, transformed both religiously and sexually, is the entire purpose of this period, and is therefore to an extent a comfortable liminality – the point of graduation does not necessarily mark the comfortable entry into acceptable evangelical or wider society.

Through frequently shared testimony narratives, the men are able to perceive their lives as structured around becoming Christians, with emphasis placed on the open sharing of former sinful behaviour as well as the redemption of meeting Christ – evidencing the possibility of transformation through this encounter (Erzen 2006: 11-3). Yet, frequently, while the transformation of the religious subject may be ‘completed’, the sexual self remains torn. Erzen’s (2006: 14) account is one of individuals in a perpetual state of liminality, with an acceptance and even expectation of continuing desires and lapsed behaviours, with the result being that ‘[r]ather than becoming heterosexual, men and women become part of a new identity group in which it is the norm to submit to temptation and return to ex-gay ministry over and over again'. This new identity, caught between what they perceive as their sinful former self and their idealised future heterosexual or celibate self, also leads to a situation where the individual stands between the wider LGBT community, who frequently oppose the methods of ex-gay ministries, and the conservative church position that ‘a person can and must move from homosexuality to heterosexuality’ (Erzen 2006: 15). The accounts

of those who have 'graduated' from the program suggests a restless discomfort with the ongoing liminality outside of the set space,[56] particularly when separated from the community developed in the program, as while the 'program had ended… the process of conversion had not' (Erzen 2006: 218). After meeting up with 'Brian', a few years after the conclusion of the program, Erzen (2006: 227) recounted his ongoing faith alongside an ongoing frustration, seeing himself as 'waiting in limbo – uncomfortable with being gay but feeling like his attraction to men had not even faded', an attitude which seems to be shared by many in his position. We see here therefore a range of liminalities in this strand of contemporary Christianity, both structured and unintended, comfortable and disconcerting, temporary and ongoing.

Yet the liminal can also exist outside of any religious framework. Since the publication of *The Ritual Process*, researchers have suggested other liminal contexts within contemporary Western society. Edith Turner (2012: 183) draws the net widely, arguing that examples of liminal people in our society are 'teenagers, students, trainees, travellers, those with new jobs, the sick, the dying, those in the army, or those in major disasters', though there is a 'paucity of [formal] rituals for these occasions' – an argument discussed by Grimes below. Environments that do continue to attempt to develop structured and transformative rituals are often oriented around the examples highlighted by Edith Turner, such as those within the formal education system addressed towards adolescents. Kulz (2017: 47), in her ethnographic study of a secondary academy in a large English city, looks at the rituals that are utilised in the school as an intentional attempt to 'transform students, instigate a particular culture, and return them changed' to the local community. The wider work is a critique of the marketisation and neo-liberal focus of education in Britain through the academisation model, and she describes this process for the students as one of 'removal from the profane space of Urbanderry [Kulz' pseudonym for the city in which the school is based] and its associated symbols' in order that students might 'access the sacred world of economic productivity via employment' upon leaving education (Kulz 2017: 48). Thus the school process as a whole, Kulz argues, can be understood in a liminal frame. However the fact that this cannot be a permanent environment for the proposed neophytes, as they have to return home at the end of the school day – much to the chagrin of senior staff who long

[56] Erzen (2006: 14-5) uses the framework of queer theory to describe this situation between essentialist categories, but I believe that the language of the liminal is also appropriate here.

for more influence over their pupils (Kulz 2017: 48) – means that this is a disrupted and fragile liminality. The response to this is that the liminal phase becomes one of strictly policed extended space, including outside of school hours and grounds. After the end of the school day, staff members patrol the streets and enforce 'correct' behaviour and presentation, in order to 'visibly monitor whether or not the institutional structures have permeated the body or if they have been discarded once past the [school] gate' (Kulz 2017: 48-51). The focus here is partly on creating a positive image of the school in the wider society, but more significantly it is on the enforcement of rigid structure on as wide a scale as possible, to the point where this structure 'lodges in the bone, in its very marrow', in the words of Ronald Grimes (2000: 7).

While the environment that Kulz describes is evidently a space in which formation of a certain type of neoliberal individual desired by institutions is anticipated, and doubtless takes place within a number of students, questions remain as to the extent to which this is a truly 'liminal' environment in the manner intended by Victor Turner. In this context, rather than societal structure and power being subverted, it is enforced with a harsh and overreaching level of discipline. As Turner describes it, the liminal phase is that which exists *between* social structures, where hierarchies are in some form subverted and transformed as a sense of *communitas* is experienced between participants, with the stripping of individual identity markers understood as liberating and creatively fruitful. There is, of course, no singular 'ideal' expression of the liminal state, and every suggestion of a liminal state can be critiqued along one definitional ground or another. Equally, Turner's definition lacks clarity and consistency at points. Yet while adolescence is an intrinsically liminal phase – something which appears to be recognised in the countless adolescent initiation rites around the world – a context in which adolescents are forced to obey a highly paternalistic hierarchical structure and does not subvert external social structures so much as heighten them, appears to lack some of the key generative and creative aspects that Turner highlights in his concept of liminality. As discussed above, the liminal is a phase which should not simply reinforce and underline the status quo, but rather one that unleashes creativity that was restricted under former structures. Yet this breaking down of social structures brings about not only an openness towards creativity, but also fosters a distinct form of collective social bonding that in itself can contribute towards the transformation of the individual.

Communitas

One of the most significant features of Turner's idea of liminality is that of *communitas*, a powerful sense of joyful transcendent togetherness with those undergoing a shared experience. Within liminal phenomena, and particularly 'the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship', the participant is presented with 'a "moment in and out of time", and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition… of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties' (Turner 2008: 96). Rather than the hierarchical and differentiated structure of society experienced outside of the liminal environment, in liminality we experience a model of society as 'an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner 2008: 96). In communitas, individuals are not 'segmentalized into roles and statuses', but rather exist freely alongside one another devoid of distinction or structure, with 'boundaries [that] are ideally coterminous with those of the human species' (Turner 2008: 132).[57] His description is intentionally idealistic, as he states that while it is often presented as an ideological goal of certain groups, the unstructured nature of communitas cannot last long as it 'soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae' (Turner 2008: 132). When power structures emerge, they 'tend to kill communitas. It is the fact of liminality, its aside-ness, its below-ness, that produces and protects communitas' (Turner 2012: 184). Not only is it precarious, it is also difficult to artificially manufacture and enforce, though this is often attempted. Edith Turner (2012: 13-22) points to a range of examples of these attempts, often from environments that depend upon the maintenance of structure and status quo.[58] 'One of the great and holding principles

[57] It is this aspect in particular that Turner (2008: 132) argues differentiates communitas from the Durkheimian idea of "solidarity", 'the force of which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast'. It is this concept of in-group/out-group dynamics that Christian Smith (1998) points to as central in the strength of American conservative evangelicals as they perceive themselves as under attack from wider culture.

[58] One such example taken from the corporate world is that of a pre-work 'huddle' in which a boss attempts to 'motivate' staff through inducing 'forced communitas', but instead comes across as self-serving and corporately motivated (Turner 2012: 17).

of communitas', Edith Turner (2012: 21) argues, 'is that it cannot be forced on anyone. One is not "socialized" into it – it is voluntary, spontaneous'.

Communitas goes beyond a structural description to an emotive experience, one described by Edith Turner (2012: 1) as 'the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning'. The breakdown of structure is deeper than a social ordering. At the peak of the communitas experience, the distinction between self and other can be dissolved in the moment. Roy Willis (in Willis *et al* 1999: 120) describes one such experience of his own, during which he 'knew that we are all related, different versions of each other, but that there were no fixed boundaries to selfhood; there was a permeability and flexibility between self and other… all these defining and localizing criteria temporarily vanished'. This sensation is by no means limited to the liminal space within organised ritual, and the context of rites of passage is only one of ten that Edith Turner (2012: 1) explores in her book on the subject, in which she states that communitas 'fountains up unpredictably within the wide array of human life' – music, religion, sport, festivals, nature, work, and many other situations can result in the experience of communitas. Yet it shares a particular relationship with liminality, according to both Edith and Victor Turner. The primary condition for communitas is some form of shared liminal or transitional state, according to Edith Turner (2012: 4), with communitas being a 'a gift from liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. During this time, people find each other to be just ordinary people after all, not the anxious prestige-seeking holders of jobs and positions they often seem to be'.

I articulated above the particular significance of peer-focused socialising in adolescence, and the combination of this desire to engage with peers and the frequent emphasis on rites of passage (either formal or informal) in this period of life creates fertile conditions for communitas. Edith Turner (2012: 168) argues that young people (in the Western world at least) are eager to 'break free' from 'ordinary habits, training, and obedience to formality' (such as those in the strict educational context described in Kulz's work) – precisely the form of anti-structure outlined by Victor Turner in his understanding of liminality – and if successful, this 'sudden and exciting view outside of the box may result in the liberation of communitas'. At these moments of shared experience, collective bonds are formed that can bring about the most creative and transformative features highlighted in Turner's understanding of liminality. In considering the formation of the subject through the adolescent liminal experience, therefore, communitas must be given significant attention. Having considered the significance of intersubjectivity on religious formation, the social bond

formed through communitas and shared experience can be understood as a distinctive form of intersubjective encounter. Particularly considering its prominence during the formative and transformative period of liminality, the potential role of communitas in subject formation during this period should not be overlooked. While considering the model as a whole – including the depths of Turner's original intention behind liminality and communitas, and the transformative nature of rites of passage – it is necessary to remain cautious over the usage of this approach in contemporary Western Christian contexts.

Challenges, Limitations, and the Contemporary Context

The model proposed by van Gennep has been influential not only on Turner but on generations of scholars of rituals. Grimes (2000: 105) points to the influence of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell on ritual theory, but van Gennep's impact on the understanding of rites of passage continues to the extent that even when Western scholars seek to develop a theory that adds more complexity than his three-stage model they remain restricted to a beginning-middle-end structure. Yet as Grimes (2000: 105) points out, 'if we look at descriptions of actual rites, rather than abstract summaries of patterns and phases, we find that there is more to initiation' than simple three step models. Any number of different features may be present in an initiation rite, which may each play a range of different roles. Even when theories have shifted away from van Gennep's model there has often been a desire to uncover universal schema that can trace a pattern across cultures. But the orientation towards universalism results in a move towards reductionism and 'allows us to glibly assert that rites everywhere mean the same thing', stripping away powerful differences and local contexts (Grimes 2000: 8).[59] Beyond the unease with the rigid structure proposed by van Gennep, and the extent to which it can be applied across cultures, there is an apparent conflict within the literature over whether the structures of van Gennep are overly European in their focus or so alien to Western culture as to be inapplicable outside of their original context. Grimes (2000: 148) criticises Western attempts to re-create 'African' rituals according to the three-stage model, arguing that these are 'European, perhaps even Christian, at their root, and that the tripartite scheme persists because it is convenient, not because it is African centred or even correct'. Yet David Yamane (2014: 11) argues the

[59] Grimes (2000: 9) also warns against the pull towards localism, 'the study of the local to the exclusion of the rest of the world'. He argues that while it is important to recognise that these rites 'happen on specific dates in actual places… among discrete human beings', the 'doggedly local focus is too restrictive if it renders cross-cultural or interreligious conversation impossible' (Grimes 2000: 9).

opposite, challenging the applicability of the model outside of the original environment of the fieldwork, writing that 'because the clearest examples of van Gennep's model come from small-scale, often non-Western, societies, the question of its applicability to modern, Western, industrial societies is raised. The complex, fragmentary, individualized character of these societies is a challenging context within which to practice sustained, rigorous, communal rites of passage'. This does not necessarily mean that the framework cannot be used in a Western context – as I shall describe below, Yamane himself applies the model to a study of contemporary Catholic initiation rites – but rather that one must be careful and conscious of the particular context in which the rite is taking place. This will be particularly the case for my own study, as I seek to use the model as a frame for understanding a process which is not identified by participants or leaders as a strict initiation rite.

The above description of rites of passage, each split into a neat tripartite structure and resulting in the absolute transformation of the individual, represents an idealised version that may be convenient for developing universal theories but is rarely experienced in reality. Even when a rite is developed in such a way as to induce a complete transformation, with clear sections following the three-step pattern of van Gennep (either inadvertently or, increasingly with rites that have been developed recently, intentionally), this is not necessarily how they are experienced by individuals. As Grimes (2000: 98) notes, '[w]hat rites *really do* may differ from what they *are said to do*' (emphasis original). Grimes (2000: 134-5) places real accounts of initiates at the heart of his work, and while some narratives appear to reach the desired state of transformation, wonder, and elation – such as Miriam's response to her bat mitzvah[60] – others reveal flaws that are rarely recorded.[61] The story of Vivian's first communion (Grimes 2000: 96-7) describes her overwhelming anxiety during the event that her menstrual blood would become visible through her white dress, leading to humiliation and ritual failure. While this did not occur, the ritual failure, Grimes (2000: 97) argues, lies in the 'detachment of a rite from its physiological roots', as these rites are 'not

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[60] It is interesting to note that Miriam's account stems from soon after the event, and Grimes states that she was 13 when she recalled it to him. One of the purposes of this present thesis is to highlight the voices of young people experiencing religious formation while they are still in the midst of the process. Recalling a rite of passage long after the event – whether 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' – offers a very different perspective, one likely to be stained by either nostalgia or cynicism and oriented more towards the present perspectives of the individual than that of their teenage self.
[61] Grimes (2000: 94) also draws on fictional narratives, arguing that '[s]ince religious and ethnic groups seldom publicize their most disturbing troubles, fiction is sometimes more revealing than journalistic or ethnographic description'.

only… out of sync with social and biological rhythms, but contradictory messages are structured into the rites themselves'.

Traditional rites of passage do, of course, continue to exist in the Western societies, most notably in the form of weddings and funerals, and, less frequently, christenings. Yet structured rites of passage surrounding adolescence are notably absent. Anthropologist Kate Fox (2014: 501), in her popular study of English culture, argues that the mixed attitudes that surround adolescence in general – with adolescents seen as 'somehow both vulnerable and dangerous' – mean that it is 'perhaps not surprising… that only minority faiths celebrate the onset of puberty in any significant way'. 'The advent of this awkward, embarrassing, hormonally challenged phase of life', Fox (2014: 501) comments, 'is not widely regarded as a matter for celebration'. While the Church of England offers a confirmation ceremony, this is rarely taken up and there is 'no secular equivalent', and as a result 'the vast majority of English children have no official rite of passage to mark their transition into adolescence' (Fox 2014: 501-2). At the other end of adolescence, Fox (2014: 502) argues that the eighteenth-birthday party constitutes an 'official rite of passage' as new legal avenues are opened such as voting and purchasing alcohol, but when contrasted with transformational rites of initiations from other cultures her argument appears unconvincing.

England is not alone in lacking adolescent initiation rituals. There is a sense in the West in particular, Grimes argues, that contemporary society is worryingly and urgently devoid of effective rites of passage into adulthood. Grimes (2000: 91-4) cites fears that a separation from traditional rites led by elders and parents has led to a rise in peer-led initiatory practices that may be humiliating or violent. Some way of marking the passage to adulthood seems inescapable, and in lieu of more traditional rites the West appears to claim a 'motley array of activities' such as beginning menstruation, passing the driving test, or moving away from home (Grimes 2000: 94).[62] Yamane (2014: 8) argues that the 'centrifugal forces of modernity

[62] More recent research has argued that biological and social markers of adulthood appear to be shifting in different directions, with improved diets and general health leading to the onset of biological puberty occurring at an earlier age while social milestones – such as marriage, parenthood, and leaving the family home – are taking place later in life (Sawyer *et al* 2018). This has resulted in a new life-stage described by Jeffrey Arnett (2004) as "emerging adulthood", lasting from around 18 to 29, and distinct from both adolescence and 'young adulthood' – a stage which now takes place in the thirties. This period, during which practices that were once common by the age of 21 are frequently delayed by half a decade or more, is a time of 'high hopes and big dreams', but also of 'anxiety and

have rendered the initiation that does take place in Western industrial societies more diffuse, haphazard, individualized, and even sometimes only imaginary', and as a result 'some communities are attempting to create or recreate rites of passage that are mindful and intentional'. The idolisation and romanticising of the presumed rites of the "ancient" or "tribal" peoples leads some to a desire to produce equivalent rites for Western society, yet Grimes argues that these have often taken an uncomfortably individualistic form. What we see in these re-constructed rituals are rites made for both the modern understanding of individualised subjectivity and Charles Taylor's 'age of authenticity', as explored in the previous chapter, in which the individual exploration of self is valued above all. In these new rites of passage, Grimes (2000: 115) argues, 'authentic' initiation ritual 'consists of figuring out *my* direction. And *my* direction is interior rather than exterior. *My* way arises from psychic, as opposed to communal or traditional, sources. Individualism is not merely a belief in the value of individuals; it sets individual and community in opposition and then ranks individuality higher' (emphasis original).[63]

Research focusing on contemporary rites of passage and initiation rites within the sociology of religion has often been sparse,[64] however important studies have emerged. In studying the rite of First Communion within the Catholic church, Susan Ridgely Bales (2005: 5) drew heavily on the theories of van Gennep and Turner, arguing that while the three-stage structure of van Gennep can be a useful way of approaching First Communion – and there are clear points of alignment – relying solely on this structure 'fails to attend to individual

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uncertainty' of what is to come (Arnett 2004: 3). While some of the 'motley array' that Grimes points towards are mentioned in Arnett's (2004: 88) research, such as losing one's virginity, there is no clear ritually marked endpoint to this extended period preceding traditional adulthood. Meanwhile, Deborah Durham (2018: 1) argues that this is not solely a concern for the West but extends across the twenty-first century world, describing it as 'the century of elusive adulthoods' due to reports that 'young people cannot grow up, that they cannot attain adulthood'. However, she also argues that this is in part due to the fact that the current normalised concept of 'adulthood' – centring in particular on marriage and employment – is heavily influenced by attitudes within the United States, and was a concept that 'emerged in its idealized and normative form in the 1950s, and unravelled soon after' (Durham 2018: 3). As a result, she argues that a renewed study of what constitutes adulthood is required (Durham 2018).

[63] Grimes (2000: 145-6) does give the example of the 'National Rites of Passage Institute' as an example of this attempt to re-create African rites of passage (intentionally drawing on Turner and van Gennep) in order to connect with tradition and *resist* the individualising tendencies of 'the American dream'.

[64] Prior to his 2014 work, Yamane (2014: 13) undertook a 'comprehensive review' of 20 years' worth of research literature in three major journals within the sociology of religion and found 'no published studies of the process of initiation'.

participants, who remain anonymous or even invisible'. As a result, she intentionally sought to challenge Turner's approach by incorporating not only the observations of the researcher in her study, but also the voices and experiences of the children involved in order to include the emotional and experiential aspects of ritual. These voices, she argues, have been worryingly absent from previous studies. She notes that Turner, in *The Ritual Process*, spends seventeen pages discussing puberty rites (of both boys and girls) 'without including one quotation from a child' (Bales 2005: 5). In Turner's work and other studies of rituals, she says, 'children's bodies, but not their voices, appear in the analyses of religious ceremonies in which children are the primary participants', and she therefore focuses on the accounts of those children directly involved in the processes she studied (Bales 2005: 5-6). As well as emphasising the children as active agents who can interpret the process in ways which can differ considerably from institutional understandings, this approach also allowed for an emphasis on the embodied and emotional aspects of this ritual experience – both in practice and in final enactment (Bales 2005: 6). She found that the process had a powerful impact on many of the children involved, particularly with regards to their incorporation into the wider church body, as they felt that they had 'earned their family's, teacher's, and Jesus's respect' as a result of completing the ritual, and were now 'being seen by both the adults and by Jesus as fellow parishioners' (Bales 2005: 123-4). The connection remains predominantly with their individual parishes, rather than the global church, but nevertheless proves a powerful influence on their personal identities as Catholics.

Yamane also takes an interest in contemporary Catholic rites of passage; however, he focuses on adult initiation into the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). While the RCIA was drawn together in the 1960s, the creators – perhaps aware of the struggles that rites of passage have found in the modern Western world – intentionally 'looked to the ancient church for a model of initiation that could be adapted to the modern context', eventually drawing on the initiation practices of 'Mediterranean churches of the fourth and fifth centuries' (Yamane 2014: 12). Yamane (2014: 12-3) argues that they have utilised a process that neatly fits van Gennep's model, with a practice of separation, followed by instruction and preparation, and finally '"awe-inspiring rites of initiation" [that mark] the aggregation of the catechumen into the mystical body of Christ'. Between 1988 and 2014, according to Yamane (2014: 7), over two million adults in the United States entered the Catholic Church through this process. Along with the numerical impact of the rite, Yamane (2014: 14) argues that studying rites of initiation adds useful complexity to approaches surrounding Christian entry, bringing together ideas of 'conversion' and 'reaffiliation' by

understanding initiation as 'a process of reaffiliation that seeks to foster conversion to the faith'. The RCIA seeks to tie the processes of conversion and reaffiliation 'by offering an extended period of formation (transition) leading up to the rites of initiation and full membership (incorporation) in the Catholic church' (Yamane 2014:14).

Evangelicalism and Rites of Passage

While these studies offer valuable insights into how we may approach a study of contemporary Christian rites of passage, the difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes to ritual (and therefore rites of passage) is significant. As mentioned above, the Anglican church (along with Methodism and Lutheranism) does officially mark confirmation, but the necessity and significance of this differs significantly between congregations. While Anglo-Catholic churches may place a high priority on this ritual, similar to the attitudes within Catholicism, in more evangelical Anglican churches the response to confirmation is less enthusiastic, while outside of Anglicanism and Methodism, confirmation is absent in evangelicalism. Even baptism, present in the vast majority of evangelical churches, is viewed with a level of caution, as noted by Webb Keane (2007: 216). Strhan's work looked across three evangelical churches in London and explored the use of rites of passage in their children's work, finding overlapping yet distinct approaches across the different traditions. She found limited evidence of 'conventional' coming of age or initiation rituals, something she argues can be seen 'in the context both of a wider national decline in baptisms and confirmations in the postwar period and of evangelical churches' traditional aversion to ritual, cultivated by a historical legacy of the Protestant reformations and Puritan anti-ritualism' (Strhan 2019: 168). Even when more traditional and formal rituals took place scepticism remained, such as at the conservative evangelical congregation ('St John's'), where the 'distaste for ritual permeating the history of evangelicalism shaped the ambiguous status of infant baptism', retained due to the church's affiliation with the Church of England (Strhan 2019: 171). They were eager to repeat that baptism has no intrinsic supernatural power, but is rather 'just a sign and a symbol', even refusing to use the medieval font and instead opting for 'a blue ceramic bowl – also used for distributing biscuits at the church's lunch time meetings' (Strhan 2019: 172-3). Similar perspectives of baptism were seen at the charismatic evangelical congregation ('St George's'),[65] while at the open evangelical church

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[65] Interestingly, Strhan (2019: 175) notes that there was 'none of the distancing from sacramental ritual that pervaded' at St John's.

(‘Riverside’), infants and children could not be baptised at all, though thanksgiving ceremonies did take place (Strhan 2019: 175, 181). As is common in evangelicalism the emphasis across all three churches was placed on the personal and free choice of the individual (often understood as occurring during adolescence (Strhan 2019: 173, 174)), rather than the mystical power found in rituals such as baptism. Even when infant baptism is performed, Strhan (2019: 174) argues that this ‘explicitly pronounced the liminality of the child, which continued until the child was understood as making their own conscious commitment to ‘trust in the Lord’, although the end of this liminal status would not be formally marked through any particular public rite’.

Yet none of this is to say that the churches are devoid of rituals or ceremonies to indicate significant moments or transitions in children’s lives. Seasonal rituals such as Nativities and Christingle services – often mixing traditional and contemporary approaches within them (Strhan 2019: 189) – were seen as important moments for the children which ‘can be seen as a rite of passage according to van Gennep’s broad conception’ (Strhan 2019: 177-8). In particular, she argues, in the St George’s Christingle it is the ‘role played by the children that most set the service apart’, with the service being ‘unique in [the children] speaking to address the whole congregation, in their writing and leading the prayers, and in their remaining with the congregation for the entirety of the service’ (Strhan 2019: 178). The inversion of structural roles is an important aspect of liminality within Turner’s model, but it is not clear how any form of transformation might occur in the course of these services. A more typical, albeit modern, rite of passage might be seen in the ceremonies used to mark the passage from primary to secondary school, at both St George’s and Riverside, in which it was clear that the child left in a new position (Strhan 2019: 179-181, 186). However, the fact that many of the children did not engage with the eucharist during the service at St George suggests that ‘rituals and rites of passage in which there is a more explicit performance of institutional religious authority… fail to resonate with children (and adults) who have not been habituated to these rituals over time’ (Strhan 2019: 181). The final form of transitional marker she looks at is a weekend camp undertaken by the children at Riverside – and around 1000 others. The trip involved games, sung charismatic worship, talks, prayers, and, importantly, ‘altar calls’ (Strhan 2019: 183-185). These altar calls, commonplace in many evangelical contexts, consist of moments in which ‘individuals are invited to demonstrate that they have made a commitment to Christ through walking forward publicly to the altar at the front of a church’ (Strhan 2019: 185). Even in situations wherein the child does not go up to and instead stands and prays with the youth leader, this still creates 'the sense of a

key moment of commitment, which was often within the history of evangelicalism seen as a transformational, liminal moment in which the individual was 'born again' or received the Holy Spirit' (Strhan 2019: 185). Or, at least, this was the intention. As Strhan (2019: 185) explains, ‘in the children’s own interpretation of their participation in the ritual, their gesture of commitment did not represent the transformation of being ‘born again’ or ‘becoming a Christian’, as Ben, the speaker had presented it that morning, but more their own choosing to mark a moment they could look back on when they had expressed their own commitment to their faith’. Incorporating the experience of the neophyte, beyond and alongside the institutional desires, is an important yet often overlooked aspect of understanding the nature of ritual. Despite these different approaches, Strhan (2019: 190) notes that there remained a regret amongst adults that ‘for many young people, there was no public rite marking their ‘adult’ commitment in the church’.

Conclusion: Intersubjectivity and Rites of Passage in a Study of Adolescent Evangelicalism

In the Introduction I outlined the expectations of not only faith *development* but wholesale *transformation of the religious self* within evangelicalism, with adolescence identified as an important period for this – transformed either from the evangelical or non-religious child to evangelical adult. While these can be seen as the idealised outcomes within institutional evangelicalism, there is little understanding of how this is expected to take place, outside of moments of overwhelming transformative spiritual experience. The present chapter has explored two key aspects that will be central to this study in order to understand the nature of evangelical youth work and how it is experienced by the young people involved. In order to understand evangelical subjectivity, we must take account not only of the desires within the institutional context (and the inescapable influences experienced outside of the church environment), but also crucially the fact that the evangelical subject is formed in ongoing relationship with others – including with God. Overwhelmingly within contemporary British evangelical contexts, subject formation during adolescence – the period in which the desired transformation is expected to take place – is experienced within age-restricted, peer-focused groups. Thus, relationships with these peers may be central to the formation of the evangelical subject in this period.

Yet the question remains what processes evangelicals draw on to bring about the *transformation* during adolescence to the desired adult evangelical subjectivity. Here I have presented the concept of a rite of passage as a lens through which this transformation might

be understood. As interpreted by Victor Turner, the rite of passage – frequently associated with the period of adolescence, of transition from childhood to adulthood – is a period of overwhelming transformation. Separated from the ordinary communities and structures, the old self is deconstructed in the period of liminality, with normal practices and hierarchies broken down and new creative possibilities opened, often in the companionship of fellow neophytes. In a group environment, transformation is not only experienced individually but also collectively with those going along the same path, with the relationships formed in this moment taking on an exceptional character due to their relationship with liminality. In the collective liminal experience, with social and individual markers deconstructed, a powerful sense of shared joy and oneness can emerge in the form of communitas. This has been described as a near transcendent collective experience, contributing not only to the bonding between members but also the individual transformation desired in the rite of passage. Following the period of liminality, the individual can re-enter the community in their new form, no longer what they once were.

Considerable questions remain about attempting to apply the rites of passage model to the practices of an evangelical youth group. The three-stage structure has been seen as simplistic and limiting, while there are doubts as to whether it can be applied across cultures. Yet the absence of any clear formal rites of passage for adolescents in modern British culture does not necessarily mean that alternative, less institutional, initiation rites have not arisen in their place. Within the evangelical context the situation is complexified further. Here formal rituals have not only fallen out of fashion but have been actively resisted and (where they are deemed necessary) marginalised as a result of normative evangelical theological priorities. Nevertheless, there remains the desire for the transformation to occur during adolescence in order to form a new self, prior to entering adulthood. Thus there is cause to ask whether the structures that are already in place in these environments in order to foster this transformation of the self and formation of the adult evangelical subject might be understood through the lens of rites of passage, even if they are not institutionally identified as such.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Evangelicalism and the Ethnographic Method

Having established the theoretical framework of this thesis, this chapter explores the methodological approach that I drew upon in order to answer my research questions. A study of evangelical youth work could have been undertaken using a number of different methodologies. Historical approaches, seeking to understand the trajectory and transformation of youth work practices over time – such as the approach used by Naomi Thompson (2018) – offer insights impossible to gain from contemporary research alone, opening the possibility for observing the development of the rite of passage approach. Similarly, the research could have focused on the vast world of contemporary evangelical youth cultural products, such as the ever-growing community of young Christian creators on YouTube, Instagram, and other digital platforms, to see the impact of transnational mediated influences on evangelical formation. If the focus was on the efficacy of this transformation over the course of a lifetime then interviewing adult evangelicals (and former evangelicals) about their experiences of their own youth groups and the long-term influence this has had on their faith subjectivity would have been another possible approach. Likewise, dedicating my efforts solely to interviewing young people about their perceptions and experiences – without additional participant-observation fieldwork – *may* have enabled a greater range of youth voices to come through from different contexts. However, from the origins of the research process it was evident that the ethnographic approach, prioritising participant-observation fieldwork and interviews, with other methods drawn in where necessary, was the most suitable for understanding the nature of subjectivity within this specific environment and context. In exploring how a process is both undertaken and understood within a group, making direct observations of these processes through participation in the group itself offers depth that would not be possible through interviews alone. The adoption of an ethnographic approach for this research is not, therefore, simply due to its novelty within studies of evangelical youth, as discussed in the Introduction. Rather, this approach is essential for observing and experiencing youth group practices and the nature of ritual process within these spaces, and thus situating adolescent faith formation within this context. Through adopting ethnographic approaches to addressing my research questions this research offers a novel perspective on the formation of evangelical subjectivity.

In the previous chapters I argued for the importance of multiple layers of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and divine intersubjectivity for the modern evangelical subject – as well as the benefits of using the concept of rites of passage as an approach for understanding the nature of subject formation and transformation in the youth environment. It was therefore essential that any methodological approach I adopted for this research was able to explore these different aspects of individuals' relationship with this group. In the following section I will show how ethnography is particularly appropriate for the study of religious subjectivity, in particular through sharing in the world of those at the heart of the study. Following this I will outline the process of finding a field site for the research, before describing St Aidan's itself and the youth work context within which my research would take place. I will then give a description of the fieldwork, and the particular nature of my participant observation and interviews, as well as indicating how the research questions were reconstructed as a result of my early experiences in the field and encounters with young people. The final two sections of the chapter explore two elements central to an ethnographic study – positionality and reflexivity. The first of these is the particular position of the researcher within their field site as they relate to their participants. In my context, impossible as it was to experience the group as a young person considering my age, this involved participation in the role of volunteer youth worker, while continuing to observe in my role as researcher. Yet as I shall show, these positions could never be wholly distinct within the field. Finally, I will reflect on my own history with evangelical youth work, my journey to the question, and the impact that this may have on my research.

Ethnography and Subjectivity

Ethnographic approaches – in which the researcher actively engages with experience and embodiment *within* the cultural context in which a particular subject is located – offer a uniquely powerful approach to understanding subjectivity. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman (2007: 5) contest that through ethnographic methods 'we encounter the concrete constellations in which people forge and foreclose their lives around what is most at stake'. By engaging personally with individual and collective life-experiences, ethnographers 'attempt to explore what matters most in people's lives in the making and unmaking of meaning', particularly focusing on 'the inward reworkings of the world and the consequences of people's actions toward themselves and toward others' (Biehl *et al* 2007: 15). Within a religious context, ethnography involves encountering the 'the particular social structures, sensory regimes, bodily techniques, doctrines, and practices that make up a religion' that Birgit Meyer (2008: 707-15) argues reinforce the 'taken-for-granted sense of self and community' at the heart of

collective religious life and experience. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the experience of religious life and formation extends far beyond the purely theological. Congregational religion is not just cognitive but experiential and emotional, material and spatial, individual and relational, embodied and communal. It is also important to consider the temporal nature of congregational life, in particular the fact that this is the context in which congregants may spend many years of their life including key milestones such as births, marriages, and deaths. The nature of extended fieldwork over a prolonged period gives the researcher an insight into the rhythms and patterns of community practice and life within a congregational context, as well as an awareness of that which is routine and that which is unusual. To have a greater understanding of the formative evangelical subject it was beneficial to be able to have as great an awareness of these different factors as possible, including different experiences and influences. Yet awareness of these embodied and experienced elements comes not only from observing but, where possible, from active participation.

Participant observation, described by Bogdan (1972: 3) as an ‘intense social interaction between researchers and participants in the milieu of the latter, during which time data, in the form of field notes, are unobtrusively and systematically collected’, has been the defining feature of ethnographic study since its origins. Crano *et al* (2015: 253) outline that this approach is ‘one of the most widely used methods in sociology and cultural anthropology, and has long been viewed by many in these fields as an indispensable feature of these disciplines’. The ethnographic method, with participant observation at its core, enables the researcher to both observe and *experience* (to a greater or lesser degree) these elements of the religious life that define the religious subject. Fetterman (2010: 21) states that the ethnographer is ‘interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's perspective’. Gaining as complete an understanding of the insider’s perspective and experience as is feasible through ethnography grants a greater insight into the lived experience of the individual subject than less experientially focused methods. 'In conducting participant observation as fully as possible in the community under study’, Liamputtong (2013: 166) argues, ‘ethnographers learn how to live in the community, how to behave as a member of that community, and to experience events and meanings in the same way as the members of the community’. Ethnography thus provides a ‘deep and rich understanding of people in a way that is impossible in other qualitative methods’ (Liamputtong 2013: 177).

Within the anthropology of ritual this element of experiential participation has long been prized as a marker of authenticity and acceptance from communities, as well as offering a powerful insight into the true experience of these rituals in a way that may be impossible as an observer or through interviews. Watching others undertake a ritual centring on perception-altering substances, for example, or interviewing them after the fact, cannot compare to the experience itself. While this may be an extreme example, even the experience of kneeling at the altar and feeling the wafer on one's tongue can give an experiential insight into the ritual of the Mass that would be inaccessible for the researcher through other means. Alongside this, appropriate and invited participation in a shared ritual can bring the researcher closer to the community at the centre of the research. Participation in ritual is not always straightforward for outsider researchers,[66] and this can be particularly the case for rites of passage that depend upon a specific prior state ahead of the transformation that is to come. As I will outline below, the fact that I am not a teenager precluded my participation in some manner. Yet even here, experiential participation in rites of passage of some form is possible, as seen with Willis' (in Willis *et al* 1999: 120) experience of communitas during a healing ritual in Zambia, wherein even while not being the figure at the centre of the ritual he is deeply, experientially, moved. Through this form of experiential participant-observation in rites of passage, alongside other aspects of religiosity in a particular context, a researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the individual subject. This will be invaluable in addressing my research questions as outlined in the Introduction.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 3) state that 'ethnography usually involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry'. Ethnographic study can thus entail a range of methods within a single project, chosen both for their practical viability and their ability to address the research questions. For my project I decided to focus upon participant observation, the method most frequently associated with ethnography, incorporating semi-structured in-depth interviews towards

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[66] In her study of First Communion practices, for example, Susan Ridgely Bales (2005: 55) was excluded from participation in the sacrament due to her being Protestant, rather than Catholic.

the latter half of the fieldwork. In-depth interviews have numerous benefits, particularly in giving the participants a voice and opportunity to express their own perceptions on situations (as well as uncovering aspects that may predate the researcher's participant-observation), but they also enable the researcher to clarify that their experiences and perceptions within the participant observation do indeed mirror those of the true 'insiders'. In the context of a project such as this, the period of fieldwork also complemented the interview process through the relationships that could be developed between myself and the participants prior to the interview taking place. This was particularly significant in my project in which potential power disparities – between researcher and participant, adult and adolescent, youth worker and young person – could be considerable concerns in the undertaking of personal interviews. The desire to ensure that the young people were familiar with me and the project, and the general nature of research, as well as the awareness that research interests could develop over the course of the fieldwork, meant that the formal interviews did not commence until the second half of my period of fieldwork. Of course, formal interviews are not the only opportunities to hear from participants over the course of an ethnographic project. Informal conversations and group discussions proved to be essential points of data gathering over the course of the project and enabled important topics to emerge naturally that may not have in the context of a formal interview.

As initial additional methods became unfeasible (as I shall explore below), during the course of my fieldwork I set about developing new approaches. I endeavoured to incorporate the young people as actively as possible in the development of these new methods – an approach referred to as 'collaborative ethnography'. In his study on 'Emerging Evangelicals', James Bielo (2011: 24) intentionally incorporated 'multiple forms of collaborative ethnography, where the anthropologist [or sociologist] attempts some remove from authority by involving consultants in the making of research activities'. Empowering the young people not only through incorporating their voices into the final thesis but also involving them in the research design, and conversations with the group became important influences in the ongoing development of the project. However, it also became evident as I progressed with the fieldwork that my idealistic vision of collaborative ethnography depended on a level of commitment from the group that was not necessarily forthcoming. While I was able to have useful conversations with a number of the young people about, for example, my interview schedule, it was nevertheless apparent that they were doing this primarily as a favour for me, rather than any great desire to impact the nature of my study. Again, here we see the value of participant observation practices for building relationships

with participants, alongside the limitations that come with working alongside real people limited in their time and energy.

Finding a Field Site

With participant observation decided as central to my methodological approach, it was then necessary to determine a field site. While previous iterations of the research questions had emphasised conservative evangelicalism in particular, upon shifting the focus of the research to an emphasis on adolescence it was decided to broaden the potential field sites to incorporate wider forms of evangelicalism. This was due to the comparative sizes of youth groups relative to whole church congregations – the latter are naturally significantly larger on average – and the necessity of finding a youth group large enough to constitute a viable study with a range of voices. According to The Church of England Evangelism and Discipleship Team (2020: 12), the average Anglican church in London has 19 under-16s in attendance each Sunday, with the number being considerably lower for the 14-18 age bracket that I was particularly interested in – especially if the findings of the *Rooted in the Church* study are correct in suggesting that the 'average age of church "drop-outs" among young people is 14.5 years' (Church of England Education Office 2016: 4).[67] Rather than searching by ecclesiological leaning I therefore focused my search on finding a congregation with a youth group significantly larger than average. Further to this, I decided to search for a church that was within reasonable travelling distance of my home. While some ethnographers of Christianity have taken a more traditional anthropological approach to their research, such as Joseph Webster (2013) who chose to live for an extended period in the community of focus and fully immersed himself in village – as well as church – life, it has been more common amongst ethnographic studies of western Christianity to focus on the congregational setting. Studies such as those by Bielo (2011), Strhan (2015, 2019), Luhrmann (2012), Guest (2007), and Harding (2000) are ethnographies that differ from the traditional mould by virtue of their 'homeliness'. The 'field' is not a broad and distinct environment in which the researcher can immerse themselves away from their 'native' environment. Rather, the primary focus of the research is the congregational setting and the community entailed within. This is not to say that these researchers did not pay attention to the wider setting in

[67] It is likely that these figures will be different for other denominations with evangelical leanings, as well as the numerous independent evangelical congregations, but these figures give an indication of the absence of significant numbers of young people in many congregations.

which the church was located,[68] but rather that the focus of the participant observation is the congregational context. As I shall indicate below, I sought to explore the environments in which my participants spent their lives outside the direct church setting – with mixed results – but the youth group was my primary field site.

After receiving ethical approval for my research, my first approach was to a large charismatic evangelical church, one that I was aware of through its long-standing presence in the British evangelical youth work landscape. After talking with the curate following an evening service and arranging to meet with the youth pastor as a result of this conversation, the outlook was promising. However, after much deliberation (extended over a summer vacation), the youth pastor told me that the current nature of the young people, and in particular their struggles with mental health, meant that he needed to be able to focus wholly on these needs over the proposed period of fieldwork. My presence could be a disruptive factor in a vulnerable time, but he also believed that due to these struggles the group would not be the best representation of youth work for my research. While this was a knockback with regards to accessing a field site, it also alerted me to the realities of this form of fieldwork. While I would seek to cause as little disruption as possible, and indeed desired to be a positive influence on the group wherever the opportunity arose, it was a reminder that I was to be working with young people who are going through a potentially fragile and vulnerable period of their lives, unfamiliar with me and this form of research, and with very different priorities from my own. While much of this had been considered during the ethical approval process, this experience offered an important moment of reflection prior to entering the field.

St Aidan's

Following this my attention shifted to 'St Aidan's'.[69] Describing itself as an 'evangelical charismatic' church, St Aidan's is an Anglican church dating from the nineteenth century in a leafy suburb of London. On Sundays the church hosted four services: an early Holy Communion service, following the Anglican Book of Common Prayer liturgy; two consecutive and largely identical morning services oriented towards families; and an evening service which was a favourite of young adults aged 18-30. When considered together, the

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[68] Strhan's 2015 study dedicates considerable attention to the nature of being a conservative evangelical within a modern city, for example.

[69] As will be discussed below, this is a pseudonym, as are all other names of individuals and groups associated with St Aidan's.

attendance at these services was over 500, with a wide range of ages. The last three of these were described as ‘informal’, and this was evidenced not only in the general avoidance of liturgy but also in the lack of liturgical dress and practice. While Steven, the Vicar of St Aidan’s, often wore a “dog collar” when preaching, he avoided the more formal clerical clothing such as the cassock or stole outside of specific occasions, and instead opted for a jumper over his clerical shirt. Andy, the St Aidan’s curate, dressed more casually still – as did other speakers and leaders in the services – with his clerical collar and shirt only making appearances for formal occasions. These informal services were often light-hearted in tone, and the worship music played by the skilled band on the stage was typically met with joyful and enthusiastic participation from the congregation. Along with the extended worship periods, these services each centred around a sermon that was usually given by a member of the church leadership team or a trusted member of the congregation, with occasional guest speakers invited for special events or particular topics. During the two family-oriented services each Sunday there were groups for children aged 0-11, with a dedicated team of volunteers led by a full-time children’s pastor. I shall talk further about the nature of these services and sermons later in the thesis. Outside of the Sunday work, St Aidan’s organised a range of groups throughout the week, including some that were explicitly religious or evangelistic (such as prayer meetings and regular Alpha courses) as well as some that were oriented towards particular elements of the community such as toddler groups, lunches for those who are homeless, and English conversation classes. While predominantly white and middle class, this latter group points towards the diversity in St Aidan’s, with (for example) a notable Iranian presence in the wider congregation, supported by a translator in some services and an Alpha course ran in Farsi, and contributing to a number of native Iranians being baptised during my time with the church.

When I first arrived at St Aidan’s, in October of 2017, the building in which the congregation met immediately struck the eye as a church. Towering in red brick with cream finishes, with a large central window above the front entrance, the history of the building rang out through both internal and external touches. This sat alongside the distinctly modern, with multiple large video screens complemented by sophisticated lighting and a professional sound system, all operated from a large booth at the back of the wood panelled worship space. Geographically the building could be found on a quiet residential street away from the busy high road. On a Sunday morning the street steadily filled with the cars of congregants, though many who were local walked while those further away could come through the underground station that was only a five-minute walk from the front door. On the front lawn grew a

scattering of trees and shrubs, with a large central sign giving information on service times and proudly proclaiming 'Welcome' to passers-by. At Christmas this would be joined by an elegantly decorated Christmas tree standing at least 15-foot high, alongside festive banners draped down the side of the building behind. Around six months after I started my fieldwork, however, there emerged a new sign, larger and more eye-catching than the long-standing welcome sign. Rather than advertising a new sermon series or upcoming evangelism course, however, this came from a property development company proudly and excitedly proclaiming the future of the building in its converted form as luxury flats. After a five-year process of consultation, fundraising, and site research, St Aidan's were preparing to move buildings in the summer of 2018 to Cecil Place. Located on the bustling high street, the four-storey building is a former office block that has been converted into dedicated multi-purpose space for the St Aidan's community through the week, as well as for Sunday services. The move was regularly referenced throughout the preceding months during sermons as anticipation built, with frequent updates and professionally created digital walkthrough videos shown to whet the appetites for the upcoming transition. The move was marked with numerous events and visits from Bishops, and by the time I ended my period of fieldwork the congregation had been settled in Cecil Place for two months. Over the course of this thesis these spaces and the transition between them will be discussed in greater depth.

David, Morning Meetup, and PM

On the first Sunday I approached St Aidan's I attended an evening service and spoke with the youth pastor, David, introducing myself and the project and arranging to meet to discuss it further. Later that week, on a grey and drizzly October evening, we met inside the huts around the back of the main church that host the youth groups for 11-18-year olds each week. This was then followed by a second meeting two weeks later, this time taking place on soft leather sofas within a cosy alcove in the main church building, a stark contrast to the previous environment. A South African who had moved to London two years previously in order to take the role at St Aidan's, David was a welcoming but commanding figure, and his confident yet reflexive character came across both in his description of and rationale behind the different group structures as well as in general conversation. Having previously been ordained as a Baptist pastor aimed towards adults, he was also extensively experienced in Christian youth work in Southern Africa. Despite undertaking various modules on youth ministry during his training followed by a certificate in youth ministry, he nevertheless remained cautious over placing too much emphasis on formal training: "At the end of the day training is great, but the best youth workers are those who allow the needs of their

young people to shape their ministry style". Alongside this approach he also actively sought to learn from other youth workers, joining the Church of England 'Youth Worker Vanguard'[70] as well as forming relationships with national Christian youth work organisations Urban Saints and Youthscape.

He was passionate about young people and bringing them to a point of Christian belief – a passion that stemmed from his own dramatic conversion as a teenager – but also showed immediate interest in my project and had some awareness of the potential benefits of this form of research.[71] David offered some insight into what he perceived as generational trends among contemporary young people – such as their activist orientation and struggles with commitment – and told me that these issues were often drawn upon in developing topics for teaching and discussion. During these meetings he also explained the different groups aimed at young people that took place in the church. At the centre of this work are two Sunday groups – Morning Meetup and PM. These catered for two distinct age cohorts arranged according to their academic year groups, with opportunities for overlap only available during the final term of Year 9, established as a transitional period for members to familiarise themselves with the older group. While I knew at this stage that I would be primarily interested in the older age group, it was nevertheless valuable to understand the processes in place for the younger age group, not least because many of the older group would themselves have experienced it.

Morning Meetup was targeted at those in school Years 7-9 – the first three years of secondary school, incorporating young people aged 11-14 – and took place at 11:30am, parallel to the second family-oriented service. This was due to the expectation that young people of this age will still largely be attending church with their families, and David said that as a result of this a high proportion of the young people in the group grew up going to church. While the group would join with the main congregation for the early period of worship once

[70] William Nye (2019: 3), Secretary General of the General Synod, describes the aim of Youth Worker Vanguard being to establish 'a group of around 30-40… youth workers from across the Church of England. These youth workers will be selected from some of the biggest, fastest growing and most innovative youth ministries in the Church of England. Through meeting together, the intention is that this group will become the innovation hub out of which new resources and support are established, developed and rolled out for the wider benefit and resource of the church.'
[71] Following the conclusion of the period of fieldwork David contacted me to ask for academic recommendations for a research project that he was undertaking himself as a part of a ministerial training course, indicating his interest in the sociology of religion.

a month, the majority of the time they remained separate from the church for the entirety of the session. Breakfast food and drinks were available on arrival – something which David likened to communion in the early church (while clarifying that it was not a sacrament) – which was eaten during 15 minutes of unstructured social time. This was followed by a 15-minute group game and a period of non-sung worship (sung worship made the young people self-conscious and uncomfortable, he told me), before around 45 minutes of teaching time. David described this period as interactive and reflexive, encouraging discussions and questions from the young people while also seeking to correct "poor" theology that had been picked up at home. Later, during my first visit to Morning Meetup, David told me that the focus of the group was on developing "individual" faith, so that they do not see this as something that is simply "inherited" from their parents – an aspect which, as I have discussed previously, is seen as essential in the formation of the adult evangelical subject. Thematically, the purposes of these sessions (as was also the case in PM), was to address issues that he perceived as being the primary reasons why young people stop involvement in church during adolescence, with answering difficult questions – he offered 'Why doesn't God heal parents with cancer?' as an example – a central element of this. This group, David told me, averaged between 25 and 30 young people per session, with up to 40 on a particularly busy morning.

The older group, PM, was catered to the final five years of secondary education, from Year 9 through to Year 13, with an age range from 14 to 18. This took place on Sunday evenings and was not at that stage running parallel with the evening service, which started around two hours later. Soon after my fieldwork started, however, the evening service changed times in order to align with the PM sessions. In contrast to the Morning Meetup start time, which was designed to encourage young people to come along with their parents to church, the evening shift was undertaken in order to encourage parents to visit church while their children were in PM. The structure of the group – which I shall outline and discuss extensively in Chapter 4 – was similar to that of Morning Meetup, with the exception of regular sung worship and no opportunities to join with the adult congregation for worship. They were, however, encouraged to attend the evening services during school holidays (during which PM would not run) and David claimed that around 75% of the group did this during, for

example, half-term breaks.[72] While this changed when the evening service start time changed to align with the PM sessions, and the group began to join with the adult services for around one Sunday out of every six (with the eventual intention that the young people would take a role in running the service), David also stated that the lack of integration between the youth and the adult congregation was of limited concern. Firstly, for both groups he emphasised the value of generational separation in this form of group and the distinction in teaching and learning styles. Secondly, he believed that this inter-generational integration would be of limited value due to the fact that the majority of young people in the group were expected to leave home in order to go away to university following their time in PM, and would therefore not be moving on to the adult congregation. For this reason, he told me, it was more important that the young people felt a sense of internal community with their peers, creating a congregation within a congregation. The final point of distinction between the two groups structurally was the concept of a youth leadership team. This group consisted of members of PM who had been identified by David as having leadership characteristics in some form and who then played a role in the planning and delivery of PM sessions. The responsibilities included, for example, organising food for an evening or devising and running the games,[73] with everyone made aware of their own roles on a rota distributed through WhatsApp in advance of each session. Beyond these explicit roles, the members of the leadership team were often encouraged to be responsible voices in group discussions, ensuring conversations remained on topic – though without a clear guidance to necessarily agree with the normative teaching. When I first started, David and I were the only regular adult leaders alongside this youth team, in contrast to the small group of adult volunteers who assisted with the Morning Meetup group (which had no comparable youth leadership model). We were soon joined by Jordan, a fellow South African who joined St Aidan's as a youth work apprentice, and shortly before I concluded my fieldwork Simone joined as a full-time youth worker.

In this conversation David said that PM averaged around 40 young people each week (though could reach up to 65), with approximately 60% of members coming from church families –

[72] I am confident in saying that this was a significant over-estimation from David. During most holiday weeks over my year of fieldwork I attended the evening service and with the exception of significant services such as Easter Sunday or the annual carol services there were very few young people in attendance – usually fewer than five.

[73] During the period of my fieldwork no young person delivered any formal teaching for the group, but David was vocal in his desire that this would occur in the future.

though he had ambitions to increase the numbers of those from outside of church backgrounds so that these ratios would be reversed. During my time in the group attendance figures were usually slightly lower than David's estimate, with an average of between 25 and 35 young people each week. This is still a very high number relative to many youth groups, as David emphasised when a session on Mother's Day led to a "quiet week" of 12 attendees. The group was very ethnically diverse, with black, Asian (in particular from South East Asia) and dual-heritage young people constituting comfortably over half of the group on most occasions.[74] With regards to gender, the group was approximately two-thirds female on average. While the group had a significant number of 'regulars' who could be relied upon to attend at least three-quarters of the sessions, there was also fluidity meaning that these demographic balances could fluctuate. With regards to the faith background of the members, my perception through observation, conversation, and interviews is that a greater proportion of the group come from Christian families than David's initial claim would suggest.

Other than these two primary groups, St Aidan's was also involved in a range of other youth-oriented activities, with evangelism (in the sense of verbally sharing the message of evangelical Christianity to non-Christians) central to these. Within the church context were the fortnightly 'Flame' sessions on Friday nights, which were open to anyone aged 11-18, and were described by David as primarily social and 'event' driven – though still including a "short talk" primarily aimed at "unchurched" young people in the group. Outside of the church setting David led a Christian Union group and a Bible discussion group at two local schools – including one in the parish of a neighbouring Anglo-Catholic church who "don't believe in evangelism". Temporary dedicated groups for specific purposes were also regular features, such as confirmation and baptism preparation classes and courses designed for those in Year 13 to prepare them for starting at university. Each summer the church also attended New Wine, a week-long Christian conference that is suitable for all ages, with members of PM attending both as individuals and with their families. During my time with PM, the group established a midweek Bible study group, named 'Flourish', that was intended for those aged 11-18 who wished to deepen their faith beyond the level offered in the

[74] According to the 2011 census, the St Aidan's parish was around 60% 'White', with 'Asian' listed as the second largest ethnic group. Based on data from the 2012 London Church Census, Peter Brierley (2019: 74-6) showed that while only 8% of White Londoners go to church, the figure is 19% for Black Londoners and 16% for the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean community.

Morning Meetup or PM sessions. While the Flourish sessions had a brief social period as the young people arrived, it was more focused around teaching and discussion than the usual Sunday groups, with around four or five young people from each age group attending each week.

Outline of Fieldwork

Participant Observation

My fieldwork formally started on November 5th 2017 and lasted for one year, beginning and ending with the autumnal half-term break. During this time, I attended every PM session on Sunday nights, arriving early in order to help set-up and participate in the leaders' meetings that preceded each session. In my role as volunteer youth worker I was included on a rota with the other adult and young leaders and would regularly help organise the snacks or game for the night, as well as helping to supervise the sessions as required. On two occasions I ran sessions during PM dedicated both to informing the group about my research and to gathering data. The first of these, early in the fieldwork period, sought to find out the group's perception of social media in relation to their faith through whole group discussions. After the session I also gained ideas for improvement from the youth leadership team – in particular concerning the manner in which I elicited responses from the young people – that I was able to incorporate into my second session. This took place around halfway through my fieldwork and focused on an activity in which the young people were asked in groups to design a church from scratch, following a sheet I had designed for the session (Figure 1). At the end of the session I asked each group to sign the back of their sheets if they were happy for these to be included in the thesis, after explaining again the nature of the research, and everyone obliged.

CREATING A CHURCH

When would the church meet?

What would be the main focuses of the church?

Where would it be based?

What would happen in the meetings?

What would they teach/discuss, if anything?

How about outside of the meetings?

What would their ethics/morals be?

What would be the same as St Aidan's/ PM?

What would be different to St Aidan's/ PM?

Figure 1: The A3 activity sheet designed for the second session I ran at PM. The blank section in the middle was intended for the young people to draw how they envisaged the space to look.

In each of the sessions I used a pocket notebook – or occasionally a hastily cut, folded, and stapled pile of papers when I ran out of notebook space midway through a session – to take short-form fieldnotes. Throughout the first sections of the night I reserved my notetaking for brief observations or verbatim quotations following a conversation that would otherwise have slipped my mind, written in the moments between interactions in the hectic adolescent social environment. During the talks and discussions, aside from those moments of small group discussion where either David requested that I join a group or I perceived it to be particularly valuable for the research to be involved, I would usually place myself at the back of the room and take real-time notes at a desk that held the small sound system. While I endeavoured to ensure that the young people were aware of my presence and the fact that I was taking notes, depending on the sensitivity of the topic I used my discretion as to what information I recorded, for example in discussions around mental health or sex in which I only noted down comments made in the context of a whole group discussion and without recording the names of contributors.[75] Similarly, I have been sensitive with reporting

[75] This was also the approach I took when observing the Morning Meetup sessions, as the young people in this group were less familiar with my research.

personal accounts of speakers.[76] Following each session I wrote up these short-form notes in a more detailed form in a field diary, containing both descriptions of what I had seen and heard as fully as possible and my 'perceptions and interpretations of the events and even emotional notes' and developing theoretical reflections (Liamputtong 2013: 169). At no stage did I detect any discomfort from the young people in response to my note taking, nor was I informed by David of any concerns being raised in this regard. I believe that this was in part due to my transparency with the group over my research and the methods I would be employing, but also a result of the positive relationship I had developed with the group and the trust I had built up through this.

Approximately once a month I attended Morning Meetup, participating in a similar capacity to my role in PM, however I was not involved in a formal rota. As mentioned above, I used these sessions primarily as a point of comparison with the PM sessions. In the main church context, I attended morning services on seven occasions, including for the first two Sundays in Cecil Place (the first of which was preceded by a large and joyful procession from the old building to the new, including approximately 500 people) and the visit of the local bishop to ceremonially open the new building. During the school holidays I attended the evening services as well as additional services over Christmas and Easter. During the Good Friday service, I assisted with the simultaneous activities in the youth huts for those aged 11-18. During the services in the main church my participation mirrored that of the congregants around me. In the evening services, short periods of guided discussion – lasting between one and three minutes – were common, as were small group prayer times of a similar length, both with those who were seated in one's immediate vicinity. I judged my participation in these according to the situation but did not vocally participate in prayer in these moments as it felt disingenuous while I was approaching the service as a researcher, despite my personal faith. Often during these periods I had an opportunity to explain to those in my group that I was involved in the youth work as a part of my PhD research, but at no stage was I introduced to the whole congregation. While note-taking was not as prevalent as in the conservative evangelical church that Strhan (2015: 14) studied, it was nevertheless a

[76] David, for example, explicitly requested that I not relay his testimony in detail in the thesis as it is both sensitive and identifiable. I have applied the same precaution to other personal accounts from speakers in the PM context. Where speakers have recounted personal stories in the context of a recorded sermon from a main church service, I have ensured to remove any particularly identifiable information (as with any individual in an anonymised account) but have included other information as it is in the public domain on the St Aidan's website.

common enough occurrence in services to mean that my note-taking did not draw any additional attention.[77] As with the youth group sessions I used discretion in deciding what to note down, and for example did not record anything that had been discussed in the small group prayer times – however on occasions in which individuals would speak to the congregation as a whole and request prayer of some sort I did note this down. As with the youth group sessions, after each service I wrote these notes up in a longer form. As I was not able to attend every service, I instead listened to and transcribed twelve sermons (all of which were publicly available on the St Aidan's website) that were relevant to my research interests.

In addition to these Sunday events, I also participated in every session of the Flourish group and baptism and confirmation classes[78] when they were established, the former on Monday evenings and the latter after the Morning Meetup sessions early on Sunday afternoons. As these sessions emphasised teaching and discussion to a greater extent than in PM, and the numbers were considerably lower, it was not necessary for me to play the same supervisory role and so I predominantly spent these sessions quietly sitting in on discussions, taking notes, and contributing when requested. The final weekly group that I was able to participate in began three weeks before the end of my fieldwork, as it was only feasible following the move to Cecil Place. This consisted of a twice weekly after-school 'drop-in', during which various activities were available for young people to engage in, with no set structure beyond an opening and closing time. I attended these sessions until the culmination of my fieldwork.

Beyond the different weekly sessions, David and the youth team also organised occasional social activities which I attended during the research. These included a laser-tag night in St Aidan's for those aged 11-18, a visit to an escape room with the members of the youth leadership team, a paintballing trip for PM members, and an end of year barbecue and awards night for all young people aged 11-18.[79] During these sessions I functioned primarily as a volunteer youth worker (and additional adult, particularly important in off-site activities). As taking notes in the moment would often prove difficult, I ensured to write up

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[77] This is not to say I was not still at moments self-conscious of my writing – particularly during one service in which I found myself seated next to Steven.

[78] Unfortunately, I missed the first baptism and confirmation class as I was unaware that it was taking place until the second week.

[79] Very early in my period of fieldwork there was also a sleep-over arranged for all young people aged 11-18, but due to prior commitments I could not attend this session.

my reflections and observations as soon as was feasibly possible. These events offered a valuable insight into the importance of play and sociality in the group as well as being important opportunities to develop my relationships with members of the group in a different context. While the research had always been focused on the PM environment, it was my original intention to also gain an insight into the school contexts of the group members. However, this proved to be considerably more difficult than I had anticipated. Despite David being involved in two in-school groups, due to logistical issues it took a number of months to gain approval from one of the schools to visit. While I was able to observe and participate in two Christian Union sessions before the end of term, they offered little of value due to the limited engagement on the weeks I was allowed to attend as a result of school exams.

In the summer of 2018, I joined with a large mixed-age group from St Aidan's on their annual trip to New Wine. Those attending were primarily family groups who were regular attendees of St Aidan's, and the group included six young people aged 14-18 – including Will, an 18-year-old who had stopped coming to PM two years previously and attended the conference somewhat reluctantly at the request of his mother. During this week I camped with the St Aidan's community but volunteered (alongside David, Jordan, and James, the young adult pastor at St Aidan's) with the 'Thirst' group that ran on site each day for 14-18-year-olds, with upwards of 500 regularly attending the sessions. Through volunteering in Thirst I was able to share in the experience of the festival that had been regularly mentioned by the young people at PM as significant in their faith development, as well as observe how the practices of PM compared to those of a much larger, national, evangelical environment. While I took time each day to write in my field diary, I was also conscious of my primary responsibilities to Thirst as a volunteer youth worker during and surrounding the sessions, both in practical and pastoral aspects.

Questions Receding and Emerging

In the Introduction I outlined the research questions at the centre of this thesis, but it is in the nature of ethnographic research for these to be dynamic, with assumptions and expectations shaken up in the field. Karen O'Reilly (2012: 29-30) describes ethnographic research as a predominantly 'iterative-inductive' exercise, in which the researcher is aware of existing research and their own preconceptions when approaching the field, but is also 'open to surprises' during the research in a manner that may shift and form their theory and questions. This approach proved to be crucial in the early stages of my fieldwork as my initial

questions and expectations became increasingly unfeasible as an avenue for research, as will become clear. In the midst of this, however, new questions emerged and developed as a direct result of the ethnographic process. Prior to entering the field my research questions had already shifted in accordance with perceived gaps in the literature,[80] before settling ahead of seeking out a field site. Upon entering the field, I was interested in the role of digital and social media and international mediated evangelical networks on the formation of the evangelical subject, with adolescence identified as an important period not only for subject formation but also for increased engagement with new media. My initial research into evangelical engagement with these media, such as through hugely popular YouTube accounts alongside the more conventional platforms of cinema and worship music, indicated that this could be a fertile area of study in developing our understanding of evangelical formation. As a result, I developed a range of methods that would grant insight into this phenomenon – from digital content diaries on the website Tumblr through to 'digital go-along' interviews with my participants in order to explore their digital space. Having found a suitable field site, I was able to start conversations with the young people about their lives, faith, and social media use. Within a few weeks David allowed me an opportunity to lead a group discussion, during which I focused on digital and social media, and at the beginning of my second half-term with the group I met with five of the more experienced young people to discuss my ideas around the topic.

Yet by the time of this meeting I was already beginning to have my doubts around the direction of the research. The PM discussion indicated that the young people saw digital and social media as having limited influence on their faith, and few actively or frequently engaged with evangelical media online.[81] This was confirmed during the smaller meeting, at which the group apologetically struggled to think of examples of content that they inadvertently encountered, let alone actively sought out.[82] As I reflected on the practicalities of the methods chosen my concerns deepened further. While the methods were appealing prior to entering the field, the reality of conducting research with teenagers – and in particular with

[80] The project initially did not include a focus on youth work, for example, and instead intended to focus on an adult conservative evangelical congregation.
[81] Madge, Hemming, and Stenson (2014: 210) similarly found that the impact of the internet and digital media on youth religiosity were not as high as might be expected.
[82] As it transpired, the formal interviews that I undertook with the young people later on in the fieldwork process revealed that many were in fact engaging with some form of online evangelical content, but none regarded them as particularly influential on their faith.

those who had not actively opted-in to participation – meant that I quickly realised that my expectations were either far too demanding or geared towards a different era of social media. Significantly, they required a time commitment during a period in which studying for exams, fulfilling extra-curricular commitments, and spending time with friends were perceived as more important. As a result, it became evident that I had to focus my attention on the designated group meeting times and adjust research methods to fit these sessions. It was becoming increasingly evident that my initial research questions were lacking in both relevance and practicality. Yet by remaining in the field site, developing relationships with the participants, and familiarising myself with the culture, a new series of questions and theoretical issues began to emerge that bore more relevance to the experience of evangelical subject formation within this youth work environment.

The lack of significance of mediated relationships and online influences in this process in turn pointed towards the particular significance of physical, 'offline' relationships in subject formation. This not only served as a tentative early finding, but also guided my research going forward as I turned to focusing solely on the processes and relationships that were in place within the community itself. As I shall outline below, many of these processes and experiences were familiar to me as a result of my previous experience in evangelical youth groups, both as a leader and as a teenager myself. Thus, the process of participant observation was a process of 'making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar' (van Maanan 1995: 20). Aspects that I had taken for granted for years – for example, the fact that playing a game is a natural feature of Christian youth groups yet would be bizarre in an adult context – I challenged myself to look at afresh. As the new strangeness developed over time and I continued to reflect on my conversations, observations, and experiences, I began to look for a model that might explain the structures and practices that were present in the group. Alongside my own observations were discussions with the young people – most notably in the group meeting described above – which in turn contributed to my developing awareness of the context. As I considered the desire not only for formation but for *transformation* within this stage of evangelicalism, my attention began to focus on seeing the means by which this could be understood as a rite of passage, distinct from the 'ordinary' practices of adult evangelicalism. While my initial questions and expectations had been challenged by my experiences in the field, as time progressed these same experiences began to form the questions that underlie the present thesis.

In-Depth Interviews

In addition to the fieldwork I also conducted a number of in-depth interviews with a range of relevant individuals. While both aspects of participant observation grant insights into the experience of the group and its practices, partnering this with the voices of young people themselves was essential in order to gain as full an understanding as possible. Conversations during fieldwork would be useful in this regard, however I decided that substantial interviews were also needed in order that these voices could be heard as fully as possible in the research. In highlighting interviews with her young participants, Bales (2005: 11) argues for a 'child-centred' approach to religious research of childhood, centring on the actual accounts of children in contrast to the memories of adults. While children are 'some of the most obvious participants in religious life', she says, 'all but a few scholars continue to overlook them', leaving the impression that 'scholars assume that children are incapable of thinking seriously about their participation in religious life' (Bales 2005: 12). Through prioritising child-centred methods and '[l]etting the children speak for themselves' in interviews, Bales (2005: 15, 14) takes seriously the perspectives and insights of children, ensuring that the research is not '*about* children rather than informed *by* children' (emphasis original), as so many previous studies had been. The child-centred approach therefore ensures that rather than depending solely on the reflections of adults on their childhood, the experiences of children are themselves valued and highlighted as important. Rachael Shillitoe (2018: 44; 81) similarly argues that studies on religious childhood have too frequently been 'seen through adult-generated frameworks and analysed through adult-centric assumptions and agendas', and countered this in her own study of collective worship in primary schools by 'placing the child as the expert and the researcher as the novice' in her fieldwork. Through prioritising interviews alongside the participant observation, and through this amplifying the voices of the young people in the research, I intended for this to be a 'youth-centred' study.

The youth-centred approach, central to the project as a whole but most notable in the interviews, also highlights another priority of this thesis: that of understanding children and young people as interesting and valuable in their own right, not solely as future adults. Shillitoe (2018: 48) argues that existing literature frequently 'treats childhood as a phase of

becoming',[83] with children in works on religion therefore 'seen as unfinished and lacking the skills necessary to be a competent social actor'. Through a child- or youth-centred approach we can move beyond this to understanding children and young people 'in their own right, not solely in relation to the needs, wants and desires of adults' (Shillitoe 2018: 22). That is not to say that this present research disregards the perceptions of adult leaders in St Aidan's, nor their perception of young people as beings in formation – as I have already outlined, the influence of these perspectives on the unique structures of youth work in evangelicalism lie at the heart of this thesis. But rather I seek to understand both the structures and expectations in place for the young people *alongside the* direct experiences and perceptions of the young people themselves within (and beyond) these structures, understanding them as independent religious actors in their own right. Conversations and interviews with the young people are central to this.

I spoke with 15 young people (including Will who, as mentioned above, had not attended PM for two years), three members of the church leadership team (including David on three occasions and Andy, an associate vicar at St Aidan's and father of one of the members of PM), and seven former members between the age of 18 and 24. Four of the interviews with young people were paired interviews at the request of the individuals involved. The semi-structured interviews lasted from around 40 minutes to two-hours, though with the young people I limited the interviews to one-hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by myself. Prior to each interview I received signed informed consent forms from participants and, where necessary, from parents – including information on how the interviews would be recorded and stored. The interviews with the young people and adult leaders were all done in person, as was the interview with Joshua, a former member of PM who had returned to his family home after graduating from university. The other interviews with former members all took place over Skype, with the exception of Helen, with whom limited internet reliability meant that the interview was conducted in text form through WhatsApp.

The majority of interviews took place in the St Aidan's premises in rooms adjacent to the main youth space. This decision was made for a number of reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, the child protection procedure in the church dictated that there always be

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[83] Chris Boyatzis (2011: 20) likewise criticizes developmental-psychological approaches towards spirituality that emphasise 'maturity', in which 'children are viewed merely as "spiritual becomings" rather than spiritual "beings."'

another responsible adult in the building when meeting with a young person, and this was most easily done within the church itself. Secondly, in the case of the adult interviewees, this made pragmatic sense as for each of them this was also their place of work. Thirdly, this was an environment with which the young people would be naturally familiar and would therefore hopefully feel comfortable. Prior to David telling me of the church procedure I had intended to give the young people the opportunity to choose a (public) space in which they felt most comfortable, and while this was not possible, being able to use an environment which the young people were used to (and, as I shall explore in Chapter 3, felt a sense of ownership over) served the same purpose. Finally, this environment was (usually) quiet – with the exception of those interviews that took place in the period before the beginning of a PM session, during which the gradually building sound of arriving young people would occasionally leak through. There were five exceptions to this for the in-person interviews. The interview with Will and the joint interview with Lily and Molly both took place at New Wine, while the interview with Joshua took place in his parents' kitchen. The final example of this was the interview with Hannah, which took place in a local branch of Creams.[84] As she was over the age of 18 at the time of the interview, I allowed Hannah to select the location, however in retrospect the noisy atmosphere was detrimental to the transcription process. Alongside these formal interviews I also met with four members of the youth leadership team for an hour in a local coffee shop to discuss the progression of the research. This was also recorded and transcribed.

The ease with which I recruited participants for interview varied significantly depending on the group I was targeting. The young people themselves were the most difficult to engage. Despite having built up relationships with the group over six months prior to asking for any interview participants, few were forthcoming when I initially did make a request. As a result, I determined to develop a means by which I could both add to the excitement of participation and lessen the monotony of my weekly requests during the notice period of the PM sessions. I therefore created a 'Treat Spinner' with a range of different appealing food or drink options in six segments. This was then publicised on the PM Instagram page (see Figure 2 for the image I created for this purpose). Each week I would invite a young person to spin the wheel, while building up the tension in the room, and offer to purchase the associated item as a

[84] Creams is a dessert focused café that was highly popular with the young people in the group, and the opening of a branch close to St Aidan's elicited much excitement and anticipation.

thank-you for anyone willing to participate in an interview. While the specific food item was not strictly adhered to, and the spin would often be re-done until it landed on the segment most popular amongst the group, the novelty of the activity and the prospect of food ultimately proved popular and garnered a number of participants. The process was also eased after the initial interviews had been completed and early participants were then able to reassure the rest of the group, often commenting on the experience of the interview in very positive terms. Interestingly, the interviews with former members were far easier to arrange despite my lack of personal relationship with any of the participants. Offers of food were not needed – and indeed Joshua even cooked lunch for me during our interview – and everyone I approached was immediately willing to participate and help in the research. I suspect that this contrast is due in part to the fact that all of these participants were currently or had previously studied at university, and therefore had an awareness of the research process that was not possible for the young people in PM. Two of these former members, who both happened to be siblings of existing members, were individuals I had met at services over university vacations. For the rest of these participants I relied upon 'snowballing', asking each interviewee whether they could recommend anyone who might be useful to talk to and put me in contact.

Figure 2: An image of the 'Treat Spinner', overlaid with digital graphics, created for the PM Instagram account. The image was posted with a caption encouraging young people to talk with me if they were interested in participating in an interview.

For the interviews I used a semi-structured approach, following a pre-set interview schedule (Appendix 3) while allowing for the perceptions or interests of the interviewee to shift the focus or order of questions where necessary or valuable, particularly at moments where it became clear that my own perceptions or priorities differed significantly from those of the participants. The less formal and rigid style also worked within the context of my relationship with the young people and enabled them to feel at ease in the situation. Following a pilot interview with a family friend who is also an adolescent evangelical Christian, I invited the members of the youth leadership team to discuss with me the interview schedule I had developed prior to a PM session. Over a box of doughnuts, I shared with them the questions as they were and we talked through some potential improvements, particularly in incorporating a question specifically focused on the role of the family. With their recommended adjustments made, the interview schedule consisted of eight primary questions, each with potential follow up questions as necessary. Multiple themes were explored through the interviews with young people: their historical engagement with Christianity, their opinions of the group, their engagement with and experience of Christianity and spiritual practices outside of the group time – including their experiences of being a Christian in their peer group – and their expectations for their church life after leaving PM. Continuing my initial interest in mediated influences, I also incorporated questions that asked about their perceptions of Christianity and culture and their engagement with spirituality on social media. As with all aspects of ethnography, the creation of an interview schedule was an ongoing iterative process, and for each interview I adjusted my approach or wording slightly, learning from each previous attempt as well as responding to the particular reactions and interests of the interviewee. Combined with the fluidity of the semi-structured approach, the result was that each interview could be adapted for the individual participant.

My interview schedule for the former members of PM (including Will) was largely based on the same questions as for current members, with the addition of a question oriented towards their engagement with Christianity since leaving PM. The varied nature of their post-PM experiences as well as the fact that I had no observational experience of their time in PM meant that these interviews varied even more greatly than those with the young people, and accordingly had a high level of flexibility with questions. For the adult interviewees, I created a new interview schedule for each individual according to their particular roles within the church and relationship to the group, again following the flexibility of the semi-structured

approach within the interview itself.[85] These largely explored their intentions behind youth work in general and the specific practices used in contrast to the adult spaces. As mentioned above, these again took place in the second half of my fieldwork and the conversations were inspired by my experiences in the field.

Research Ethics

I received ethical approval for the project from the University of Kent ethics committee, and also received approval for the research not only from David but from the wider leadership team at St Aidan's. While it was impractical to gain signed consent from every young person in a group as fluid in membership as PM, I endeavoured to make my identity as researcher as widely known as possible in PM through various methods described below. As informed consent in the ethnographic environment is an ongoing process, the young people were also made aware that they could come to me or David at any stage with questions or concerns. When a guest speaker was present, I would also seek to introduce myself and ensure that they were happy for me to take notes during the session. With regards to the interviews, I followed conventional guidelines according to the age of my participants. As the majority of the interviewees were over 16 it was only required that I receive their informed consent, and in these cases, they were given a participant information sheet (Appendix 1) to read and two consent forms (Appendix 2) to sign prior to the interview taking place. They were also informed that they could withdraw consent at any time. On the occasions in which I interviewed a young person between the age of 14 and 16 it was also necessary to gain the informed consent of a parent or guardian. In these situations, I met with the young person before the interview – either during the PM session preceding the interview date, or in the case of interviews at New Wine earlier on in the day – and gave them information sheets and consent forms for their parent or guardian as well as themselves. The signed consent forms were then brought to the interviews. For interviews with former members that were conducted over the internet, the information sheets and consent forms were sent prior to the interview and these forms were then signed, scanned, and returned via email. Correct ethical procedure was also followed with regards to the digital methods that were present

[85] I have included the interview schedule for one of my interviews with David in Appendix 3.

at the beginning of the research process and were clarified with David according to the guidelines of St Aidan's.[86]

Alongside the ethical expectations of my University, I also followed the guidelines of St Aidan's and the Church of England, in particular with relation to child protection. This involved undertaking a Disclosure and Barring Service check with the church, but also following procedures such as those outlined above with regards to ensuring that another adult was in the building when interviewing a young person alone. In the context of New Wine this was extended further, with strict guidance over which adults were allowed in the youth space, and this approach was mirrored in St Aidan's following the move to Cecil Place, at which point only youth workers wearing their identification were allowed on the youth floor during PM or other youth group sessions. In considering conducting interviews the relationship between anonymity and child protection came to the fore. Alongside assuring the young people that their responses would remain anonymous and would not be repeated back to David, their parents, or other members of the St Aidan's staff team, I also had to clarify that I would need to report any concerns I had about issues they raised that may indicate the welfare of themselves or others is at risk. At all times the welfare of the young people was of the highest priority in my fieldwork and has continued to be in the course of my writing up of the thesis. Outside of the interview periods I also followed safeguarding procedure, and any conversations, comments, or behaviours that emerged that raised concerns would be reported to David as appropriate according to these guidelines.

For purposes of anonymity I have used pseudonyms for the church (including its buildings, and all the named groups within) as well as all individuals involved, both leaders and young people.[87] While some have previously chosen to name the churches involved in an ethnographic congregational study, this has largely been on account of the particularly distinctive history or characteristics of the church involved (see Guest 2007: 54-75 for an example of this), and this was not deemed necessary for this particular project. Alongside pseudonymisation, I have also removed any information that may identify individuals or

[86] This included, for example, not actively 'adding' or 'following' any young people on the social media profiles that I had developed for the purposes of the research, and instead publicising these accounts during the explanation of the research process and allowing them to 'add' or 'follow' these as they felt comfortable.

[87] During the interviews I offered the young people the opportunity to suggest their own pseudonym, and while this invoked excitement and discussion at first, only Christopher suggested one. However, after further conversation we decided that 'Dragon' would feel out of place in the thesis.

groups in other ways, while other information that may be deemed as sensitive has either been removed or presented without attribution to any particular pseudonym, for additional assurance.

Positionality and Participant Observation in PM

As a part of my meetings with David prior to the start of the fieldwork, we discussed the practical nature of my research and my role within the group over my period of fieldwork. It was evident early in the research design that this project could not straightforwardly incorporate participant observation approaches. Unlike a traditional congregational ethnography of adult congregations, my being a 26-year-old at the time precluded me from sharing the participatory experience of the teenagers who were the focus of my study. O'Reilly (2009: 8) addresses this when she notes that 'it is important to remember that the researcher's own personal attributes… may affect access. Becoming part of a group, participating in their daily activities, and attempting to blend into the background are not easy when the one thing that sets the group apart from other groups is skin colour or sex' – or, in the case of a youth group, age. Quite apart from the distance that may naturally emerge as a result of being a researcher within a setting such as this, it would have been impossible to attempt to join the group as a member due to the fact that I was 8 years older than the upper limit. While I shared a number of characteristics with my participants, as shall be explored below, the age differential was a primary barrier in equal participation in the group. As a result, a different approach and position would be necessary. While, as Marvasti (2004: 36) suggests, the essence of this form of qualitative research is the two 'seemingly contradictory activities' of participating and observing in the same context, it was essential for the research that I did not sacrifice either aspect, and it was therefore necessary to establish a means by which I could actively participate in the group – even if this was participation of a different form to that of the young people.

One important element to consider is the relationship to power within the space, particularly the potential for power differential between adult and child. This has a particular significance in studies based in school environments, wherein Jon Swain's (2006: 208-9) approach of adopting the 'least-teacher role' has led to researchers such as Shillitoe (2018: 89) and Peter Hemming (2015: 40) taking on positions of teaching assistant in the classroom. Shillitoe (2018: 89) describes various approaches she took in order to reduce the power dynamic – for example, asking the children to refer to her by her first name and taking an active interest in their non-academic lives and interests. However, within youth work this teacher-student

relationship is already actively disrupted.[88] Creating relationships with the young people that engage with their whole lives has been a consistent priority of the youth work environments in which I had previously worked, and the experience of telling a visitor or new member that they need not call me 'Sir' – "I'm Rob, I'm not your teacher!" – is a common one. Informal dress is expected (to the extent of resulting in light-hearted mockery from the outside on occasion (see Figure 3 for an example)), and active awareness of youth interests is seen as valuable in developing relationships with the young people. Of course, for all youth workers this needs to be a carefully balanced line to walk in order to be effective, attempting to empathise and relate with young people without pretending to be a teenager themselves – a falsehood that will be immediately detected and derided by young people. As I shall outline in Chapter 4, the model of teaching and leadership used, along with particular practices such as play, also seek to lessen the power differential between adult and young person. This is not to say that these are completely eradicated, but the expected positionality and behaviour of youth workers does go some way to minimising the difficulties experienced in some other research with children and young people. This was furthered by my approaching the group as an *assistant* youth worker – similar in some ways to the role of teaching assistant mentioned above – in which I was not expected to be a disciplinarian if it was so required, although I still had to be observant to situations that required particular safety intervention. The fact that prior to starting my research I had attained 12 years of experience as a volunteer children's and youth worker in multiple Christian settings, including groups which shared many similarities with PM, meant that this role and the expected relationship between young people and youth leader was one familiar to me. As a result, I was able to suggest to David at the beginning of our discussions that I participate in a similar capacity in the youth contexts at St Aidan's, and he was able to trust that this would be a benefit to him and, more significantly, the young people.

[88] A central feature of 'informal education', as described in the Introduction, is that it stands in intentional distinction from the position of schoolteacher (J. Griffiths 2013: 58). It is therefore within the natural position of a youth worker to adopt the 'least-teacher role' within a youth group.

Figure 3: A meme parodying expected Christian youth leader attire (Dust Off The Bible 2016).

Researcher, Youth Worker

In these groups I therefore undertook the dual position of researcher and voluntary youth worker. With regards to my role as a researcher, it was important that the young people were as aware as possible that this was the primary purpose behind my presence. In order to do this effectively I utilised a number of methods, alongside the more informal conversational reminders that would naturally take place. Firstly, in each of the first two weeks I was introduced to the group by David and spoke from the front about the project,

inviting questions or concerns.[89] At the beginning of each academic term I further reminded the group of my role as researcher from the front in a similar manner. Secondly, I led two sessions at PM over the course of my fieldwork, both with an explicit link to my research and with reminders to the young people that these sessions would form a part of the data for my thesis. Thirdly, the process of attempting to recruit interview participants, as referenced above, gave me weekly opportunities to remind the whole group of my role and the nature of the research. Fourthly, David occasionally made remarks in the usual course of a session that had the secondary result of reminding the group of my difference. Finally, I endeavoured to make my notetaking conspicuous without being disruptive. Through physically detaching myself slightly[90] and visibly writing in my notebook during this period I intended to remind the young people of my position as a researcher in each session.

The second aspect of my positionality within the group was my role as volunteer youth worker. This involved following in many of the same routines and responsibilities as other adults involved including organising the snacks and devising and running games, as well as helping out with any necessary tasks for the delivery of sessions. This appeared to be appreciated, and at the end of year dinner I was awarded the 'Hyper Helper' award by the group (Figure 4). While I was happy to help with practical aspects of the group, I was clear with David from our initial meetings that I did not wish to be involved in any form of teaching. In the two sessions that I did run for the group I endeavoured to avoid prescriptive teaching and instead lead with questions and encourage discussion amongst the young people.

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[89] While the young people showed limited interest, the questions proved highly valuable as an opportunity to clarify what research did – and more importantly, did *not* – entail. For example, in response to a question I was able to assure the group that I would not be walking around the group with a microphone seeking journalistic style interviews, and nor was I seeking to 'catch them out' in any way.

[90] The desk at which I was seated was positioned immediately behind a sofa usually seating at least three young people as part of a loose semi-circle.

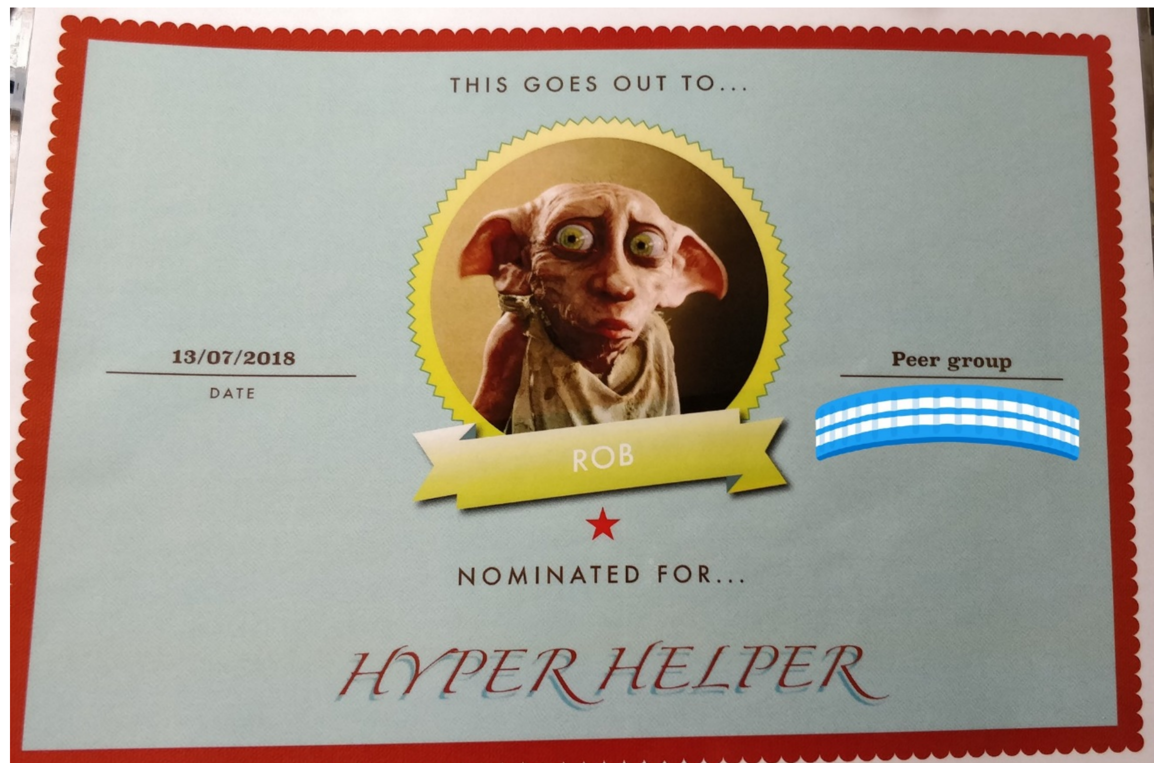

Figure 4: The 'Hyper Helper' award certificate I was presented at the end of year dinner for 11-18-year-olds. The name of the group has been obscured.

These two positions were constantly intertwined in my time with the group in a manner wherein each inescapably influenced the other. In part this is in the nature of ethnographic research, the ongoing 'tension between participation (and involvement) and observation (and distance)', as O'Reilly (2012: 106) terms it, a tension which 'does not have to be resolved' as 'it is what gives participant observation its strength' Yet the nature of in *loco parentis* responsibility that came with the role of participant involvement contributes additional complexity to this tension. On a pragmatic level this meant that I was required to take on responsibilities that were sometimes to the detriment of my research. For example, in my third session with PM they spent the first half hour with the main congregation for the period of sung worship. I was eager to observe this to see how the young people behaved in a larger group for worship, and in particular in the adult space. But David was concerned that not all of the young people would be aware of the change in routine despite the message that he had sent out over the week. He therefore wanted someone to stay in the youth hut, and it soon became clear that he particularly wanted me. As a result, I felt obliged to stay rather than observe the service. Fortunately, I was able to join the group on other occasions, and after Jordan joined the group the reliance on me as an over-18 lessened, but this was nevertheless an important point in my growing awareness of the dual-roles I possessed in this space.

Beyond this were situations that emerged from my relationship with and position of responsibility for the individual young people. As I have mentioned above the concern for the well-being of the young people in my care was paramount throughout the project, and at moments this superseded the priorities of the research. Alongside times in which young people disclosed safeguarding concerns, there were other encounters in which I felt a moral obligation to support the young person however I could. This included, for example, offering pastoral support to a young person who had sought me out following a family bereavement. I may have directed his question onto David – as I did on other occasions – but in this scenario, I made the judgement that he had intentionally sought me out for a reason in this particular instance. As a result, I premised my response primarily from my position as youth worker. Yet this incident also indicates one of the benefits of my dual role, with my previous experience being an essential feature of this. While it took time for the young people to understand the nature of research and what it meant for me to be there as researcher, I could in the meantime develop personal relationships with them in a way in which they felt comfortable through a position with which they were already familiar. Along with knowing how and when to offer practical help, my familiarity with a youth group context and the expectations and responsibilities of youth workers meant that I quickly felt at ease within the group environment, and my fieldnotes indicate that by my second session I felt comfortable within the context and able to start building relationships. I believe my position of responsibility and my familiarity with Christian youth work spaces, alongside the more social environment of the PM group, enabled potential barriers to be broken down both for myself and for the young people. As I shall explore in Chapter 4, the practices of the group were intentionally designed in order to foster relationships and break down social barriers not only between the young people but also between the young people and the adult leaders. I, and this research as a result, were prime beneficiaries of this.

Reflexive Research

The above indicates the extent to which I was constantly interacting with and becoming a part of the field site at the centre of my research. Without this incorporation my research would have been impossible, but it was also important to reflect regularly on my experiences, in particular through the taking of fieldnotes as outlined above. This awareness that 'researchers are always part of the social world they study' and therefore 'should continually reflect on their own role in the research process and on the wider context in which it occurs' is understood under the term *reflexivity* (Hammersley 2004: 934). This

concept is not a peripheral one to ethnographic study – rather, as Swinton and Mowat (2006: 59) argue, it is 'perhaps the most crucial dimension of the qualitative research process', while Kieran Flanagan (2007: 1) states that reflexivity is *the* defining feature of a sociologist, arguing that 'reflexivity is the term that recognises this career in disciplinary identity and affiliation'. The 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences has sought to move the discipline away from epistemological realism and a perception that the researcher can uncover 'objective' observations detached from their own presence. As Swinton and Mowat (2006: 60) argue, reflexivity emerges from the idea that 'such objectivity is in fact a myth and… researchers are participants and actors within the research process, whether that is acknowledged or otherwise'. The researcher must realise that this objectivity is an impossibility and they are therefore 'only able to present part of the picture, but our task is to argue that this is the best account possible of the part that we have chosen to study' (Kaufman 2015: 97). A central (but not exclusive) element of reflexivity is what can be termed 'personal reflexivity', described by Willig (2008: 10) as involving 'reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests… and social identities have shaped the research'. This must be a constant feature throughout a research project, from establishing the initial questions through to concluding the write-up, with every stage involving persistent self-reflection.

Elements of this form of reflexivity have already been explored in this chapter through the exploration of my position within the group, including understanding the nature of my personal relationships with the participants. Both my roles and my personal characteristics at times would have strengthened my relationships (or possibility of relationships) with the young people, but equally provided distinctive difficulties. The familiarity and relationality of a youth worker was contrasted with the role of researcher, something that was not only unfamiliar but potentially adverse as it evoked images of an invasive and cold journalist. The fact that I came from an evangelical Christian background and shared many of their beliefs would have been a reassuring marker of comradery, but I was also nearly a decade older than most members, not only of a different generation but crucially of a different life stage in what is fundamentally a peer-oriented environment. Along with reflecting on how I related with the young people in the group, it was also important that I was aware of my own experiences and emotions and how they may differ from those of the young people in the group – elements that were again impacted significantly by my position. Interviews and informal conversations were invaluable opportunities to discuss my experiences and how they compared with the young people who came weekly for their own benefit, seeking spiritual development or simply peer-interaction.

While ongoing reflection of my experiences in the group was important, central to this reflexivity was an awareness of my personal historical experiences with evangelical youth work and how that may colour my perceptions and expectations of the group and its members. This personal history – and ongoing presence – has influenced not only my time in the group, but every stage from my journey to the question through to process of writing up. As the child of an Anglican Vicar, I grew up attending an evangelical church in Bristol and attended children's and youth groups there until I left for university at 19. While neither as charismatic nor as sizeable as St Aidan's there was nevertheless a familiarity with my own experience in the group. During my fieldwork I would be drawn back on occasion to consider how approaches had changed since my adolescence, how topics were engaged with or avoided, while reflecting on my own journey of challenging and exploring faith identity. This pedagogical approach of questioning was a central part of my experience growing up as a teenage Christian. Intellectual approaches to faith in my church were common, and at different points the volunteer leadership group included a university lecturer, a senior partner in a national law firm, a barrister, a judge, a paediatric heart surgeon, and a consultant psychiatrist – alongside the paid youth worker who had left school at 15 – with an unspoken expectation that we as young people would attend (Russell Group) universities following A-Levels. This not only contributed towards the ongoing inquisitiveness into questions of religion and Christianity that led me from Religious Studies A-Level, through to Theology at undergraduate, and eventually to this PhD, but also meant that I was familiar with the pedagogical modes in operation within PM – and yet had never questioned them prior to undertaking this research.

Of course, neither adolescence nor religion are ever exclusively cognitive and rational experiences, and my teenage years of faith were often tumultuous and emotional in ways that have continued to influence how I understand myself as a religious subject. Experiences from this time both inside and outside of the group, from individual life-moments such as early relationships, the presence or absence of friends in youth groups, and decisions over peer-pressure through to collective events such as visiting large Christian conferences and even a school trip to Auschwitz continue to resonate in my religious self-understanding. A decade before hearing the names of Victor Turner or Arnold van Gennep or understanding the concept of a rite of passage, my confirmation service proved to be a genuine pivot point in the story of my faith in a radically unexpected way. After leaving school I involved myself in Christian youth work on a 'gap year' and continued at university alongside my studies, and for a period considered it as a future career. My academic interest in the sociology of

evangelicalism is not solely a reflection of my personal life, however, and the teaching I received as an undergraduate in this area was the key factor in my settling in this area. Nevertheless, the interest has always also been a personal one, desiring to better understand a vast and twisting movement that I have been a part of and yet have long had struggles with.

Despite these links with the current thesis, the research questions did not originate in this form and, in many ways, I perceived the journey towards the specific youth work focus to be a pragmatic one. As I have outlined above, my starting point for the PhD had been an interest in adult British conservative evangelicals and their (potential) relationship with American evangelicalism. While still within the broad category of evangelicalism, these are elements that are far more alien to my own personal religious identity than the final research questions. As my questions morphed over the first year of research it became clear that focusing on youth work would be a novel and enlightening approach, yet it was some time before I realised that this was to be an inescapably personal project – beyond the sense that all ethnographic researchers become intertwined with their object of study. Through studying evangelical youth work and its influence on the role of subject formation – especially in a context such as St Aidan's with so many parallels to my own experience – I may also be gaining an insight into my own experience as an adolescent that was so formational in my present self-understanding. At no point did I desire this project to be an autoethnography, and the following chapters focus exclusively on my experiences at St Aidan's, but the experience of this research has provided as many personal insights as it has academic. My awareness of these personal ties also resulted in an additional layer of caution over my perceptions of the group and in particular of the experiences of the young people. I was conscious of the risk of projecting my own memories of adolescence, of the concerns and questions, beliefs and emotions that I experienced (or believed I experienced, with a decade of hindsight and muddied memories) during this life stage onto the young people in PM. Again, formal interviews and informal conversations provided valuable opportunities to clarify my perceptions with the young people themselves to help avoid this pitfall, while my shared background also enabled me to probe and perceive in ways that may not have been possible to someone new to the movement. Yet this familiarity also required that I had to actively challenge myself to move beyond my familiarities and assumptions in order to see the context in new ways from a research perspective. In making the 'familiar strange' I began to question elements that I had always taken for granted – such as the fact that certain practices were only 'suitable' for children and young people – and move beyond my personal

experience towards perceiving this space through fresh eyes. Again, this can never be a perfect exercise but can bring us closer to a broad perspective of the events being experienced and witnessed.

Objectivity in ethnographic research is an impossible goal, and in attempting to ignore their own presence and past in an attempt to seek this goal the researcher risks the integrity of their entire project. Yet through incorporating reflexive practices during the course of the research process, I cannot (and would not want to) claim to provide a wholly objective viewpoint, but nevertheless can offer a greater insight into the formation of evangelical subjectivity in an adolescent youth group context through a social scientific and ethnographic lens.

Findings from the Field

In this chapter I have outlined the importance of the ethnographic approach in addressing the research questions described in the previous chapters. Through a combination of embedded participant observation within the youth group and interviews with (in particular) young people, I was able to gain insights into the nature of youth subjectivity in this environment that would have been impossible through other methods. Yet the iterative nature of ethnographic research meant that my initial questions and expectations were challenged by my early experiences and so, in turn, the method began to redefine the nature of the research questions. While my position within and relationship with the group was a point of constant reflection – and 'true' experience of the group was inevitably limited not least due to my age – through incorporating the voices of young people into the heart of the findings and (where possible) into the construction of the research method, I endeavoured to make this a 'youth-centred' study. Over the following three chapters I will use the findings from my time with PM to argue that this life-stage can be seen as a form of un-ceremonial rite of passage, focusing on three particular areas. Firstly, in Chapter 3 I will look at the nature of separation within the group, separated from both the church and the outside world, spatially and behaviourally. In Chapter 4 I will explore the idea of communitas, examining the particular significance of friendships and peer-based religiosity within this group. Finally, in Chapter 5 I will examine the nature of anti-structure in the chapter focusing on the pedagogical approaches in PM. The methods described in this chapter are at the heart of, and inseparable from, the findings ahead.

Chapter 3: Separation and the Self in Sacred Space and Secular Society

In the dying light of an autumnal evening – even one as overcast as that – St Aidan's was a powerful sight. Sat in a leafy residential suburb in London's 'Zone 4', the orange and cream brick of the grand symmetrical façade seemed to glow in the twilight. As I walked up the driveway I was met by two near identical wooden doors, each eight feet or so high, on either side of a towering central window. From my previous visits I knew that one led to the reception, and one to the main meeting area where that night's service would take place. But as I approached, some two and a half hours before the main service was due to begin, it was clear that neither of those were available to me. As the service start time drew nearer, the left-hand door would be opened as congregants were ushered in with a smile by a dedicated member of the 'Welcome Team', ready with a handful of notice sheets outlining the events occurring not only that evening but across the week. The soft glow of light and the growing hubbub of small talk over contemporary worship music, either from the band going through last minute rehearsals or a recording played over the speakers, would leak out offering an enticing escape from the brisk October air. But at that moment, with the sun yet to fully set, both doors were firmly locked shut and no light was visible through any of the many windows, no sound escaping through the cracks beneath the doors. From the outside, the grand old building appeared temporarily lifeless, though far from desolate.

Despite my destination not being the church itself but rather the youth hall that stood at the back, in my two visits up to that point I had always accessed the hall via the church and therefore through one of those two main doors. No signage is available for those like me seeking an alternative entrance or simply wishing to know where the youth group was to gather. After a few moments I considered calling my contact in the group for clarification, wondering if perhaps I had my timings wrong, before I spotted a small and weathered wooden gate at the far-right hand side of the building as I faced it. It was tucked between a seasonally leafless hedge and a (relatively) recent extension to the church building but set back in the building's shadow, two or three feet from the line of the brickwork – further hiding it from the attention of new attendees. While that evening the spaces were vacant, in future weeks I also encountered cars parked in the area immediately in front of the gate. Feeling a small sense of pride at finding it in the first place, I gave the gate a push.

This experience would change a few weeks' later when both the service and the youth group would start at 5pm – for the previous few years the service had started two hours later than the youth group, resulting in the emptiness of the entranceway. This shift might have brought about a situation in which both adults and young people arrived together before they split to their different locales, perhaps offering opportunities for mingling in the driveway in front of the main doors. However, the differing relationship with time across the two groups made this unlikely. For those attending the main service the expectation was arrival around fifteen minutes prior to the start time in order to have a biscuit, a cup of Fairtrade filter coffee, and a brief catch up with fellow congregants before being seated by 5pm. For the youth, the advertised start time was more akin to the time at which the doors open at a concert. They were welcome from this time, and many took advantage of it, but the organised activities were unlikely to start until at least half an hour later.[91] As a result, only the latecomers to the service and the early attenders of the youth group were likely to cross paths in front of the old building, those over-18 being invited in to the large space to the left while those below made their way through the barely lit side gate to the right.

The gate was stiff and required a firm shove before relenting, and I was met with a walk up the gloomy alleyway. A wheelchair-accessible ramp led to the side door of the main worship space – another door that remained closed as I arrived. Ignoring this, one instead had to go up a small slope and around a corner that led to the youth space. Yet here I was not met with a state-of-the-art youth complex or anything that attempted to match the gravitas of the adult environment. Instead, there stood a set of three interconnected huts behind the church (Figure 5), all on a slide towards external disrepair since the decision by St Aidan's to purchase a new church building a few years before. They sat on raised wooden decking in what once must have been the church garden but had become largely overgrown, overlooked by the railway line that ran behind the back of the church grounds. They were reminiscent of a site-manager's office on a construction project, or the hastily built prefabricated classrooms that adorned school grounds around the country in the second half of the twentieth century, and years of British weather had not improved the external aesthetic. The battered exterior, worn away paintwork, abandoned garden chairs – they

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[91] As I shall outline in the next chapter, this initial period prior to the beginning of structured activities was of great significance to the culture of the group and the formation of the subject within this space, though David specifically referenced the adolescent relationship with time when describing the origin of this period of the night.

certainly lacked any of the opulence of the building in whose shadow they lay. The interior was more welcoming, with large murals made up by the different youth groups decorating sections of the white walls, and a string of faux-vintage soft lightbulbs had been hung across the room to give a friendly atmosphere. The room was full of soft and colourful furniture, many pieces designed to be shared and used accordingly. Some were fixed, most were not. The space was homely, informal, and somewhat makeshift, in contrast to the slick and professional feel of the adult space with its leather sofas, large and numerous screens, and professional standard stage lighting.

Figure 5: The front exterior of the youth huts, behind the main St Aidan's building.

Despite only being an early visit, this architectural contrast to me pointed to an obvious conclusion: as far as the church was concerned, the youth work was a fundamentally secondary concern, not deserving of a space in the main buildings. Pushed into the back yard, into the outhouses, while the adults met in the more central and better equipped space. I was not at that point sure whether the young people themselves were aware of or had great concerns about this – this division might even have had a sense of subversive appeal for them, hidden away from the conventional, adult entrance of the main building, only discoverable to the informed – but the visual and the embodied experience certainly appeared to suggest not only a *division* between the adult and youth congregations, but an inferiority.

Yet one of the most exciting periods of an ethnographic project is the moment at which the researcher becomes aware of their unconscious presuppositions by virtue of them being

subverted through experience and the eyes of participants. This account exposes my initial assumptions of the link between architectural inequality and perceptions of inferiority among the young people in the group. As a 26-year-old churchgoer I was used to being at the centre of the sanctuary, the focus of the weekly worship orienting around adults such as myself. As a result, approaching the sacred building I felt slighted by the necessity of being pushed to the back, away from what appeared to be the clear focus of the wider church spatially and therefore symbolically. Yet as I continued to attend the group and familiarised myself not only with the young people but with the space itself, growing increasingly attached to the chaotic and informal environment, I began to realise an aspect that I should have considered from the beginning, an aspect I had forgotten from my own youth. It became clear that for these young people, the importance of space, and the associated separation from 'adult' contexts, goes far beyond the external aesthetics of a building.

Separated, Inside and Out

Within the conventional rites of passage process as described by both Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, separation from 'ordinary' spaces and structures is frequently an initial requirement prior to the process of transformation through the liminal period. Set apart from the rest of society, this separation can then provide fertile ground in which liminal experience can occur as the old self is broken down and the new one formed. As explored in Chapter 1, spatial aspects are often important but are not the only markers of separation. Structural or behavioural distinctiveness can also be evidence of this separation, signifying 'the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions… or from both' (Turner 2008: 94). Within St Aidan's we see these different layers evidenced in the relationship between the youth group and the adult environment, distinctions that will be explored throughout this thesis in order to understand the nature of subject formation within this community. Through these forms of separation, the individual is marked as a liminal subject, an evangelical in production, exploring, experimenting, and constructing themselves amongst their peers prior to entering the adult community. In considering the youth environment in St Aidan's as a form of rite of passage, therefore, understanding the nature of this separation is invaluable. In this separation within the church, the young person enters into a temporary liminal space, ripe for formation, with the eventual desire that they will one day leave this separation and re-enter the adult environment.

A liminal existence is not purely the reserve of the young person within St Aidan's, however. The nature of evangelicalism itself encourages a perspective of (semi-)permanent liminality, extending from the moment of conversion to the point of eventual reintegration with the heavenly community. In the meantime, they are to understand themselves as 'set apart' from those around them in earthly culture and to desire to act in ways that distinguish themselves from 'the world'. This form of liminality thus demands a level of separation from non-evangelicals, albeit one that also allows for engagement in order to enable evangelising in word and deed. As Anna Strhan (2015: 203) argues, adult evangelicals desire to distinguish themselves from non-Christian society by engaging in 'interactions through which they seek to separate themselves from others, as 'exiles', forming themselves as oriented towards different values than those they describe as dominant in wider society'. In St Aidan's this is marked particularly by distinctive (and ideally attractive) ethical behaviours and expectations, driven by the desire to be '*in* the world but not *of* the world'. This desire for distinction is deeply intertwined with an anticipation of worldly rejection and even hostility, with these responses being understood as a positive indicator of truly distinctive faith. In this form of liminality, conclusion is only possible eschatologically as the distinction between heaven and 'the world' is broken down completely. Thus, we see simultaneous layers of liminality and separation taking place for the young people at St Aidan's, prepared through a temporary and internal process of separation and liminality to enter into a more permanent experience of external separation and liminality that defines evangelical subjectivity. On top of this, as a part of the process of formation the young people themselves are navigating their relationship with wider culture and patterns of separation that exist during this period. Through these interweaving forms of separation experienced by the members of PM we see a distinctive evangelical subject being constructed, with particular ideas of relationship between one another, the wider church community, the external world, and the divine central to this.

This chapter will explore these multiple layers of separation and liminality, both the separation between young and old *within* the church environment and between evangelical and non-evangelical in wider life. I will start by exploring the internal spatial separation described in the vignette above in more detail, exploring a space which provided an environment of collective formation and experimentation with parallels to an adolescent bedroom, and enabled freedoms that would not be possible under the parental gaze. I will then outline the wider nature of evangelical liminality in relation to the world as encouraged in the adult St Aidan's environment. While the focus of the remainder of this chapter and

thesis will be on the youth environment and experience, understanding this wider form of life-long evangelical liminality provides invaluable context for the expectations placed on young people when they do progress beyond the adolescent period. Equally, as will be explored below, their own liminality is inseparably intertwined with this wider liminality and thus the adult expectations colour their own experiences of the world. As I shall show, the emphasis in adult environments is placed on being 'distinctive' from wider culture in such a way as to both follow the teachings of the Bible and to attract new people towards themselves becoming Christians. This, therefore, leads to an expectation of a certain form of ethical religious subjectivity and presentation of self, one that can be complexified when understood within the wider liminal identity of the journeying Christian.

Moving on from this, the next section will look at how this understanding of separation and integration from wider culture is taught in the PM environment. Here we see that the young people are encouraged to be "ambassadors for Christ" in their contexts, displaying distinctive priorities and behaviours that were aligned with Christian ethics in order that these might be noticed and draw others towards faith themselves. Yet there were clear differences from those seen in the adult teaching with regards to the relationship with wider culture, indicative of the perception of these young people as liminal beings as evangelicals in formation. While adolescent life was presented as a challenging time and one which had to be carefully navigated, their school environments were not necessarily perceived as spaces that were actively hostile or damaging to their faith. Instead, it was the future, more adult, university environment that was seen as the particularly challenging context in which to be a Christian. I will also look at the interaction with popular culture in PM, defined largely by separation in the adult environment, and the extent to which instead an authentic integration of mainstream and Christian culture is valued by the young people. We see in this a result of the institutional liminality of evangelical young people. They exist somewhere between integration with wider culture and wholehearted commitment to evangelical separation – impacting their experience of daily life whether they desire it or not. It is these experiences of the young people themselves as they consider their place outside of the church environment and the experience of separation from wider culture that I will explore next. Rather than seeking an identity that marked them out as notably distinct from their peers, as encouraged in particular in the adult environment, they instead sought acceptance from and integration with peers while retaining behaviours that they believed to be personally important, with Christianity hoped to be understood by secular friends as another form of contemporary lifestyle variation. Through outlining these dual liminalities in this

separated space[92] we see the first aspect of the rite of passage process that will be explored throughout this thesis. I will start by exploring the distinctive physical environment described above, the space in which the rest of the thesis takes place, in greater depth.

A Room of Their Own: The Creation of Liminal Space

The external beauty of the old main church, standing proudly facing the suburban street, was harshly contrasted with the weather-beaten huts that housed the youth activities. The architectural differences not only marked the spatial difference between old and young, but also indicated both a distinction in priorities between the two different age groups and the aesthetic identities of the two groups. The informality of the youth space, with its shabby exterior, haphazard furniture, and gradually fading interior murals, appeared to be a youth space not only in the sense that it facilitated the differing values and activities of the youth group sessions but also insofar as it created an environment in which the youth felt a sense of belonging as well as of deeper active ownership. Nash *et al* (2007: 46-7) argue that part of the attraction of attending youth groups for young people was that they 'provided a youth orientated space' with particular importance placed on it being both a space of socialising and autonomy – a 'third place' between home and school. For David, this sense of shared belonging and ownership was a central priority of the group, and he identified this as an important need for these urban young people, often cramped for space in other areas of life:

> For a lot of these kids they don't have a place to call their own. They share bedrooms, some of them have like two or three siblings in the same bedroom as them. There's even like with the weather, with the weather being horrible like they go to Starbucks or McDonald's or like they walk around the park in the rain and that kind of stuff, but it's not their own, it's not a place that they can be safe.

Through the youth space, separated from both adult and wider life, David and St Aidan's sought to offer a "place in which young people can come and feel safe, feel vulnerable, and

[92] I will not here explore the terminological distinctions between 'space' and 'place' (as described by Sally Nash *et al* (2007: 43-4) among others) and will predominantly be using the former. As will become clear, however, within this framework the PM environment can certainly be understood as a 'place', considered as it is a 'meaningful space – a physical location filled with significance, history, and identity' (Nash *et al* 2007: 33).

just be". This separation and safety in space was highly spiritual for David, with the youth huts understood as a 'sacred space'[93]:

> There's something significant about, and you see it throughout scripture, about a holy place, about a place in which they can come, they can encounter God, and this is what we've identified is a fundamental need of our young people, especially with mental health issues so many of them struggle with around anxiety, stress, depression, we found that the best way to cope with all of that is for them to have a place that they can just come, spend some time with God, relax, and feel safe.

Of course, this experience depended on more than the architecture and interior design of the space, and the practices and culture of the group would be crucial in how young people experienced the space – as will be explored in the next chapter. But the perception that this was a space which the young people could call their own, crucially separated from the parental gaze, was evident in the ways in which the young people moved and settled in the space. The group, in particular regulars and those who were familiar with church youth group environments, would manipulate the space with ease and fill the ever-changing formulation of furniture and empty space like liquid adapting to a new container. This ease stood in stark contrast to the uncertainty and discomfort displayed when the youth group joined the main church space for services, a space in which they were visitors met with rigid furniture and adult gaze. The territorial perception of space was also evident in the sense of intrusion that was felt on occasions where adults used the youth space. Before one session, for example, David informed the youth leadership team that they would have to tidy up more thoroughly than usual after the session as the senior church leaders were having their staff meeting in

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[93] Part of the process of dedicating this space as sacred came in the form of active and specific prayer. Prior to the first youth session in Cecil Place, the leadership group (both adults and the youth leadership team) were invited to the space in order to discuss and plan the term schedule, and as a part of this meeting we were encouraged to walk around the space praying that God would bless the area and activities within it, and that His Spirit would be present in that place. Alongside this, David prayed that God would transform this space into a "safe space" that the young people have ownership over – as with the old space. This practice was also performed at New Wine, again by the leaders prior to a session, with extended periods dedicated to walking around the space and praying for the young people who usually sat in that area and petitioning God to be present during the session. While this lacked the liturgical formality of more structured ceremonies such as the consecration ceremony carried out by the Bishop in Cecil Place shortly after St Aidan's had moved in, there was nevertheless a sense that this active prayer by figures of spiritual authority is important in the creation of a sacred space in which worshippers can encounter the divine.

the room later that week. The consternation that this evoked was caused not from the additional physical work the teenagers would have to put in, but rather from the perception that the adults were encroaching on a space that they had no right to – and expecting the young people to prepare it for them. Of course, the adult leadership team had no obligation to ask the young people for access to the space as it was owned by the church. Yet for the young people this was a space that was fundamentally theirs, indicating their independence from the goings on of the main church and from the expectations and intrusions of adults that governed the rest of their lives.

In considering the adult space, however, I was surprised by the powerful emotional attachment the young people appeared to hold for the main building – despite spending comparatively little time in there during their liminal adolescent period. This was particularly evoked by the imminent move to Cecil Place, an event which appeared to bring about an emotional response that clashed with the group's operative ecclesiology. While David's quote above references the significance of having a particular space for worship, in sessions the emphasis both from his own teaching and the responses of the group was clear: "church" is a community, not a building. When asked to discuss the question "What is the church?", the first response given was "A community of people of faith", while one member of the youth leadership team proudly said that the church moving to Cecil Place shows that "At St Aidan's, it is clearly the people who matter more than the tradition or the building". When it came to David drawing the session to a close, the important message the young people were encouraged to take was that there is "nothing biblical about beautiful churches". Yet while the pronouncements came easily to the young people in this discussion, in other contexts and conversations it became clear that the attachment to the older, 'adult', building ran deeper than they might wish to acknowledge.

In particular this emerged with regards to this space as a site of ritual and memory, triggered by the prospect of leaving the old building. On one occasion, for example, I mentioned to Hannah and Sophie – two Year 13 girls and members of the youth leadership team – that the upcoming wedding in the main church was to be the final in the old building. Hannah was struck by this realisation. "I'd always imagined that I would get married here because this is the church that I've been to for the longest", she told us, before doubting whether she would even see this as her chosen church when she returned from university – "They've moved, it won't be my church anymore". Likewise, following the Easter baptism service two months later Euan expressed regret when Ben told us that part of his reasoning for getting baptised

now was because this was to be the final opportunity before the move. Again, this triggered a sense of disappointment and nostalgia. This was not something that had crossed Euan's mind, he told us, and it was clear that he was saddened by the fact that he would not be able to mark this ritual in the church building in which he had grown up. On both occasions the concerns over ritual were intermingled with reminiscences about their time in the space – pointing to the halls that had previously hosted long defunct youth groups, or where they had once hidden during a particular Sunday school game. The relationship between space, memory, and anticipation of ritual re-emerged when I asked Euan whether he will miss the old building in our interview some months later:

> *Euan*
>
> Yeah I think I will. As in I'll miss that building, because there's quite a lot of memories there when I was like a kid. And also I guess there is some part of me that does like that churchy look, you know with the stained-glass windows and everything and the pillars, whereas the new place is gonna be like an office block and it's gonna, it's not gonna feel… I guess there's pros and cons of it like you don't want to feel traditional but then I think the aesthetic of like the old pillars just looks nice
>
> *Rob*
>
> Do you think there are particular times when that will be significant, Christmas or Easter for example?
>
> *Euan*
>
> Oh yeah Christmas and Easter definitely. Like especially when you have the big [Christmas] tree outside at the front and then… Yeah it just looks a lot nicer than like, than like a big office block. I mean that was something I was talking to someone about it – so [they are] getting, is engaged you know, talking about a wedding and basically they definitely don't want it at St

> Aidan's because it's not gonna, by the time they get to have the wedding it won't be in here anymore, it will be in an office.[94]

Just as the relationship with the adult space was complex, it is important to note that the youth space did not automatically evoke a powerful sense of ownership purely due to its separation from the adult building. The context in which an individual found themselves in the hut was also significant to the experience. Those who were uncertain or uncomfortable with the social experience of the group would reflect this in their engagement with the space.[95] Similarly, during sessions which differed from the normal routines or expectations, even those who were entirely familiar with the space would appear to engage with it differently. During the baptism and confirmation preparation classes, for example, the shifted purpose and structure of the group was mirrored in the embodied experience of the space. Unlike the highly fluid and multipurpose environment of the PM or Morning Meetup sessions, in this time and context the youth hut became a single purpose space, and the young people present did not expect anything else from it. As a result, the relaxed and informal embodied engagement with the space that was so evident for these young people during the evening group evaporates, was replaced by positions that are respectful rather than relaxed, attentive anticipation instead of casual catch ups, and a polite packing up of materials instead of a final opportunity to socialise with friends.

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[94] Interestingly, this concern was not expressed for the youth space in the move, which was understood as being much more flexible and adaptable to different spaces – providing they had ownership over that space. For Sophie, for example, the fact that PM was already spatially separated from the main church meant that she believed the youth group would be less affected by the move – "we as a youth group have done pretty well in a little shack behind the main church so I don't think we're going to be affected as much because like if we can function as a youth group in a tiny hut with paper thin walls, then we can function anywhere!"

[95] One example of this came early in my fieldwork during one of the sessions in which the group joined the adult congregation for sung worship. Following this period, the young people returned to the youth huts and quickly settled into the usual rhythm of social time. Yet it was immediately clear that two young people I did not recognise, and whom I later learned usually worshipped in the 'adult' services, were uncomfortable in and unfamiliar with the informal space and social environment. Rather than the fluid ease with which regulars moved through the different areas and activities, the two boys seated themselves silently and discreetly on stools at the 'breakfast bar' to the side of the room, out of the way of any other group. Their awkward body language and lack of conversation betrayed their discomfort, but this was also indicated in the way that they interacted with the space, intentionally seeking a peripheral place in which to be inconspicuous.

Equally evident was the fact that, when absent from the adult gaze, the youth could feel a sense of ease and freedom within the adult space. This was seen, for example, in the various social evenings that took place sporadically during the year. Figure 6 shows the transformation of the main space of St Aidan's ahead of a 'Laser Tag' evening organised for all the youth (aged 11-18) and run by an external company. The room had been emptied, and the company set up a series of barriers, plus professional stage lights and smoke machines from the stage that usually hosted the worship band. Instead of contemporary Christian songs, Jordan played a playlist titled "Techno Bunker" through Spotify over the large and high-quality sound systems. Each game involved two teams of 12 young people, with darts of coloured light and 24-bit-sounds emanating from the guns for every shot, and every successful hit resulting in progressively louder 'screams' (five hits and you had to return to base before resuming). These sounds, along with the mixed cries of success, despair, and amusement echoed across the Victorian building over the post-apocalyptic techno that rang out from the speakers. Absent from the parental gaze and behavioural expectations of the worship services, this space could – temporarily at least – be theirs.

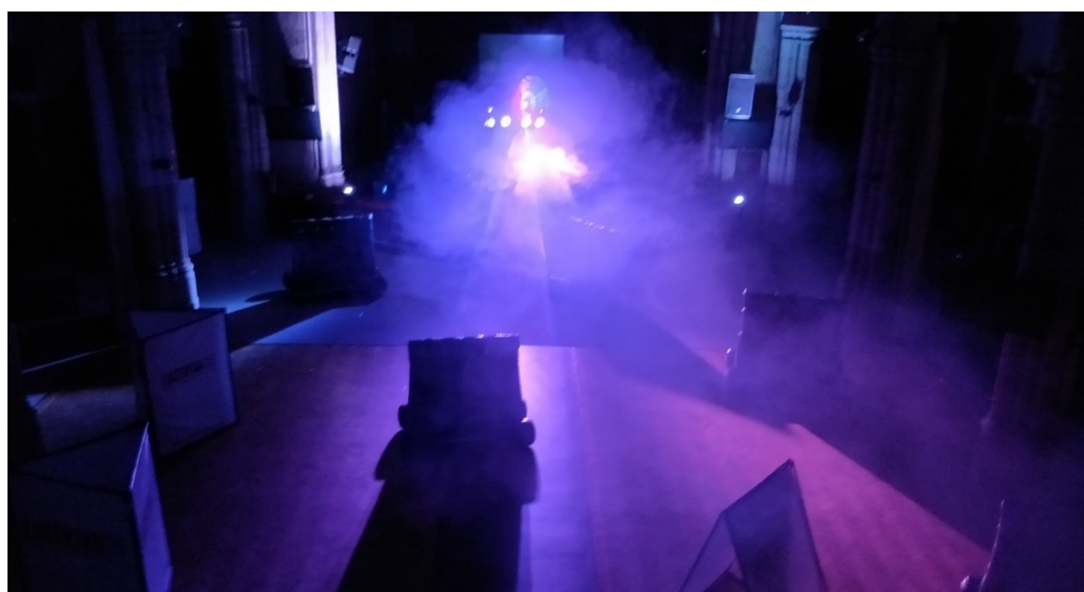

Figure 6: The interior of St Aidan's prior to the youth 'Laser Tag' evening.

The Church's Bedroom

The move to Cecil Place posed new questions about the nature of separated space for young and old at St Aidan's. Whereas the former building had a large single space for worship and had few smaller spaces inside – necessitating the use of an external building for dedicated youth activities – Cecil Place consisted of four equal storeys that were dedicated to different purposes. While through the week there was some variation, on Sundays the ground floor

was for the adult service, the first floor for the children's work, and the second floor for the youth work.[96] This separation was exacerbated by the new child protection protocols that were brought in with the move – adults were not only discouraged from entering youth space, they were actively stopped from doing so. In the early sessions in Cecil Place, David was at pains to emphasise to the young people that even while it might be used by other groups during the week, this was first and foremost "your space". An early activity encouraged them to walk around the new space in groups and come up with ideas for furnishings and activities that could best utilise the potential of the space. One room had yet to be named, and this decision was placed in the hands of the young people themselves – with a dessert voucher on offer to the individual who came up with the name that won the most votes.

In the interview with Andy, an associate vicar at St Aidan's, I asked whether it was important in the planning of the new building to have this separate and dedicated space for the youth work:

> Yeah very very important in as much as we recognize, whether it's the utopian ideal or not, we recognize that discipleship happens most effectively in age specific groups and that means having space […] Even five weeks in I know […] some of the kids in kids' church were talking about the [first floor] space as *their* space and I think that's healthy, that's nice there's a sense of ownership, 'we belong more specifically here and this is familiar' […] I think there's something important about, for young people to have that sense of 'but this is our space', to give them a sense of ownership, to give them a sense of *control*, a sense of 'actually we have a voice here, we have a say here', a sense of security almost and a sense of shared identity that is distinct from the other age groups within the church. In heaven, in this utopian ideal, I think we probably won't be, we will be so consumed with Jesus that we won't even barely even notice, but here in the in the sort of waiting imperfect in-between time, I think those things matter and I think they're helpful and I think it's part of being healthily human.

[96] The top floor served as office space for the church staff throughout the week and was not used on Sundays.

When read with the quote from David above we can see the importance, both spiritual and social, of age-separated space and the perception of ownership over this space, alongside an awareness that this is not necessarily the spiritually ideal state.[97]

This ownership and separation are, of course, to an extent illusory. The building was still the property of the church, the Diocese, and the adult leadership, and as was displayed with the above example of a staff meeting taking place in the youth hut, adults would utilise this space for their own purposes if deemed necessary. Yet the *perception* of ownership of space for the young people – expressed in the distinctive and informal use of furniture and decoration, and re-enforced through their involvement in decisions such as the naming of rooms – was crucial in enabling the young people to feel at ease and, in the operative theology of St Aidan's, encounter God and thus be formed as an evangelical subject. This sense of a separate space within the adult property yet away from the parental gaze, granted with permission by the adult(s) to the young in order to be a space of privacy, formation, and expression, mirrors that of the teenage bedroom. In these spaces, subjectivities can be forged and experimented with away from the prying eyes of adults. In her study of the importance of bedrooms for adolescent girls, Kandy James (2001: 74) argues that a 'sense of independence and personal control' and a 'desire for freedom from the authority of their parents' is particularly important for teenagers, and retaining a territorial guard over the bedroom space can be a significant aspect of this – a guard that we see exhibited through the incident of consternation described above. Sian Lincoln (2005: 400), in her study of the role that music plays in the adolescent bedroom, likewise argues that in being a space of independence from adult control, the teenage bedroom is 'a site of multiple cultural and social articulations and expressions […] often the first space in which they are able to exert some control, be creative and make that space their own'. For James (2001: 74) the bedroom takes on particular significance for teenage girls due to the fact that boys appear to have 'wider access to alternative public spaces than girls do', yet the wider spatial limitations mentioned by David

[97] As outlined in the Introduction, this division into age-segregated groups for children and young people is not unusual in evangelical contexts. Interestingly, however, both David and Andy referenced situations in former churches they had attended where the generations had interacted more frequently, more aligned with the forms of intergenerational worship advocated by Holly Catterton Allen (2018). Despite this openness to generational integration, both David and Andy stated that for various reasons this would not be the best approach for St Aidan's.

in the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests that public spaces in which the young people feel comfortable and able to be themselves are increasingly limited for both genders.

The potential to create a bedroom-like space within the evangelical environment, with separation from adult gaze in order that subjectivities might be explored and formed in comfort and at their own pace alongside accepting peers, is of great significance in understanding the formation of the evangelical subject. Hidden in their own space, either in crumbling huts in the back yard of a Victorian church or two storeys up in a converted office block, the group had a clear sense of ownership of space away from the gaze and expectations of adults and parents. Here, as with a teenage bedroom, identities can be explored and expressed, deconstructed and re-formed, in a place of safety and comfort. This is a fundamentally liminal space, a space separate from the 'ordinary' culture and location of the wider community, in which expectations are broken down and new subjectivities are constructed. The divine is invited into the space in order that it might be a *sacred space*, and the practices explored in the next chapter indicate the significance of this as a *social space*, all the while possessing a sense of ownership for the young people distinct from the adult environment as a *separate space*. But separation and liminality for these young people exists not only within the church building. Instead, it is a multi-layered experience, and even into adulthood is anticipated as a feature of their relationship with the wider world during what Andy above called the "waiting imperfect in-between time". Before exploring the particular nature of this for young people, I will first explore how this is understood within the adult environment at St Aidan's.

"*In*, but not *Of*" – Distinctiveness and the Evangelical Life

Chapter 17 of John's Gospel describes Jesus – having delivered a final message to his disciples prior to his crucifixion – praying to God the Father for the disciples ahead of what he knew was to come. He prays that they might be protected following his imminent departure as they remain in 'the world':

> [11]I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them […] **[14]** I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. **[15]** My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. **[16]** They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

This passage was chosen by St Aidan's as a sermon focus during a ten-part series on Jesus' life as recounted across the different Gospels. The forty-minute sermon, delivered by Steven (Vicar of St Aidan's) and entitled "In, but not Of", explored what the relationship should be between Christians and the church, and "the world". The fact that "the world" was never precisely defined in this sermon belies the assumptions from the speaker that this is an obvious category, or alternatively that it is too complex a category to attempt to construct. As a result, it was left to the individual members of the congregation to determine for themselves what is meant by Jesus' phrase here, but regardless of the chosen definition there is a clear distinction expected between themselves and "the world". This distinction in place, the challenge then becomes determining how to respond to and relate with the other category. This is a challenge that all Christians, and all churches, have to engage with, Steven taught:

> Embedded in this text is a concept that is the defining factor for the culture of any church, in fact any Christian. How we respond to this notion put forward by Jesus will determine the ethos of literally every church on the planet. And it's the driving force behind our approach to practically everything […] this defining concept that really creates culture in church, how we respond to it, is this idea of us being *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

He then offers two binary options that have been taken through history. At one end, he says, you have "churches that have emphasised being *not* of the world, that they've set themselves apart". While noting that they may be too severe, Steven drew particularly on the *behavioural* distinctiveness of the Amish and the Exclusive Brethren as a challenge for the wider church. St Aidan's can learn from the idea that "it is essential for us to keep our distinctiveness. We have a set of beliefs, a set of values, that we hold to." While in a "post-Christian society, we will be viewed as 'weird', as 'different', as 'alternative'", this difference "is not something that is to be avoided, in fact it's inevitable! We have the good news of Jesus Christ! That is exciting, and marvellous, and it makes us different from the rest of the world in a wonderful way!"

At the other end of the spectrum were those who emphasised Christians as being "*in* the world". Again, for Steven this was primarily behavioural, but it was also ethical. "Some Christians", he told the congregation, "have become indistinguishable from the non-Christians that they live alongside. They have very liberal views about sex [… and] their lifestyle is *exactly* the same as everyone else's". As a result of these behavioural and ethical

similarities, Christians are no longer perceived as different from the non-Christians around them. Being “in” the world, Steven argued, did not mean losing all markers of distinction, but rather meant “getting involved in the world, unafraid that we might get infected by the ghastly virus of secularism”, confident that “the Holy Spirit who is in us is greater than any force in the world and so compelled by the love of Christ [that] we cannot stand idly by while a world around us is literally going to hell”. Thus, believers and the church are faced with a “paradox”:

> For the church to survive, as something *distinct,* with our own unique beliefs, our own value system, our own ethics, our own vision and purpose, we need to be radically different from the society around us. And yet at the very same time, if we separate ourselves off from society, we become a ghetto that is destined to become increasingly irrelevant and that will inevitably lead to decline and extinction.

Christians should “live alternative lifestyles by an alternative ethic, following Jesus” – as a result of which they will be identifiable as Christians – while also going “out into the world in amongst those we are trying to reach”. This will inevitably lead to misunderstandings and hatred from non-believers, but this is something to be “battled through”.

Closing the sermon, Steven looked forward to the upcoming building move, a shift from the traditional and explicitly religious building on a residential street to a “fiercely secular building, an *office block* on the high street.” This use of secular architectural design for church space was, he told the congregation, an idea that went back to the earliest days of civic Christianity following the conversion of Constantine. Just like in those earliest days, in moving buildings St Aidan’s “is saying ‘We want to be out there, in the middle of the town, in society, with the people!’”. As with individuals, however, they were also intent on having “something distinct to offer the world” in this more visible location. The Christian life, both as individuals and as a church, was not a case of being either wholly detached or wholly integrated with the wider world, but rather is one that seeks to be “radically both! We're meant to be at both ends of the spectrum at the same time! We're meant to be *extreme* in both!”

Separation, Opposition, and the Adult Evangelical Subject

This emphasis on continued interaction with wider society while maintaining distinctive practices and beliefs that not only followed the teachings of Scripture but also served as a

positive and evangelistic influence in society frequently emerges through the sermons at St Aidan's. In another sermon, one of the curates taught that part of Jesus' purpose was to recover "Israel's[98] mission […] to be set apart, doing things differently […] and to be a missional people" that brought people into a relationship with God *through* being distinctive. Yet this is not an easy task – in another sermon, congregants were told that "the world, the flesh, and the devil are always attacking" Christians as they seek to live out their lives. Even at the St Aidan's carol services, some of the busiest of the year, the evangelistic sermon emphasised that believers can be "assured of opposition" in their lives as Christians (with the equally strong assurance that "God is on your side" throughout this). Members of the adult St Aidan's congregation were thus persistently encouraged to see themselves through a liminal lens, present in the world but not quite belonging, awaiting the final re-incorporation at the end of days.

In his study of American evangelical college students, James D. Hunter (1987: 56) argues that historically 'the main thrust of Protestant orthopraxy has been its negative character (what one *should not* do)' (emphasis original). The scriptural justification for these prohibitions was significant, but equally important was 'the belief that their observance was the principal way of distinguishing "godly living" from "worldliness" … distinguishing the faithful from the unfaithful' (Hunter 1987: 57). Separation from anything considered "worldly" – based on the presumption that a 'clear and fundamental distinction could be made between Christian conduct and non-Christian, or worldly, conduct' (Hunter 1987: 57) – as well as any particular vices of the pre-converted self, served as external proof of the internal transformation within the soul, evidencing the authenticity and sincerity of the believer to the outside world.[99] However, Hunter (1987: 63) argued that increasingly liberal attitudes towards issues such as drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes indicated that '[m]any of the distinctions separating Christian conduct from "worldly conduct" have been challenged if not altogether undermined', and simultaneously the 'traditional meaning of worldliness has… lost its relevance' for the 'coming generation' of evangelicals.[100] The threat that this posed was a sociological one, as the behavioural separation from worldliness provided a 'means of

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[98] This was a reference to the nation and people of Israel as described in the Old Testament, and not the contemporary nation state of Israel.
[99] Martijn Oosterbaan's (2015) work on the importance of testimony narratives in Brazilian worship music shows that evidencing transformation and separation from past self continues to be significant in global evangelicalism as a marker of sincere faith.
[100] The 'coming generation' of Hunter's study are now, of course, into their 50s.

generating social solidarity and cohesiveness for conservative Protestants as a moral community' and 'reaffirm their collective sense of identity as a unique and even "chosen" people' (Hunter 1987: 64). Separation from "the world" through firmly drawn lines of distinctive ethical behaviour served to bond and strengthen the community as a group distinct from all others and thus retain an element of identity and purpose.

Yet the form of separation desired by Steven above is one that seeks to avoid becoming a "ghetto", with significant emphasis placed on some level of interaction with wider society. In this context, distinction is expected to be both attractive to and despised by non-Christians in the world. This relationship with modernity is one that has been observed across evangelical contexts, as I have outlined in the Introduction, and has been referred to by Christian Smith (1998: 218) as an attitude of 'distinction-with-engagement', an approach central to the 'thriving' evangelicalism of late-twentieth century America. This approach, he argues, avoids the 'Achilles' heels' of both mainline and liberal Protestantism and more fundamentalist approaches, namely 'enculturation and accommodation' and 'defensive separatism' respectively, both of which will lead to 'decline in religious vitality' (Smith 1998: 149-50).[101] Through creating a 'subcultural identity', evangelical groups are able to maintain a level of 'sustained dissonance' between themselves and the pluralised world with which they engage, in a manner that 'fosters religious vitality' (Smith 1998: 150). Through this approach, and by continuing to present and perceive external culture as hostile to Christian beliefs and practice, Smith argues that evangelicalism in the decade following Hunter's research managed not only to avoid anticipated decline but had in fact become stronger. While the desires and actions of St Aidan's were less explicitly political than those seen amongst the American evangelicals of Smith's work, many of the behavioural and ethical markers of distinction remained – or at very least remained areas that should be carefully considered by the practicing Christian, issues such as drinking alcohol and engaging with popular culture.

A recurring theme of this distinctiveness, in both word and deed, is the idea that it will (or even must) be opposed by wider culture – an aspect that is not always readily embraced. What made praxis distinctly Christian in the British conservative evangelical context in which Strhan's (2015: 86) research was based was not the act itself but rather its partnership with

[101] These poles mirror the extremes observed by Steven in the sermon referenced above.

the explicit articulation of the Christian gospel message, with the vicar of St John's preaching that "Christian mission is only Christian mission if it has to it *verbal* content, declaring the possibility of being reconciled with God"(emphasis original). However, Strhan (2015: 102) shows that this spoken aspect that is so desired by the leaders of St John's poses considerable difficulties for those who feared the hostility and opposition that they were assured was the natural response to their faith – despite the fact that receiving this opposition was praised as a signal of 'heroic evangelistic practice'. While this is perceived as the ideal, the anxiety it induced in some congregants leads to a reluctant acceptance that it lay beyond their abilities, even to the extent of blaming their own failings over the hostility of 'the world' – "I wonder if it's hard [to speak about faith] not because of the society we live in, it's just that… we make it hard for ourselves, 'cos we're rubbish and lack the confidence" (Strhan 2015: 102). Behavioural practices, such as carefully navigating urban drinking culture, therefore become means by which those who struggle with explicit spoken evangelism can 'position themselves as distinctive, even if they feel awkward engaging in the more public 'verbal' performances of faith' (Strhan 2015: 103). What we see in Strhan's study is a disconnect between the expectations of the normative teaching at St John's with regard to the idealised evangelical ethical subject and the lived experiences and struggles of the members themselves, unable to reach these heights in their daily lives. Distinction and separation from the world, through both word and deed, are desirable but in practice a struggle to achieve.

Life-Long Evangelical Liminality

Within St Aidan's we can see, as might be anticipated, differences and similarities to the above examples. Being perceived as separate from wider society as a result of distinctive practice was of central importance, though there was hesitancy over the precise prohibitions relative to the certainty of the historic forms of Protestantism that Hunter (1987: 56-7) identifies. While there remained a clear emphasis on being distinctive from wider society, and warnings that this may receive opposition and hostility, this is significantly weaker than the strictly defined binaries found in Smith's study. While congregants are encouraged to share their testimonies and stories, behavioural distinctiveness is valued as 'missional' in its own right, without the need for expressed verbal evangelism as in Strhan's study. Despite these differences, across evangelical contexts we see an emphasis on the evangelical subject as in a position of ongoing liminality, caught "in" the world, living in and engaging with the non-Christian people and contexts around them, while not being fundamentally "of" it but rather being in some sense 'heavenly' beings, and thus behaving and speaking in a way that marks them as distinctive from the world around them.

While extensive work has already been dedicated to exploring evangelical relationships with modernity, as outlined in the Introduction, what we see here in St Aidan's remains understudied. In particular, the extent to which the engagement with modernity fosters, and is built upon, a form of near life-long liminality, one defined by both separation from wider society and within the self. The nature of evangelical conversion is that while the individual is transformed, indicating a separation from the past self – made ritually clear in the metaphor of death and resurrection in the baptism ceremony, and reinforced in testimony narratives that openly discuss pre-conversion behaviours as contrasted to the redeemed life – there is also an understanding that this is a constant and ongoing process. The process of sanctification, of becoming 'Holy', was understood as a worthy lifelong endeavour that is impossible to fulfil entirely in the current, sinful world. Only at the point of eschatological resurrection will believers be fully transformed and sanctified in the renewed creation. Thus, while in the post-conversion, pre-resurrection state, believers are liminal beings – neither fully their old self nor fully their new self, separated from the world yet still inescapably in it, being deconstructed and remoulded into a new being that is yet to be completed. Strhan's (2019: 172) statement that the experience of commitment to following Christianity has often been understood 'within the history of evangelicalism… as a transformational, liminal moment in which the individual was 'born again' or received the Holy Spirit' is to an extent correct, but there must also be recognition that this is in itself a step into a liminal identity that lasts a lifetime.

To suggest the Christian life is a liminal one is not novel – Victor Turner (2008: 107) argues that phrases such as "the Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveller, with no place to rest his head" indicate that transition 'has become a permanent condition' in the Christian life – in particular in the monastic life.[102] The purpose of this thesis is to explore the nature of evangelical youth work as constructing a particular liminal environment and a particular liminal subject. However, it is important to recognise that this itself takes place within a much broader context of separation, liminality, and – at the coming of the resurrection – reintegration. Thus, the period of youth liminality and separation within the rite of passage explored in the rest of this thesis is a step into this much larger liminal space, one that contrasts not a Victorian church building with a backyard hut but earth with heaven.

[102] Coincidentally the example Turner (2008: 107-8) use as emblematic of Christian liminality is the same as used by Steven when discussing the extremes of Christian separation from the world – the Rule of St Benedict.

Yet the nature of religious formation through this rite of passage also includes exploring this longer-lasting separation and liminality, albeit with a distinctive focus that belies the nature of overlapping liminalities. This comes across most clearly in the exploration of the relationship with the wider world – both that which is encouraged in teaching and that which is experienced by the young people.

"Ambassadors for Christ" – External Separation in PM

There was a range of models drawn upon by the leaders at PM through which the young people were encouraged to understand their identity as Christians, each of which addressed differing layers of relationship. One recurring theme, drawn from Romans 8:14, was that Christians are 'children of God', encouraging a deeply intimate and individual relationship with the divine father-figure who offers limitless love and acceptance. This was their "true identity", beyond all their doubts and anxieties. This focused primarily on the individual relationship with a responsive and living God, but also fed into the second model, that of being a member of the 'body of Christ'. This metaphor is used in 1 Corinthians 12 as an image of unity in the church, and through this the young people were encouraged to reflect on their position within the wider church (both St Aidan's and around the world) and their relationships with other church members. This in turn led to reflection on their relationships with and responsibilities to those *outside* of the church. In discussing the idea of the church as the body of Christ, one young person spoke of the spiritual nature of God, lacking a physical body, and so the metaphor could mean that the church must function as "God's hands and feet… We are the physical representation of God" in the world. David used this as an opportunity to share with the group what he saw as the Christian's role in the world – "we are Christ's ambassadors", he told us, meaning that Christians are representatives of Jesus in the world. This represents the third layer of their Christian identity, tied to their relationship with non-Christians, and has clear resonances with the discussion of wider evangelical separation and liminality discussed above. However, as will become evident, in conversations with the young people there also remained important elements that distinguished the approach from the expectations placed on adult believers. This was exacerbated by the ability and willingness of young people to interpret the teachings and expectations of adult leaders according to their own experiences, thus living out the duty of "ambassador" in individualised, context-particular ways – often reducing or altering the level of separation from that which might be expected by adult leaders.

This idea of being an 'ambassador' for Christ in the world was the most consistent image used in the teaching in PM for how the young people should understand themselves in relation to non-Christians, be they peers, family, or strangers. In the first thematic series in Cecil Place David dedicated the entire term to exploring what it meant to be an ambassador. The opening talk of this series started with a discussion question for the young people: 'What does it mean to be a Christian?' As was frequently the case in these sessions, the group were initially encouraged to discuss their thoughts in small groups for around two minutes before being brought back together to feed back to the group as a whole with their thoughts and further questions.[103] The responses were considered and diverse, but generally focused on two central themes. Firstly, that of *belief* – in God's existence, in God's love for them, and in divine forgiveness. Being a Christian meant "believing in the beliefs and the Bible and God and just believing it, wanting to be a part of it", for one member. Some drew more directly on the relationship with the divine that this belief entailed – "loving God and believing that He loves you", "following God and accepting His forgiveness". The second theme that came through these responses was that of *practice* – for example "living your life by God" and "acting out actual Christian values". These were not mutually exclusive – one young person said that it meant "Not just saying the words but believing it in your heart and living it" – and nor was the meaning singular or universal: "on paper it would be worshipping God and believing in God, but I think it means different things to different people, because it is a worldwide religion".

After praising these answers, David drew the themes together by saying that a Christian – literally meaning "little Christ" – "is somebody who wants to reflect Jesus". This has a personal, intentional, and cognitive faith-based dimension ("you've come to a place where you've accepted Jesus as your Lord and your saviour, which means that you believe in him, you believe the work he did on the cross so that your sins could be forgiven so that you could have a relationship with God"), but also necessitated responsibilities as Christians. Again he asked the group what they thought these might be, with a number of young people offering their thoughts: "Be a reflection of how Jesus loves everyone"; "Integrity, like living out what you say you do at church"; "the 'What Would Jesus Do?' kind of thing – actually living it out, not just saying it but actually doing what it says". While two of the young people mentioned

[103] I will explore this pedagogical approach in greater depth in the next two chapters.

a verbal element within this,[104] overwhelmingly the responsibility of a Christian was constructed as something that was embodied through behaviour. These had layers of intrinsic value – helping others and following God's will – but also had the intention of working as a form of non-verbal evangelism through living attractive lives, for example "setting a good example so that when people see your life they can see what an impact God has had on your life and then they'll see that and might want the same kind of thing." It was this aspect that became particularly significant as David outlined what he saw as the Christian responsibility: to be Jesus' "ambassadors". Being a Christian meant that "each and every one of you has been called in to relationship with God", and "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength", but also to "love your neighbour as you love yourself".[105] Living out these commandments could be best understood in this ambassadorial role. To be an ambassador, he said, was to be a representative of the origin country in a foreign land, but also the means by which the locals can judge the people the ambassador represents. Christians are therefore to be "Jesus' ambassadors in this world", representing God through actions in day-to-day life.

Yet at points David's understanding of ambassadorship went even further than this, to the point of believers being individual physical *embodiments* of Christ in their non-Christian settings. "If you identify as Christian", he told the young people, "you need to *be* Jesus to your friends, to your families, to the people you meet". This was also intended to be attractive, engaging non-Christians in seeking to find out more about Christianity by witnessing the distinct living of believers. In using this model, David intentionally avoided the prioritisation of verbal evangelism evidenced in Strhan's work, recognising that this could be difficult for some of the young people: "I know that you guys maybe don't feel that you can talk to people about God because it's really really scary, but we are called to live our lives in such a way that we *point* to Jesus, that everyone that you meet *knows* that you are God's ambassadors." Along with this awareness of the potential fears, there was also an acknowledgement from David that developing into this role was part of the formation

[104] This included one young person who thought it important to tell people what church was "actually" like, as opposed to the external presumptions that it was "really boring". This desire to break negative perceptions of Christianity was shared by another young person in the group – who believed that people saw Christians as judgemental – however this was not explicitly constructed as something to be enacted verbally.

[105] This quote of Jesus is found in each of the first three gospels, given in response to a Sadducean lawyer asking what is the "greatest commandment" (Matthew 22: 34-40).

process at the heart of PM – "We want to grow you guys but we also want to give you opportunities to be Jesus and train you up in that".[106] Thus 'being Jesus' meant relating to others in a manner that best replicated the way that Jesus related to those he encountered as described in the Gospels, and this idea would therefore recur on sessions on various topics. For example, in a session asking whether God and the Bible are sexist, David encouraged the male members to "look at how Jesus treated women, the way he interacted with them as equals" as a model for their own behaviour. But it was also intended as something that ultimately drew people towards faith, into their own personal "relationship with God", therefore behaving in a manner that was not simply attractive towards themselves but towards Jesus. The young people were not entirely averse to speaking about their faith as a part of this but avoiding any form of conflict was a priority. When David asked the group, in my final session at PM, what they thought they should and should not do in order to "love our neighbour [and] bring them to God", many of the negative responses from young people revolved around hostile and explicit verbal communication, such as "don't tell people they will rot in hell", "telling them what to do", and "Bible bashing". In contrast, the positive methods suggested included "being kind and supportive" as well as more personal and relational verbal forms such as "sharing your testimony" and making sure to "let them get there on their own but help them". These were seen by young people as effective and manageable ways of drawing friends towards faith through maintaining authentic relationships and were praised by David as modelling being an 'ambassador'.

This role of 'ambassador' indicates ideas of separation from wider culture in two significant ways. Firstly, in keeping with the teaching of Steven outlined above, it suggests that these Christian young people are not, first and foremost, 'citizens' of 'the world'. Rather, they are long-term visitors from another place, here to represent that place and attract people to it. As the ambassador for a foreign nation is both "in" their host nation but not "of" it, an ambassador for Christ is both "in" the world but not "of" it, constantly seeking to interact with local culture while intentionally maintaining a positive image of their own culture, that of Christ and Christianity. The second aspect is that in order to represent this distinct culture

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[106] As with the sermon from Steven referenced above, David emphasised the importance of the new building as a physical and collective expression of this ambassadorial ambition. The more public location of the building, its potential to host a range of different activities, and in particular the fact that "this place doesn't even look like a church!" were all praised as attractive elements that could assist the young people in their ambassadorial roles.

it is necessary to act in a manner that is *intentionally* and *noticeably* different, as David had put it in one session on a cold January night some months prior to the move to Cecil Place. This meant “sinning” less, particularly around friends and family who were not Christians, aware of our responsibilities as Christians: “In a lot of your life you are the only Jesus that people are going to see, so if you’re just doing what everyone else is doing then you’re not a good ambassador.” To those who do not know Christ personally, who are unaware of their potential identity as children of God, who are not members of the body of Christ, the ambassadors for Christ can become the physical embodiment of Jesus in their lives. In order to be this embodiment, it is necessary for the ambassadors to act in a manner that is noticeably distinct from those around them. Yet David also emphasised that acting distinctly did not mean separating oneself off entirely into an isolated Christian social enclave. Rather, making friends with non-Christians was a central aspect of being an ambassador – “it’s about being in the world, having friends, but showing them God’s love.” However, being an ambassador for Christ was not solely a case of embodying Christian values and through this giving people an insight into the Christian life. Beyond this there was the desire to actively bring non-Christians to faith. This was particularly oriented around friends: “A big part of being a Christian is bringing your friends to believe in God”. As a result, the forms of verbal evangelism favoured were those that were both relational and non-hostile. As we shall see in the following chapter, the relationship between friendship and faith is indeed strong for this age-group, but arguably more significantly in the sustaining of faith than in the evangelistic aspect desired by David.

Priorities of Separation and Integration for Evangelical Adolescents

While the desire for separate behaviour in order to indicate a distinct way of living shared many similarities with the adult approach, this did not necessitate a perception of wider culture as fundamentally and actively oppositional to Christianity, as was more common in the adult environment at St Aidan’s. While there were inevitably challenges that came with attempting to live a distinct and Christian life in adolescence, for example the potential pulls of negative peer pressure, these were seen as aspects to be carefully navigated as opposed to faith-threatening trials – such as by seeking out ‘positive’ (that is, Christian) role models. School in particular was not presented as an automatically threatening environment, a

feeling that was mirrored in the interviews as I shall outline below.[107] This was in part due to the safety that could be found in membership of the group, and returning to the sessions each week provided opportunities to explore and discuss any challenges that had been encountered, with PM therefore providing an environment of growth and gradual transformation in order to adapt to a potentially tumultuous wider world. As a space of peer-focused liminality, exploration, and formation, PM offered a space of creative respite from the struggles of encountering "the world" in school. The practices of PM, in particular the emphasis on peer-focused formation and pedagogical approaches that encourage exploration and uncertainty, will be the focus of the next two chapters.

This is not to say that secular culture was viewed as entirely without danger. The most evident sense of threat emerged when discussing the future spectre of university.[108] David told me that he would usually offer a short course for those in Year 13 prior to leaving for university as a form of preparation for this transition, however the disruption caused by the move to Cecil Place meant that this was unable to take place in the year I was with St Aidan's. When this was discussed in the group, the emphasis was consistently placed on the necessity of preparation for what would be a hostile environment,[109] and according to former members, these warnings were appropriate. Speaking to Joshua – a former member of PM who had recently graduated from university when we met – it was clear that not only had these sessions been greatly appreciated, the strong warnings had also proven prescient for him. When I asked him which sessions he had particularly remembered from his time at PM, it was these university preparation talks that had lingered in his memory:

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[107] This finding stands in notable contrast to Nick Shepherd's (2010: 154) research, which found that '[s]chool is the environment these young people cite as being the primary negative experience of being a Christian.'

[108] Overwhelmingly the young people in PM expected to go on to study at university, often with very high grades at A-Level. In my first meeting with David he told me that the leadership took the assumption that young people would be leaving for university after leaving Sixth Form, thus minimising the importance placed on integrating the youth and young adult groups as a space of transition, and in our interview he told me that "I think we had 12 young people from Year 13 last year, only one stayed in London. They all go off to Leeds or Sheffield or Cambridge or Oxford or wherever that might be, and even the one who stayed in London moved into [university] residence quite a distance away from us so he no longer attends our church".

[109] In one session on 'Partying', which I will discuss in greater length below, the speaker (a women in her late twenties from the St Aidan's congregation) humorously warned the group that partying, including high levels of alcohol consumption, was all but unavoidable at university – "at university it's just the lifestyle – so good luck!".

> Some of the really good sessions I found were like the ones with some like university prep sort of talks, and then I remember them because at uni you'd like definitely bump into the problem or the dilemma […] so I remember those because at the time I was like 'These are quite interesting' and then once I got to uni I was like 'Shit this literally happens like every day'[…] My brother's [older] and a lot of his friends came back to do a little talk so they'll be like, 'well I came across this problem and this is how I dealt with it' or 'I didn't deal with it and I fucked up' and then, and I was like 'that's super interesting' so I remember those ones really clearly.

His own experience of university and faith was turbulent, both with regards to behaviour that he did not himself see as 'Christian' and with involvement in a church (and in particular struggling to find strong Christian friends akin to those he found at PM). As a result, he found these sessions specifically targeted to addressing the potential pitfalls of university especially beneficial. The warnings surrounding university, and the sessions that sought to support the young people as they left for university, suggest firstly – due to the absence of comparative warnings for their present environments – a concern that 'adult' secular spaces pose more of a threat to faith than 'youth' secular spaces, and secondly that the threat of these secular spaces is increased as a result of leaving the supportive and formational community of PM. Preparation for adult evangelicalism thus involves preparation for the forms of hostility and challenge that is perceived as existing within the adult secular world, a world they will encounter fully upon leaving school and leaving PM. With regards to separation, therefore, we see an expectation that the level of distinction and opposition from wider society will become progressively stronger after leaving the youth environment. There remain expectations on the young people with regards to identifiable and intentional behaviour, but this lacks the binary nature seen in the adult environment – an aspect visible in their engagement with popular culture.

Popular Culture: Authentic Faith and Authentic Art

Along with a perception of local culture that lacks the greatest fears of threat evidenced in the adult environment, there is also a greater natural integration with non-Christian popular culture in the PM context. Previous studies of evangelical use of media[110] have often focused

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[110] See Romanowski (2007), Ward (2016), and Abraham (2017) for examples.

on the sharp distinctions drawn between the evangelical and non-evangelical worlds by evangelicals. Media that is institutionally endorsed is usually that which supports a particular ethos, identified by Romanowski (2007: 31-2) as entailing content explicitly prioritising evangelistic values and family friendly content. This has been seen as particularly important for young evangelicals, and Pete Ward (1996: 205) argues that the entire 'premise on which the Christian subculture is built is that young Christians need to be encouraged to consume 'positive' cultural products' in as many forms as possible, avoiding the 'negative' or 'harmful' influences in 'secular' culture. Ibrahim Abraham (2017: 155) argues that these Christian media can offer 'sometimes radically different experiences of worship' to the ordinary experience of evangelicalism. '[M]ost significantly', however, they offer 'opportunities to embody evangelical belief and practice in everyday life in secularizing societies, "witnessing" a different way of being in the world' (Abraham 2017: 155) – reinforcing the concept of evangelicalism's model of 'distinction-with-engagement' focused on witnessing to outsiders.

As I found when I initially sought to study the youth engagement with evangelical media, however, this content was not widely embraced by the PM members. Instead, there was a widespread comfort with non-Christian media. This would emerge primarily in the more casual conversations that took place during the social periods of the night but was also evidenced through the incorporation of mainstream culture and media into the wider experience of the sessions. Video games were popular at every session and were frequently being played on two (and often three) different screens during the social period, and both male and female embers participated – though popularity of individual games differed between gender.[111] Meanwhile, throughout the opening and closing periods of the evening music from Spotify played out across the main room, providing a background soundtrack to the conversations and games that occurred throughout the space.[112] This in itself was not

[111] The most popular games on the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 consoles were *Fortnite* and the latest version of *FIFA*, while the Wii played host to a variety of singing and dancing games, alongside *Mario Kart Wii*. While each of these are considered broadly family friendly, on occasion members would also play entries from the more mature first-person shooter franchise *Call of Duty*, including as part of a tournament during a sleepover early in my fieldwork.

[112] Lincoln (2005: 413) argues that music is a key feature of adolescent space, that it is 'one of the primary cultural forms through which young people are able to transform the mundane space of the bedroom […] into an 'atmospheric zone', an ambient space with a cultural meaning'. In the specific Christian youth work context, Leah Marie Wilson (2019: 37) advocates for the presence of secular music chosen by the young people in these spaces, arguing that 'music might provide a practical way of empowering youth through memory making and responsibility particular to the Christian ethos' of a Christian youth group.

unique, with music accompanying the coffee and conversations that bookended each St Aidan's service. Yet the difference in content, and the resultant expectations surrounding cultural engagement, is significant. In the main space the music mirrored that heard during the worship in the service itself – contemporary worship songs by globally known Christian worship collectives such as Bethel Music and Jesus Culture, each with tens of millions of plays on Spotify. While these artists have produced works that attempt to mirror popular music styles and genres, the songs chosen for these moments in St Aidan's left little doubt that they were explicit songs of praise. In contrast, the music played at PM – often selected by the young people themselves due to access to the laptop on which Spotify was loaded – shared closer similarities with the playlist of Radio 1 than the worship in the main building. Expectations and limitations did exist, and anything with explicit content was likely to be skipped by David or Jordan. Similarly, the objection of members with high social capital could lead to changes to something more suited to their taste. In general, however, anything that would be deemed radio-friendly was acceptable in the space. Evidence of this is the fact that the most frequent source of music was a playlist entitled 'Clean R'n'B' created by Hannah and featuring popular mainstream artists such as Drake, Frank Ocean, and Kendrick Lamar.

The use of this soundtrack, appreciated (and created) by the young people and endorsed by the adult leaders, encouraged a relationship with wider popular culture that was not defined by separation and aversion, but rather one that could comfortably engage with cultural material without fear of guilt. While examples of popular culture in the adult St Aidan's services were utilised for explicitly spiritual purposes – for example, a clip from *Lord of the Rings* as a sermon illustration to indicate the value of friendships – within PM the cultural products were allowed to exist in their own space, integrated into the religious environment without needing to be overlaid with spiritual meaning. It is also noteworthy that as a result, black and minority ethnic music was far more likely to be represented within the youth environment than in the adult space. While both congregations were diverse to an extent, the exclusive use of evangelical contemporary worship music in the adult context meant an emphasis on genres that are 'coded to people in racial and ethnic minorities as being white' – such as soft rock and acoustic ballads – according to Monique Ingalls (interview in Davies 2018). Without the restrictions of only abiding by normative evangelical cultural expectations, the cultural experience of PM was able to far more closely reflect the diversity of its attendees.

However, conversations with the young people revealed a more complex relationship between popular and evangelical culture, one that valued *authentic* integration beyond all else. This integration had two aspects. Firstly, an aversion to Christian media that was attempting to co-opt the styles of popular culture for evangelistic purposes, and secondly – and more significantly – the presence of explicitly Christian figures in the mainstream media. The former aspect emerged during a conversation following the group's first visit to the adult evening service for the period of worship.[113] After a short social period, David asked the group what they had thought of the experience. While there was broad positivity, almost immediately the conversation shifted to one particular song that had been chosen. Along with the usual contemporary worship songs, the congregation had been led in a 'Christian-ised' version of the Grammy-nominated song *All of Me*, by American singer-songwriter John Legend. A romantic ballad written for Legend's then-fiancée, the song had been re-written in order to create worship-appropriate lyrics.[114] This attempt had clearly made some of the young people uncomfortable, with Christopher in particular highlighting the line "Love your curves and all your edges", retained from the original. After David attempted to suggest a re-interpretation of the line, Christopher responded that "we all know what it means in the original song" and so felt that it was misplaced and should have been removed. When I spoke with David later in the session, he was surprised that the young people had not embraced the song more enthusiastically. The reticence here I suggest is indicative of a discomfort among these young people with attempts by evangelicals to appropriate and alter popular culture for their own means.[115] This was not a condemnation of all evangelical culture or music, nor was it indicative of a resistance to authentic integration of Christianity into popular culture – for as I shall outline below, this latter aspect was highly appreciated by the young people. Rather, the comfort with which these young people already interacted with

[113] As mentioned in the previous chapter I was unable to attend this period of the night as David had asked me to remain in the youth hut.

[114] This appears to be an example of the 'cultural alchemy' that Harding (2000: 2) describes in her study of fundamentalism in the United States, a 'fusion of dissonant cultural practices', in which figures and organisations within evangelicalism have intentionally sought to emulate the practices of wider media culture but with a specifically evangelical ethos. John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association, comments that the global Christian media industry has created a 'parallel universe… below the radar of pop culture, but emulating it directly' (quoted in Romanowski 2007: 32).

[115] During our interview, Elena gave a similar response as she recalled a church social media page attempting to use a popular internet and adapt it to be about the Bible. This was a failure in Elena's mind, the result being that "it just took the fun out of it".

mainstream culture meant that there was little desire to imbue this artificially with evangelical meaning, with the result being inauthentic art that has little spiritual power.

The second aspect centres on the presence of prominent Christians in mainstream culture, with again an emphasis on perceived authenticity. The concept of 'authenticity' in evangelical cultural products is one that for Oosterbaan (2015) revolves around the legitimacy of the faith of the individual, particularly in emphasising their own separation from 'the world' and their pre-conversion life, accounted in their testimony narratives and their ongoing external actions. This continues to be a significant marker for many evangelicals in considering the validity of cultural icons, though adjudicating this is evidently unclear. Two names that recurred regularly throughout my time in the group were Chicago based rapper Chance the Rapper and grime artist Stormzy, from Croydon. Both artists have had enormous mainstream success, recording best-selling albums and collecting countless awards. Both have also released successful songs that explicitly reference their faith – one of which, Stormzy's 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt 2', was even sung by Hannah and Josh during one of the worship sessions at PM. Introducing the song, Hannah warned that there were "No lyrics [displayed on the screen], but some of you may know it", saying that it was "not a typical churchy song". Looking around at the young people during the song, many of whom often appeared unengaged or unemotive during the sung worship, it was clear that this song had a deeper emotional impact than many of the more conventional contemporary worship songs sung in PM, particularly among those who knew the song well. The fact that this was not only a well-known song recognised as artistically highly credible, but also one created by a young black-British performer from London – in contrast to contemporary worship artists who are overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and American – doubtless contributed to the powerful experience for many of the young people, particularly those of colour.

While these artists were appreciated as providing credibility to individual faith, there was also a gratitude that these artists were recognised by peers and wider culture and accepted while being openly Christian. Hannah spoke of the encouragement she felt when these figures with mass appeal were open about their faith and able to engage their non-Christian fans with Christian ideas. She recounted her own experience of being in a crowd at Chance the Rapper's set at Wireless Festival in London and hearing thousands singing along to songs about faith, despite many of them likely not being Christian. In a separate session discussing positive influences in society, Sophie re-iterated this enthusiasm for Chance and his appeal to non-Christians. However, when Christopher suggested Stormzy as a similarly positive

influence, both Sophie and David were reluctant to agree. Despite the spiritual content of some of his songs, David argued that he would be less enthusiastic for Stormzy to be held as an influence as "I think Chance reflects it in his life more than Stormzy". While he did not elaborate on this, it was clear that for David – as with the communities in which Oosterbaan was based – declaration of faith from public figures was not sufficient, and this had to also be visible in 'correct' behaviour in their lives. As with the language of 'ambassadors', therefore, we here see the prominence of persistent embodied behaviour and the presentation of Christian self through action – and in particular certain behaviours that distinguish an individual as 'Christian' – as central to the Christian life. Likely linked to similar concerns over perceived authenticity of faith was the absence of major figures such as Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West in these discussions, both of whom have frequently referenced their own faith in their music and interviews and have achieved significant global appeal and critical praise, and both of whom were mentioned by individuals when discussing their personal music tastes.[116] This suggests that even amongst the young people in the

[116] My research pre-dated the release of West's 2019 album *Jesus is King*, which is explicitly Christian in content (including an absence of swear words). The enthusiastic reception the record received from evangelicals revealed an interesting insight into evangelical culture and their engagement with mainstream culture – providing certain markers of authenticity and acceptability are met. Progressive Christian journalist Fred Clark (2019) has argued that aspects of racial and political, as well as religious, identity are significant in the response to *Jesus is King*, with the release following high-profile coverage of West's support of Donald Trump, and stylistically intentionally designed not as a gospel album but rather as a '"Worship" album — a product of and for the kind of hip Southern California white evangelical mega-church that Kanye's [white] in-laws introduced him to'. This contrasts with earlier releases by West which emphasise his Christian faith, such as *Jesus Walks* (2004) and *Ultralight Beam* (2016) which drew more explicitly on black musical influences such as gospel, a genre which Clark (2019) argues is 'actually a threat to white [American] evangelicals and to white evangelicalism. It's music for Their Team — music that helped to inspire and to sustain the very thing that late 20th and 21st-century white evangelicalism exists to obliterate: the Civil Rights Movement'. Kendrick Lamar has similarly spoken openly about his faith, while constantly wrestling with ideas of grace, sanctification, and damnation in his music. His critically lauded 2012 album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* opens with the sound of young men saying a version of the 'Sinners Prayer', an important part of the conversion ritual alongside baptism within many evangelical churches. However his music more broadly could be seen as equally challenging to white evangelicalism in the United States – not least due to the recurring themes including sex, gang violence, and the prevalence of police brutality and institutional racism across the country. As Matthew Linder (2018) argues, Lamar also intentionally breaks down the sharp separation between the expected evangelical life and 'real-life' experience. For example on 2011 track *Kush and Corinthians,* Lamar narrates his struggles with addiction and desire for sanctification, and thus is 'subverting a sanitized version of the narrative of Christian life (often espoused by mainstream American Evangelical culture), by injecting into that white-washed narrative, struggles had by those with addictions but wanting to live a more righteous life' (Linder 2018: 138). On Christmas Day 2019, West also released *Jesus is Born* with his 'Sunday Service Choir', which incorporates new writing alongside reworked versions of some of his own previous faith-themed songs and covers of those by other artists.

group, while there was a great appreciation of public figures who were revered by peers being open about their faith, reservations could remain depending on whether they were perceived as presenting the ‘correct’ Christian persona. What determined the correct markers of faith for these figures was never specified, however.

Initially, the model of “ambassadors” has clear parallels with the models of separation taught in the adult context. Christians are to understand themselves as set apart from the world around them, in some way present but not belonging in the same way as a ‘native’ might be. This too is to be embodied in deeds as well as words, to the extent that these young people were encouraged to “be Jesus” to their friends and family. In this sense, therefore, the young evangelical is invited into the separation and liminality that will be a life-long state should they remain in the faith. Yet beneath the surface we see a more complex and nuanced relationship with wider society, one that belies their more temporary liminal status *within* the church. This has been exhibited here in two prominent ways, both indicating a more accommodating relationship with wider culture than that which is pronounced in the adult environment. Firstly, this involves a perception that their own school environments are not necessarily overtly hostile to their faith, and are navigable for young Christians with the right support, including continuing in their involvement with PM. This is contrasted with the post-youth environment of university, a treacherous place worthy of preparation, containing the worldly hostilities that are expected in adult evangelical teaching. Secondly, the general institutional accommodation of non-Christian popular culture, without recourse to ‘Christianise’ it, suggests an acceptance of increased proximity between young evangelicals and the wider cultural world than amongst their adult compatriots – within their worship spaces at least. Again there is nuance here, however, particularly with regards to mainstream artists who identify as Christian, whereby a certain model of lived faith is expected in order to justify “authentic” faith and their subsequent ability to serve as either role models or ‘witnesses’ to non-Christians. The result of this more engaged relationship with the wider world is an insight into the second layer of liminality in which these young people are existing, alongside the lifelong state of adult evangelicalism. Here they are not seen necessarily as standing between heaven and earth, but somewhere between ‘the world’ and evangelical culture itself. At this point, still in the process of formation, there is less of an expectation that they have committed to the binary identity expected in adult evangelicalism and so can exist in-between the binary. In the following section we will explore the experiences and accounts of young people as they navigate this relationship with the wider world.

The Desire for Quiet Acceptance

Thus far the exploration of youth separation in this chapter has largely been premised on the normative teachings of the group – along with the responses given by young people in particular discussions – rather than the lived experiences of the young people themselves in their various contexts. While the accounts of being an ambassador outlined above, both from David and the young people, repeated the desire that behavioural separation would be actively attractive to non-Christians, the individual accounts were more complex. What emerged through conversations and interviews was a desire more for acceptance of their difference by non-Christian peers rather than a distinctiveness which created division. Despite this, members of PM tended to accept that some distance between themselves and non-Christian peers was inevitable, because these friends, however sympathetic, could never fully understand the spiritual dimension of their lives. As a result, members of PM placed great value both on friendships with other Christians and the shared Christian ethos of the group. This will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.

As I have outlined above, the perception of wider culture in the adult context at St Aidan's was one wherein separation was not only *desired* as a marker of distinction, but also *necessitated* due to the natural opposition (if not quite persecution) that should be expected from non-Christians. Yet as was the case with the attitudes towards school in the PM sessions, the overwhelming experience of my interview participants in their school environment was one of indifferent acceptance by non-Christians.[117] All of the young people I spoke to said that many of their school peers knew they were Christians, often as a result of having mentioned their involvement in a church based activity, but they had limited experience of any negative responses occurring as a result of this. Anna, a Year 12 girl who had joined PM after growing up in a church that lacked a youth group, and Samantha, two years younger but who had been involved with St Aidan's since early childhood, had similar experiences of this in their different school environments. Close friends, the girls were enthusiastic and responding to each other as much as myself throughout the ice cream-fuelled interview, and both agreed on the perception of faith among their peers:

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[117] This reflects findings from research by Sylvia Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010: 52-3) into the faith of Generation Y, which found a broad level of indifference towards religion rather than outright rejection.

Rob

Do many of your friends know that you come along to church? That you're a Christian?

Samantha

Yeah

Anna

Yeah I think pretty much my whole year knows! I don't know it was never something I was ashamed of, it's like I don't know, I think it's pretty obvious like from the way I am they're like 'oh you're a Christian aren't you' I'm like 'yeah, I am!'

[…]

Rob

Does it impact do you think how people treat you?

Samantha

Not really, I think people are just so used to hearing like 'this person's Muslim, this person's Christian', it's just sort of like accepted

Anna

It's not like a big deal

Samantha

Like you sort of say 'ok, move on'

Rob

Yeah, and [Anna] you've found the same?

Anna

Yeah like I don't think I've been treated *differently* because of it

However, while they had not faced the level of 'opposition' often narrated (and glamorised) through (adult) evangelical teaching, this is not to say that their school peer experiences were entirely free of confrontation. These usually took the form of relatively academic challenges from classmates, for example during discussions in Religious Studies classes. Molly, a Year 10 member who I interviewed in the sunshine during New Wine, found the poor quality of teaching in these contexts frustrating, particularly as it led to her – as a known Christian – facing accusatory questions from (as she perceived it) ill-informed friends:

> [… In Religious Studies] I feel like it's just a bit 'the Bible says do not kill' and it's just like, all just quotes and it's not really like explaining what they actually mean and it's just people are getting the wrong idea, and without the right person to explain it or guide people through the Bible it's just a bit hard. Like when [the teachers] just say a random quote and they're like 'learn this' and then everyone's like 'oh I can't believe Christians believe that!' and I'm just like 'well, it means this this and this' and they're just like 'yeah but it's *saying* this' and I'm just like [*frustrated noises*]! […] If it's not in RS then it's just normal, but like I feel like when we're talking about religion no one really gets it until you've actually been in that like situation.

The presence of this form of conflict was less frequent outside of class but not unheard of, though often resulted in irritation rather than great personal spiritual unsettling. 17-year-old Ben, for example, told me that most of his friends were not Christian, and that while this did not usually concern him, it could occasionally lead to frustrating situations:

> *Rob*
>
> Has it ever caused any tension or misunderstandings?
>
> *Ben*
>
> I mean I have had, it's really just one person who's come up to me and just sort of thrown some of the biggest questions to the Christian faith at me and just expecting me to answer them!
>
> *Rob*
>
> Was that to catch you out or because they were genuinely interested?

Ben

> I mean, I never actually asked I just got kind of annoyed cos this guy was being really annoying that day […] he had been really obnoxious as such, just getting in the way. I sort of had enough. So I just left!

As with Molly's example from the classroom, the assumption from Ben is that there was little genuine interest in understanding Christianity or his personal relationship with faith in this situation, and instead was a tactic to agitate believers. Yet as with Molly, Samantha, and Anna above, the general response was one of indifference:

Rob

> Does [Christianity] ever come up in conversation, maybe your friends will be having some chat and they'll be like 'oh Ben, you're a Christian, what do you think about XYZ?'

Ben

> Very rarely. I don't have many chats like that with my friends, at least conversation topics that would come up in the Christian faith too often

[…]

Rob

> Why do you think it doesn't come up much?

Ben

> […] It has no impact on their life as they think if they're a Christian or not a Christian, so doesn't really bother them, so they don't have any like dying questions they want to ask.

The final context in which these young people faced challenge from peers was in the context of extended discussions with friends, either on one off occasions – such as with one young person who described a long late-night conversation with two friends neither of whom had a

faith themselves[118] – or more regular debates, as was the case with Christopher, a Year 13 student and member of the leadership team, who described regular discussions with friends at lunch times.[119] This context, however, is one that is entered into willingly and appeared to be appreciated, either due to the genuine interest of the conversation partners or because it was enjoyable. As Christopher described it, "I never feel like uncomfortable doing that, just because of the group of friends who I'm with. And it's a good atmosphere like the chats that we have, it's all like good-natured." Here again then we see limited genuine opposition to faith from peers, and certainly little experience of tension as a result of these discussions.

For most of my interview participants the general experience was that the topic of religion rarely came up outside of the Religious Studies classroom and occasional moments of either genuine intrigue or attempted antagonism from peers. It was interesting to note that the young people themselves rarely appeared to be the instigators of religious conversations themselves, suggesting that the form of direct evangelism in which the believer is encouraged to actively present a Christian message to people whenever the opportunity arises was not attractive to these young people – despite their general recognition during discussions that some form of verbal element was worthwhile for sharing faith (as noted above).[120] As a result, the experience of their Christian faith as a marker of separation from those around them was rare outside of lessons that specifically focused on religious topics and thus drew their difference to the fore. This appeared to be due in large part to the sense of apathy felt by those around them to this identity difference between Christian and non-Christian at this

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[118] "The conversation we had was just a very long conversation in the field, but I don't know how it got into theological stuff, but it just went really deep, really quickly. It doesn't help we were drunk, but I can remember most of the conversation." I have decided not to name the participant in this instance, but it is perhaps interesting that they felt comfortable revealing to me this incident of underage drinking – unprompted – in a manner that would be contrary to many ethical expectations among evangelicals.

[119] These were not limited to religion, and he also mentioned talking about the news, politics ("we're *all* left-wing like Labour except like two of our friends who are like Tories so they just get slaughtered all the time"), and aliens ("My friend thinks that aliens are real so we have like big debates about that"). In this context, Christopher said, "religion does come into it quite a lot" – with around a third of the group being Christians and the others being "either agnostic, like completely atheist [or] doesn't really care".

[120] One aspect that many appreciated from PM, however, was the opportunity to learn how to respond to difficult questions from peers that they had either struggled to answer in the past or anticipated facing in the future. As I will explore in Chapter 5, the pedagogical approach adopted in PM enabled them not only to learn but also to challenge and discuss among peers as they themselves explored their own faith identities.

level.[121] This therefore mirrors the presentation of the school environment from within PM, as explored above, but the reluctance of young people to regularly initiate these conversations indicates a reticence to verbally expose and exacerbate the separation between Christian self and non-Christian other. Behavioural separation, however, was experienced slightly differently for the young people in PM.

Behavioural Separation, Pre-Conceptions, and Longing for Acceptance

While the general response of accepted indifference from peers meant that they were unlikely to perceive themselves as recipients of extensive opposition on account of their differing religious position in school, the desire from some to resist certain expected behavioural norms – in particular surrounding alcohol and substance use, and to a lesser extent issues of pre-marital sex – did mark them out as separate from their peers. These distinctive practices were discussed during dedicated thematic sessions, each of which were greatly appreciated by the young people.[122] These sessions were often led by adults (both leaders and guest speakers from the congregation) who had in some way wrestled with this topic in their own lives after previously 'failing' to live up to these standards during adolescence or early adulthood, and as a result would regularly involve some level of testimony narrative relating their change in behaviour to a newfound faith in and relationship with God.

During the Spring term of my fieldwork, following consultations by David with the youth leadership team over what they would like to cover that term, the sessions oriented around two themes: 'Big Questions' and 'Real People, Real Stories'. The first of the latter came from Sandi, a member of the St Aidan's congregation in her late twenties, who had been invited to talk with the group on the topic of "Partying". Speaking without notes from a stool in the middle of the room, the young people gathered in a haphazard semi-circle around her, Sandi

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[121] Again, this is an aspect also seen in Collins-Mayo *et al*'s (2010) research. They found that the young people in their study were 'universally keen to stress in the interviews that they respected other people's beliefs and practices', something the authors argue may be down to the fact it 'simply did not matter to our young people what somebody's religious faith was if they kept it to themselves and did not try to force it on others' (Collins-Mayo *et al* 2010: 64-5).

[122] These topics, along with sessions on issues such as social media, were frequently referred to during interviews as examples of sessions they had appreciated. Most frequently these were praised due to the fact that these topics were particularly "relevant" to teenagers and allowed for conversation on topics that were important in their lives and could then be applied to everyday life. As I shall outline in the next chapter, the fact that this was a group comprised entirely of peers at the same stage of life was of great significance to the members of PM.

started by assuring the group that the wedding at Cana in John 3 showed that "Jesus didn't hate parties". She then asked what the young people thought the appeal was of parties, before utilising (dubious) neuroscience to refer to four "happiness hormones" that were released during parties and claiming that it was "scientifically proven that partying is fun and addictive". The bulk of her teaching came in the form of her own story, outlining her partying and drinking while at university – continuing even once she had felt God "moving in her life". This was until an incident involving accidental recreational drug use while inebriated, and the next day, while watching embarrassing videos of the night before, her phone Bible app opened by itself and showed her the verse 1 Peter 4:3 – "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing & detestable idolatry". For Sandi, this was "God proving a point to me that he does really care what we do". While things such as partying and drinking alcohol are not intrinsically evil, it is an issue of *priority* – "God wants to tell us that if we seek anything other than His kingdom then it is an issue". She wanted to reinforce to the group that it was not about being perfect ("God's not going to cast you off because you struggle with something"), before giving the young people an opportunity to ask her any questions. While there was not an outright condemnation of particular practices – with partying not only presented as inescapable but highly enjoyable – the tone was nevertheless one of caution, and that to truly follow God and be in relationship with Him one must be careful not to engage in partying in a manner that prioritises partying over God – one that is "doing what the pagans do". Responding to questions at the end of her talk, Sandi told the group that while she was more intentional and reflexive with her drinking now, she had not given up entirely, and said that the friends she had been with that night were still some of her "best friends". "Real friends", she assured the group, would respect your decisions to be different. Therefore, while the language of 'pagans' in the passage might have been used to increase a sense of division, the lasting impression was that the young Christian could follow evangelical behavioural expectations while still having "real friends" who were not Christian.

Partying emerged in conversations with the young people as a key potential point of differential behaviour with their non-Christian peers. In an interview conducted eight months after Sandi's talk, Anna referenced this session as particularly memorable and relevant for her:

Anna

> That's like an issue like with my friends cos they're really like into [partying] and I'm not, and it's like hmm, but then often, I don't know, I don't feel like as bad about it after [the session on partying].

Rob

> What was it that made you feel a bit more comfortable about it?

Anna

> Well it was like, you can go and still have a nice time, but you don't have to like, do the stuff that your friends are doing if you don't want to.

Sophie was another young person to mention partying as a marker of difference between herself and her peers, particularly with regards to recreational drug use. She was one of the older members of the group, approaching her final term of school as we sat down for an interview in the hut on a warm weekday afternoon. When I asked whether any particular issues caused tensions with her non-Christian friends – initially asked in relation to topics of discussion – she focused on distinctive practices:

> […] I kind of made it clear [to my friends] from the very start, because also the school I go to is quite a druggie school, so most of my friends have tried various drugs – that I haven't gone near, I haven't gone near any drugs – and I kind of made it clear from the beginning. Somehow like I managed to do it where it didn't come across that I was like 'straight edge' and I would touch anything, but like I drink but I'm not willing to experiment with different drugs just cos I don't want to, I'm not really about that

Interestingly, however, she said that while she would not *explicitly* tie this to her faith in front of her friends, their presuppositions about Christian behaviour led to an assumption that this distinctive behaviour must necessarily be due to the distinctive faith identity. Thus, even when their faith was not explicitly discussed or disputed with regards to its content, distinctive practices were identified by peers as inseparably tied to their faith. Behavioural distinctiveness thus emphasised a level of separation between Christian and non-Christian, even if this was not explicitly sought out by the young person themselves.

For those who chose actively to differ from their friends in this area, their frustration did not appear to stem from the idea that their faith was forcing them to miss out on desirable experiences. This was perceived as a free choice that they were content with. Rather, it was the assumptions and other reactions that this behaviour would illicit from friends that caused the most frustration. When Harriet followed Sophie's response in their shared interview by speaking about the responses of some of her friends to her decision not to take drugs, for example, her passion was evident:

> I've definitely had moments where I felt like really like, it's weird even though I've had, I can have like really good conversations about my own faith […] I think when it gets to like what you will and won't do that kind of, there is peer pressure, that kind of like "oh she won't drink, she's a good little Christian girl" that side of it, eurgh it's horrible! […] And then on the other side the sort of, they assume that just because you're doing a certain thing that you're judging them for what they're doing, so I have friends who take drugs and they think, I've had people assume, because I *don't* take drugs, that I am this judgey Christian judging them for their drugs or alcohol or whatever, even though I never said that […] that's horrible as well because that's like, you can never get that close to someone when they're when there's that barrier there when they think that you have put yourself
>
> *Sophie*
>
> They kind of hold that against you
>
> *Harriet*
>
> Yeah when they think that you've put yourself on a different like level to them

In this quote we see two unintended elements of societal separation occurring (in the perspective of Harriet) not as a result of her action but as a result of the *perception* of Christians that is held by her friends. Firstly, there is the assumption that a difference of behaviour driven by Christian faith necessitates judgmentalism, even amongst friends, over those who behave differently. Secondly, an association between being Christian and being in some sense boring or unadventurous, uninterested in engaging in peer-driven behaviour. This relationship between religion and certain behaviour caused frustration even when it was not necessarily intended as a form of mockery. While Lily was younger than both Sophie and

Harriet, she nevertheless shared their frustration. In her experience, this could be taken as patronising or belittling, as though her faith marked out her behaviour in a way that would not be true of non-Christians:

> I think sometimes people are like 'Aw you're such a good, such a good Christian girl Lily' and not just you guys either! Like friends at school they're just like 'You're such a good Christian!' and I'm like 'you could just say could just say I'm just a good person but apparently Christian comes with that!'

While these young people sought a level of integration with their peers, negotiating this was multi-layered and not always straightforward. Difficulties with regards to verbal challenges over the content of theological or philosophical belief were largely limited to moments where Christianity was raised in the curriculum, or a peer desired to be intentionally incendiary. Beyond this, the response was largely one of indifference – a state widely accepted by these evangelical young people. Behaviourally, however, behaving in a more conservative manner that ran counter to social norms[123] – whether intentionally as a result of their Christian faith or not[124] – risked bringing about judgements and unwanted assumptions from their peers. Thus, even without the persecutory theological beliefs of adult evangelicals that finds pride in these behavioural distinctions, these young people often still found themselves separated in some form from mainstream society. The nature of their liminality, between total social integration and the form of distinction from 'the world' demanded in adult evangelicalism, resulted in experiences of separation with wider culture even if these were not desired, and even within the relatively accommodating context of secondary school.

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[123] It is interesting to note that not drinking or taking drugs was still seen as a counter-cultural act, despite evidence suggesting that contemporary teenagers are less likely to drink, take drugs, or fall pregnant than previous generations – even being dubbed "Generation Sensible" (BBC News 2018). This would suggest that traditionally evangelical conservative behaviours may be more normalised within youth culture. The accounts of Lily and Harriet, however, suggest that in the eyes of their peers these behaviours are inescapably tied to personal religious belief if it is present.

[124] When I asked Anna and Samantha what difference being a Christian had made in their lives, they struggled to answer initially due to the fact that they had both "always been a Christian". Without a dramatic conversion experience offering a stark separation between past and present self they struggled to distinguish between what decisions, priorities, or characteristics were as a result of "me being like a Christian or it's just me being me".

Conclusion: Separation, Space, and Intertwined Liminalities

In this chapter I have outlined some of the overlapping layers of liminality experienced by the young people at St Aidan's, each defined by a form of separation. Across the adult environment, evangelicals are encouraged to see themselves as existing in some way between heaven and earth, "*in* the world but not *of* the world". While "the world" is left undefined, it is expected that the believer will be explicitly distinctive in both ethics and practice without being wholly cut off from society. This was not an easy task, and before the eschatological re-integration of heaven and earth believers were to anticipate active opposition from those around them. For the young people, however, both the expectation and experience of this was tempered by the fact that they exist within the additional liminal environment that will be the focus of this thesis – existing between child and adult, and between integration with wider society and full participation in evangelical life. As a result, while they may adopt some differing beliefs and practices from their peers, they do not desire, expect, nor regularly experience the form of resistance anticipated (and glamorised) in the adult services. Similarly, their in-between status allows for a greater engagement with non-evangelical culture, while still greatly appreciating the existence of high-profile Christians within the popular culture sphere.

While these forms of liminality primarily consider the relationship between evangelicals and the wider world, this chapter has also explored the nature of separation within the St Aidan's, most prominent in the use of space. Whether in the old buildings or the new, dedicated youth space away from the adult meeting area was a constant presence. This served as a space which the young people could have a sense of ownership over, as well as providing an environment in which experimentation and formation could take place – crucially away from the parental and wider adult gaze. It is in this separate space that the remainder of the thesis will be set. Within this separated space inside St Aidan's, the rite of passage of evangelical adolescence can take place. In this space, reserved for those liminal beings between childhood and adulthood, young evangelical subjects are expected to be formed. Yet separation is more than simply spatial in the rite of passage process. For David, separating the youth from the adult environment enabled them to both form a unique community and draw upon distinctive practices that were uniquely suitable for this life stage. In the models of van Gennep and Turner this is to be expected. For separation within the liminal is not only spatial but structural and behavioural. These aspects will emerge over the next two chapters as I explore two significant features of liminality within a rite of passage. In Chapter 5 I will explore the distinctive pedagogical approaches utilised within PM and the extent to which

this encourages a form of uncertainty during the period of formation. Before this, however, I will focus in the next chapter on the importance of peer-based relationships within the group, deeply woven into its structures and practices, and the impact of this on faith formation, leading to an experience of *communitas* – an important feature of liminality.

Chapter 4: Faith Formation Among Friends: Peers and Communitas

‘Friends and Influences’

A few hours after my last visit to St Aidan’s for baptism and confirmation preparation class, I pulled up on the quiet suburban road and walked the familiar path up to the youth hut. Jordan and the assembled musicians had already arrived and were rehearsing for the evening’s worship, as had some of the youth leadership team. While we sat and watched the band I chatted with Harriet about school and the offers she had, and had not yet, received from universities. Before long David gathered the leadership team for the meeting that preceded every session. As the meeting ticked over past 17:00, when the group formally started, a solitary young person snuck into the hut and quietly made themselves comfortable outside of the leadership circle, waiting politely for the meeting to end. David ran us through the plan for the evening: Maddie, who at 15 was one of the younger members of the team, would be leading the game for the first time, Jordan would be leading the worship, and David’s talk would be focused on ‘Friends and Influences’. As ever he closed the meeting with a spontaneous prayer, leaving space for others to join in with their own. Usually, Jordan would contribute before a period of potentially uncomfortable, ideally contemplative, silence as the group waited for David to say the ‘Amen’ that indicated that the time was complete. Yet this time Lily, another of the younger members of the team, opted to pray out loud for the forthcoming session. Considering her spiritual and social confidence in the group, the fact that Lily would be the first of the group to pray in this manner was not a surprise, however it nevertheless served as an indication of her development in the group.

The meeting had overrun, but still numbers were low – David had assured us that this was due to it being Mother’s Day – and as we separated out for the unstructured social period it was noticeably quieter than usual. Sophie and Euan had made their way over to the snacks table, with first selection of the unhealthy bounty one of the perks of joining the team. As we chatted and dug our forearms into ever-emptying tubes of Pringles – with university choices once again being the main topic of discussion – Sophie expended some energy grabbing articles of furniture that were nearby and placing them, somewhat haphazardly, towards the centre of the space in what was previously a large semi-circular empty section of grey carpet. While there was no order to her placements, the intention was clear: to ready the area for the session and in particular the discussions during the talk, discussions that

depended on unrestricted engagement with those around. After half an hour of conversation and casual play, with young people continuing to flow in slowly throughout the period and take up positions by the food table, gather enthusiastically around the consoles in the side room, or just slouch on a sofa with friends, David called us through to the 'Treeside Room' on the other side of the hut. The table tennis table had been packed away and slid into a neat slot down the side of the table football table, leaving a large empty section of half carpet and half linoleum in the harshly lit room. Into this space twelve collapsible and light metal chairs – enough for one per person – had been chaotically placed facing in different directions.

Maddie was leading this section and while slightly nervous to begin with, settled into her role as she realised that all of her peers were keenly engaged. The game was titled "The Chair Game" and was simple in theory and manic in practice. All but one player was seated, leaving one empty chair. The one standing had to try and sit in this empty chair (only allowed to walk), while the rest of the group did their best to stop them by swapping chairs as quickly as possible to leave the one empty far from 'the walker'. If the walker managed to sit down, they 'won' that round and a new walker was selected. After a few rounds, David introduced a competitive element, timing each walker to see who could complete the task the quickest, though as ever 'victory' was only a passing consideration in amongst the sheer joy of the moment. It was frantic, chaotic, and unexpectedly tactical – but hugely enjoyable. A constant eye was needed on the empty chair and the participant, while watching for other members who might be looking to dart out at the same time as oneself. Too many people getting up left chairs unsupervised and easily accessible. No one going for the chair and the game was up. Cries of laughter and encouragement rang around the room throughout, and each round ended with an exasperated round of applause as the seated team acknowledged defeat and the walker sat proudly in their place, before a new person was chosen. Despite being a decade older than some of the group I was as enthusiastically lost in the game as every young person, desperate to save my teammates at every point of jeopardy. After fifteen frenetic minutes David congratulated us all and called an end to proceedings, guiding us back into the main room for the period of sung worship.

Jordan and two of the young people headed to the front of the room and faced the rest of us, now scattered around the space. The chaotic furniture arrangement meant that when invited to stand the group were spread out unevenly and without order, though all angled themselves towards the band and, if desired, people could adjust themselves to find their

own space. After picking up his acoustic guitar and adjusting the microphone Jordan read a Psalm from his tablet, before encouraging us that "with everything we have we should praise the Lord" and launching into 'Awesome is He' as a deluge of rain began to clatter onto the plastic roof in the adjoining console room. Following the second song, 'Revelation Song', Sophie read to the group from Psalm 34 (Jordan had asked prior to the session if she would be happy to do this), and Jordan prayed before going into the final song, 'Build My Life'. As I sat on one of the high stools on the right-hand side of the room, I could see the group members, each singing together but as usual lacking the embodied charismatic behaviour that I had witnessed in the 'adult' services. The exception was Harriet, her hands out in front of her body, palms facing upwards, eyes closed as she sang every word from memory, stood in her own defined space but not detached, not alone, facing her peers as much as she was facing the band. The songs sang of the holiness and majesty of the divine and of the confidence that believers can find in relationship with God as they sung directly to Him – *"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty / Who was and is and is to come / With all creation I sing praise to the King of Kings / You are my everything and I will adore You"* (Riddle 2004).

Given the small group size, and the fact that we were already sat in a reasonably tight semi-circle, David decided to grab a stool and position himself farther forward than usual, increasing the intimacy of the occasion further. Following some brief notices and an opportunity for the group to share what they had done over the week, David shifted into the teaching. The low numbers this week were, he insisted, advantageous for the particular topic at hand – 'Friends and Influences'. We were first told to pair up with someone we knew well, share what we admired about them, and reflect on how it felt to hear this. Jordan and I, as the adult leaders, went together and it was powerful to hear his kind words, despite us only having known one another for a short time. We were then asked to imagine how it would have felt if our partner had given a negative, rather than affirming, comment. "The reason why this makes us feel a certain way", David told us, "is because people have influence over us, we value what they think and say about us". He asked the group "Who are the most influential people in your life?" and around the room the answers were consistent – family and friends for the young people, and spouses for Jordan, David, and myself. Influences were there at all stages of life, but David spoke of the particular importance of this in adolescence, as "psychologically, and there have been a lot of studies on this stuff, you guys are at a stage where you're figuring out 'who am I?' – you're figuring out your identity". As young people they were, he said, gaining autonomy and independence from parents, moving away from the dominance of parental influence, with friends becoming increasingly more influential.

Because of this, “you are at the most impressionable phase of your life” and so “that’s why a lot of teenagers go through to push boundaries and ask themselves ‘Who am I?’”, with friends being central figures in this journey of self-discovery. Over the next half-hour, David guided the group in conversations around consequences of negative and positive influences (both from peers and wider culture), debates over the relative virtues of publicly Christian musicians (“Chance [The Rapper] can get to people who aren’t Christian but uses his platform to tell people about Jesus!”, Sophie enthusiastically argued), the ways in which their friends brought them down or built them up through words and actions, the extent to which St Aidan’s and PM served as a positive influence, and finally some introspection on whether they are a positive or negative influence to those around them.

I had been asked at the beginning of the discussion period to hand out Bibles to everyone, but David waited until the final stages of the session before explicitly drawing on scripture. Back in the pairs in which we started, David wrote five verses on the board and asked the group to select one and discuss “What do you think the passage is saying about influences?”. After a few minutes with their partners everyone fed their thoughts back to the group as a whole, with the repeated theme of surrounding oneself with good influences and escaping negative ones, as well as being a positive influence on those around us. Bringing the session to a close, David had some choice words for the group to reflect on. Firstly, that they understood their responsibility of being influenced and of influencing people, and that this was a *spiritual* responsibility – “What we believe as Christians is that we are careful about our influences and being a positive influence”. Secondly, that this had an evangelistic element. Being a “positive and purposeful influence” in our friends’ lives meant “earning” your way into someone’s life, and not being a “Bible basher”.[125] Clearly, part of being an influence in their lives was to encourage them towards the Christian faith, though not forcefully. Thirdly, we were asked to close our eyes and reflect: “If you identify as a child of God, one of his ambassadors in the world, I want you to think about this: Who do you allow

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[125] While this will not be the focus of the current chapter, this aspect of the discussion links to discussions in Chapter 3 and raises interesting insights into perspectives of evangelism within the group. Firstly, that this is best done through pre-existing friendships rather than with strangers. Secondly, as discussed in the previous chapter, that evangelism is not simply verbalised but embodied in distinctive (Christ-like) action which, in the context of a prolonged friendship, is exhibited over an extended period. Finally, we see a prioritisation of empathy and attempted non-judgementalism, contrasted with approaches that are seen as aggressive and not premised on a pre-existing relationship – “Bible bashing”. Indeed, the language of relational influence suggests that didactical approaches are contrary to the expectations of evangelism in PM.

to influence you? Do they pull you towards God or away from him? Do your friends see Jesus in you? Are you pointing them towards you? Or towards Jesus?” Our influences and the influence we exert should have the same direction – towards God. Relationships with peers were intertwined with our relationship with God, something that needs to be proactively maintained, and “a big part of that is pointing others towards Jesus”. Finally, we were presented with a challenge: “Are you allowing Jesus to influence you? Or are you allowing people like Miley Cyrus or Lil Pump?”

Intersubjectivity, Peers, and Communitas in PM

Mathew Guest *et al* (2013: 116), in their study of Christians at British universities, argue that while ‘vertical relationships (i.e. parent to child)’ have been privileged in the sociological study of religious socialization, ‘[i]ntra-generational relationships are equally, if not more, important to young people's religious identities’. Those who were most committed to practicing Christian faith were also those who were most likely to have more Christian friends, with the study finding a ‘strong association between active church involvement and having a close friendship group who share similar beliefs’ (Guest, et al, 2013: 117). When we consider the significance more generally of peers on the formation of the adolescent self, the need to consider the significance of peers on faith formation in adolescence becomes even more important. As noted in Chapter 1, numerous studies have shown the importance of friendships for teenagers – indeed, neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2018: 31) argues that ‘friends are more important during adolescence than at any other stage of life’. As young people move out of the dominance of parental influence, their ‘chosen’ relationships with admired peers begin to take on greater significance, greater here than they ever have been or will be. This will be true in areas of religion as with other areas of life, and thus while the emphasis within evangelicalism during this life stage is on individual development, it remains important to consider the impact of peer intersubjectivity on the formation of religious subjectivity in this context. As this chapter will show, relationships within the group were encouraged across the structure of the sessions and were understood to play an important role in the development of the individual relationship with the divine.

In understanding this process as a rite of passage, however, two further aspects become significant in reflecting on the PM sessions as liminal environments. Having already established this as a place of separation, we can consider elements of both anti-structure and communitas. The former, explored in greater depth in the following chapter as I outline PM’s approach to pedagogy, was Victor Turner’s term for the subversion of usual social

structures and practices that takes place in the midst of liminality. In the course of the session outlined above – unremarkable aside from the lower than usual numbers – we repeatedly see practices that remain unquestioned yet would be radical in ordinary 'adult' environments. In this chapter I will look in particular at these practices as they relate to the development of intersubjective peer relationships, but this is closely tied to the second element: communitas. This idea, proposed by Victor Turner and expanded on by Edith Turner, argues that in the period of liminality in which social power structures are broken down and individual differentiating characteristics are less significant, individuals are particularly susceptible to a powerful sense of joyful transcendent togetherness with those undergoing the shared experience. This is a sense of unity and bonding, one that might only be fleeting – indeed the state is intrinsically precarious and difficult to maintain – but is nevertheless significant in the formation of the individual and the collective in the midst of liminality. The experience of communitas is not exclusive to rites of passage, but neophytes are particularly vulnerable, and Edith Turner (2012: 4) refers to the experience as 'a gift from liminality' due to the eradication of social difference that takes place. Through considering intersubjective peer-relationships alongside communitas, in the context of anti-structural practices, we can see the important role of the communal sense of the group as a whole in the formation of young evangelical subjectivity. This will be the focus of this chapter.

I will start by exploring the extent to which peer-relationships were placed at the centre of every aspect of the PM meetings. Building on the findings of the previous chapter, I will show that the space in which the young people met was internally arranged so as to emphasise relationality throughout the session, in stark contrast to the adult environment indicating the differing priorities of the communities. Following this I will outline the different stages of an ordinary PM session and argue that again each of these elements centred around relationships between peers. The practice of play in particular, I will argue, has the potential to develop into an experience of communitas through the willing participation of those with the highest social capital in order to flatten the social hierarchy and allow for a shared sense of transcendent joy. Later in the session, the teaching incorporated not only the voices of David and other adult leaders, but the voices of all the young people through active discussion – an aspect that will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter – an approach that again was built upon and encouraged an attitude of religious intersubjectivity in the group. The one exception to this emphasis was the period of sung worship during which, as I shall outline, the leadership encouraged the young people to ignore their communal surroundings and instead focus on their individual relationship with God. After

describing the social significance of each of these structural elements I will bring the voices of the young people themselves to the fore, exploring the complex relationship of religious influence between parents and peers during this period as perceived by the young people. Finally, I will show the significance of sharing the worship experience with like-minded peers for these adolescent evangelicals in reinforcing their faith position, once again contributing to the impact of peer-focused social experience on the formation of the young evangelical subject.

"Here, relationships are just as important as worship or teaching" – Sociality and Institutional Intentions

While the session described above closed with a comment on the dangers of popular culture figures, throughout the talk the emphasis was placed equally heavily on their peers. The recognition that friends hold particular influence during adolescence – confirmed by their responses to David's initial questions – was at the heart of the youth work practice at St Aidan's. As we see in the session there were multiple rationales for this emphasis from the institutional perspective, rationales that were presented clearly to the young people. Firstly, a sense that young people in adolescence are reaching a stage of increased independence from their parents. Secondly, the idea – stemming from scientific studies of adolescence[126] – that the particular nature of neurological and social development in this period draws young people to seek new influences, in particular their peers. Thirdly, the belief that adolescence can be a pivotal period for subject formation and exploration – and this can be a risky endeavour. Fourthly, the idea that friendships can be crucial in whether an individual at this age continues with or shifts away from their childhood faith. And finally, the related hope that friendship can be a fruitful basis for evangelism and bringing new young people into 'relationship with Jesus'. Personal relationship with God, as emphasised through prayer and most explicitly in the three charismatic worship songs, was the goal not only for the group members for themselves but also to imagine for their friends outside the group, but attaining and maintaining this relationship was made easier through positive (that is, Christian) peer relationships.

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[126] While understandably David did not reference any in particular and was open about his lack of expertise in the area, studies would support this claim.

A pronounced emphasis on relationships (at least in theory) is not unusual within evangelical communities. Yet for David there was a belief that within a youth context this took on an additional significance, most succinctly described in a meeting with volunteers prior to the Good Friday service for which we were providing activities for 11-18-year-olds. We had been joined by a new volunteer who, though a regular attender of St Aidan's services, had yet to experience a youth group session. As a result, David focussed on what he perceived to be the central distinctive feature of the group – the extended opportunities for socialising. "Here, relationships are just as important as worship or teaching", David told us. As a result, this emphasis on relationality was embedded throughout the structure of the PM sessions in multiple ways. Prior to outlining the relational emphasis across the different elements of a Sunday evening, I will first start by exploring the ways in which the space in which PM met encouraged this social focus.

Social Space

In Chapter 3 I outlined the nature of spatial separation from the 'main' church and the extent to which the young people felt an ownership over their space. Yet the nature of the difference was not purely one of location but also of emphasis and intention. This was most clearly visible in the layout and further use of furniture across the two spaces. Unlike many similarly aged Anglican churches, St Aidan's had never had pews and as a result there was no pre-determined way the congregation needed to be arranged – the space was vast, open, and multi-purpose. While the pillars and the stage indicated a general direction of the space, it was nevertheless one in which multiple possibilities were present with regards to use and focus of furniture.[127] Yet despite this possibility, the most frequently used layout of seating was reminiscent of traditional pews. Row after row of chairs faced the stage from which the preacher and worship team addressed the congregation, and aside from brief moments of permitted conversation with those seated nearby congregants had little need or opportunity to interact during services. The songs that peppered each service often elicited physical responses from congregants, but still these remained largely confined to the individual's personal space immediately in front of their chosen chair, with only a small confident minority using the areas at the back and sides of the worship space. The interior space was

[127] At times these potentialities were explored, for example during a 'Taizé' service in which the seating was arranged in a semi-circular arrangement and different areas of engagement arranged around the church building for the second half of the service. However, this was unusual.

therefore utilised in a manner that discouraged socialising and corporate involvement, instead emphasising the general passivity of the individual as they were guided from the stage with little opportunity for active participation.

This is not an unusual internal layout for evangelical churches in Britain.[128] While the charismatic response in worship would not be present, in other forms the church space is reminiscent of that described by Anna Strhan (2015) in her study of St John's, a conservative evangelical church in London. She notes that 'the inside of the church is warm and light… with utilitarian modern chairs arranged in rows facing a low stage and prominent wooden pulpit' (Strhan 2015: 11). The orientation towards the pulpit in St John's, and the lectern in St Aidan's, is far from accidental. She argues that this use of space expresses the priorities of the church in the service context: listening to scripture and the sermon. 'In Sunday services, listening to the Word' was, Strhan (2015: 120) argues, 'positioned as central, indexed spatially through the positioning of musicians on the floor, the Bible reading given from the stage above that, and the sermon preached from the elaborately carved pulpit above that'. The space surrounding the rows of seating in St Aidan's in which congregants could engage in more energetic responses to worship if they so desired indicated the orientation of this space in a more explicitly charismatic manner, but otherwise the emphasis appears to be similar to that of St John's – a space of worshipping, listening, and receiving. David Morgan connects this orientation of space towards attitudes within Protestantism more widely, with listening to the sermon emphasised above all. Pews – and their contemporary replacements evidenced in St John's and St Aidan's – are 'organised in narrow rows along the building's central axis, facing the elevated platform of the pulpit', with the seating designed 'to keep the body of the auditor erect and attuned to the act of listening' (Morgan 2012: 178). Yet this is not to say that this is an exclusively solitary activity, Morgan argues. Sitting together in this form is, he states, 'more than sharing conventional signs of listening. It is listening as a single body… Sitting in unison is no less important for mainstream Protestants than praying or singing together' (Morgan 2012: 176). The sense of community and belonging is experienced through these shared embodied actions and experiences, made possible

[128] Nor is this exclusive to British churches. The Chicago Vineyard congregation at the centre of Tanya Luhrmann's (2012: 11) study met in a neighbourhood gym, and she describes how each Sunday morning 'the setup crew pulled out folding chairs and arranged them in rows before a cloth backdrop and a wooden cross'. Churches with a similar use of space and furniture are present in evangelical congregations across the world.

through the use of space, rather than necessarily a shared theology. But the act of sitting alongside one another in these organised rows and adopting the correct bodily and emotional disposition during the period of teaching 'conveys solemnity, respect, and submission to authority' (Morgan 2012: 176).

In contrast, the main youth space (Figure 7) was one of practicality, fluidity, and – most significantly – sociality. Instead of professional stage lighting, the huts were dependent on the harsh fluorescent tube lights that ran across the ceilings, occasionally replaced by the string of softer yellow bulbs that was hooked around the room. A single screen hung on the back wall, but this was seldom used aside from providing lyrics for worship songs. Most significantly, at any time during a session there could be five or more different forms of seating being used, from high stools and legless sofas to armchairs and scattered cushions. Across the course of an evening these were all moved around multiple times. In the first stage of the evening, and frequently also during the latter sections, the adjoining two rooms were also drawn upon. Through the doors to the left of the main entrance was the 'Console Room' (Figure 8), a chaotic sprawl of chairs, cushions, a pool table, and two different games consoles crammed into a tight space that also housed the primary storage cupboard. Beyond this was the 'Treeside Room' (Figure 9), a larger space that housed a table tennis table, a table football table, a selection of sofas, and a sparsely used kitchen. The fact that these were primarily utilised in the first period of the session, which I shall describe in more detail below, emphasises the extent to which these were understood as spaces intended primarily for the development of relationships. Yet while the main room was the primary site of worship and teaching, this does not mean it was any less social in its orientation.

Figure 7: The main room of the youth hut prior to a PM session

Figure 8: The 'Console Room' in the youth hut prior to a PM session

Figure 9: The 'Treeside Room' in the youth hut prior to a PM session.

The use of a more sociopetal arrangement in evangelical worship spaces is not unique to a youth environment, however it is often seen as in some sense countercultural when applied in adult environments. Mathew Guest (2007: xx-xxiv) describes a space in which tables and chairs are laid out for people to gather around in groups during a *Visions* service, a young-adult oriented worship event in which visual arts (and 'visual chaos'), popular culture, dance, and contemporary music styles are drawn on in an ancient worship space. In Marti and Ganiel's (2014: 128) study of emerging evangelicalism the congregations often intended to

move away from conventional ideas of church space – 'There is an intentional effort to reconstruct spaces to move away from pews, altars, or elevated pulpits. If such spaces are not available, they are created'. This is not simply about the building itself but how it is used, as both 'architecture and seating arrangements push away stereotypical notions of church', as space is arranged to emphasise the values of the group – 'egalitarianism, artistry, and dialogue' (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 129). These arrangements were sometimes greeted with uncertainty – "It freaked me out walking in at first because I was like, oh my gosh, its dark. There's nothing like – no pews. There's all these couches" – however for others, the distinction from conventional church context was an attractive feature (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 129).[129] In these examples spaces are intentionally constructed to counter what is understood as conventional church design, either to make a statement as to the congregation's distinctive theology and practice, to appeal to those who would otherwise be disinterested in coming to church, or both. They are designed to confound people's expectations of what church is and can be, intentionally thought-provoking and challenging. Yet the youth space, separate and liminal, was not necessarily experienced in this way. Expectations were different for this space, both from the adults and the young people, and as explored in the previous chapter there appeared to be an unquestioning acceptance from church leadership that as a result of the separation the structure of the youth space did not pose a challenge to the structuring of the adult space. The young people themselves, particularly those who had grown up in the church, appeared entirely comfortable with the idea that this flexible, informal, and chaotic space was their place of worship and faith exploration. This was not purely due to the sense of ownership over the space that I outlined in the previous chapter. It was also because this was intended, understood, and experienced as a social space in which their relationships were emphasised.

As with Strhan's church above, space and interior design of the non-conventional environments described by Guest and Marti and Ganiel were designed so as to highlight the most important feature of their meetings – the reading of scripture and the delivery of the sermon in Strhan's case, and the egalitarianism, ethics, and anti-ritualism in the case of Marti and Ganiel's congregations. Leah Marie Wilson's (2019: 37) study of two evangelical youth work spaces – one in Florida, one in Oxford – likewise found that 'youth space was influenced

[129] The distinction from expected church space was also seen as appealing for many members of PM and was also noted as a factor in determining whether to invite friends to groups or events. Comparisons with emerging evangelicalism will be explored at greater length in the Conclusion.

by the vision for the youth ministry' in both contexts, and in the PM space we see an orientation towards the social and towards collective religious development. This is further emphasised through the arrangement and usage of the space throughout the evening. Rather than fixed lines of seating facing a single leader – in which the expectation is reverent and attentive listening to the normative voice of the sermon – the furniture was constantly mobile and oriented as much towards the group as it was towards the person or people at the front, with interaction with peers valued alongside engagement with the leadership. Jeanne Halgren Kilde (2008: 4) argues that the use of space and bodies within space point back to the basis of power (divine, social, and personal) within the community, and in the main St Aidan's environment the social power at least is clearly directed towards the individuals on the stage, and the preacher in particular. While the intentions and effects are not as extreme as with Foucault's (1977: 172) observations on the internal architecture of school classrooms, these rows of congregants oriented towards the teaching of an individual preacher arguably form 'an architecture that would operate to transform individuals' in such a way as to 'carry the effects of power right to them, to alter them'. The sense of discomfort felt by the young people when present in the Sunday evening services may not be simply down to the uncomfortable and inflexible chairs themselves, therefore, but the wider dynamics that the seating arrangement represents and portrays. The youth space, a social space, in which evangelical subjects are explored and formed alongside other peers, is one in which the power of the *group* as a whole is elevated above any one individual.

Session Structure

The significance of the social in the institutional perception of youth work at St Aidan's goes beyond arrangement of the space and deep into the structure and priorities of the evenings. The opening vignette of this chapter gave an example of the outline of an ordinary Sunday evening at PM, but a deeper exploration of David's intentions behind this structure – prior to exploring the experiences and perspectives of the young people themselves – gives an insight into how this contributes to the bonding and relationality that can be experienced in liminality and, within that, communitas. Broadly, the session can be divided into four clear sections: the opening unstructured social time, lasting around half an hour; a whole group game, lasting around twenty minutes; a period of sung worship, lasting around twenty minutes; and finally a discussion-focused talk lasting around forty minutes, preceded by notices.

Social Time

With the preparation, meetings, and rehearsals (ideally) concluded, the young people would begin to arrive from the advertised start time at 5pm, but there was minimal urgency here as members trickled in over the opening half hour. Some arrived alone, immediately scanning the room to see if their friends were already present, greeting them with the level of enthusiasm deemed socially acceptable by peers before launching into conversation, while others rolled through the door already in their small social groups having met beforehand. During this time the spaces – both interior and, when appealing, exterior – were fully available to the young people, with various activities scattered around the different areas. In the main room, the sounds of radio-friendly hip-hop over the speakers clashed with the tunes emanating from the latest version of *Just Dance* on the Nintendo Wii, as one or two young people attempted – with various levels of success – to follow the movements dictated on the screen as a group of friends cheered, instructed, and waited their turn. In the far-right corner, a steady flow of people moved around the table holding various snacks and drinks as the area became a hub for catching up. Towards the centre of the room one would often find a group sat on the floor enthusiastically playing a game of *Dobble,* attention wavering as conversation fluctuated in intrigue or hilarity. Scattered around the room would be groups of friends simply and excitedly chatting with one another, laughter ringing out at regular intervals. Phones, when on display, served to *enhance,* rather than distract from, the embodied social experience, allowing for friends who were absent or had never been to PM to be included through Snapchat or Instagram messaging. The small Console Room, already filled with various forms of furniture, would frequently feel cramped with bodies, some seated in front of the two screens (usually two people would be competing at *FIFA 18* on the PlayStation 4, while one played solo on *Fortnite* on the Xbox One), others stood behind, chatting amongst themselves and offering encouragement or commentary before a rotation of players. Interestingly, this appeared to be the space in which those (particularly males) who did not know anyone else at the group were most likely to be drawn. The consoles offered them a shared social focus with those around them, a shared language that could be spoken or unspoken, a way of feeling involved without stepping out into the risky world of striking up conversation with strangers unprompted. As a volunteer at the group, aware of the welfare of the young people as well as the potentials for research, I found that a shared game of *FIFA* could serve as a useful way of easing discomfort and starting conversations

with new young people – despite my woeful ability at the game.[130] This room also served as a thoroughfare to the Treeside Room, usually quieter than the other two areas though still frequently echoing with the repetitive sounds of table tennis – again, serving as a vehicle for conversation and bonding, both among peers and often with adult leaders.

For David, this unstructured period was not simply a way of filling time while waiting for the inevitable latecomers before starting the 'real' session – though he did admit to me that accommodating for the tardiness of teenagers was a contributing factor in the original idea. Rather, this was an essential part of the night for David. From his perspective, this section was about creating *community*, "an environment in which young people feel loved and accepted… providing a space in which you can hang out with your friends that especially if they've been studying the entire day, or they've been training for an athletic thing, [PM is] maybe the only time during the week that they get the opportunity for that space so we really want that". He also hoped that this section would serve as an opportunity for new members to settle into the group and integrate ahead of the more socially interactive periods that were to come. Of course, this was not always successful, and a level of social confidence was required by new young people who did not know any other members, particularly if they went unnoticed by David or Jordan. Yet David's justification for this period was also spiritual. The spread of squash, grapes, crisps, and biscuits provided each week were, he said, "kind of our Communion, that's the heart of Communion, we eat and we drink together, and there's that bit of we're sharing a meal with you, we're coming together, we're asking about your day".[131] The significance of this social time was evident in particular on occasions when there was no concern about latecomers, for example on occasions when PM would join with the adult service for worship. Despite returning to the youth hut half an hour after the session would usually start, a (shortened) unstructured social time including food and console-play remained. Creating authentic peer-focused spiritual community lay at the heart of the group

[130] This approach was also one utilised by David and Jordan, and while some of the female members of the group did involve themselves in *FIFA* it was predominantly drawn on with male young people. It was not until the final two weeks of my fieldwork that a regular (and paid) female member of staff joined the youth team, and David was conscious of the difficulties that existed with incorporating new female members in the group due to the gender imbalance in the adult volunteers – an imbalance to which I, of course, contributed.

[131] Immediately before saying this in an interview, he told me that he was conscious that this was not the orthodox Anglican understanding of Holy Communion, and when making a similar statement in a previous interview he assured me that while he saw comparisons with Communion, this was not a sacrament.

as a whole, and the unstructured period of socialising – during which young people could talk, eat, relax, and play alongside one another – was viewed as central to that vision.

The form of socialising that we see in these periods is typical of that emphasised by danah boyd (2014) as of particular significance to teenagers – unstructured and with minimal adult intervention, in which young people can freely mix with peers, both friends and strangers. She argues that teenagers naturally 'want to gossip, flirt, complain, compare notes, share passions, emote, and joke around', yet the reality is that they 'simply have far fewer places to be together in public than they once did' (boyd 2014: 21). In studying their social media habits, boyd (2014: 22) found that while teenagers would 'far rather meet up in person', this was increasingly impossible due to the combination of restriction of movement and public spaces, and increasingly heightened expectations on their time. '[O]ver and over again', boyd (2014: 201) writes, 'teens complained to me that they never had enough time, freedom, or ability to meet up with friends when and where they wanted'. As a result, they were drawn to utilising online spaces to carry out these important casual social interactions. David's rationale behind the social time echoes the concerns that boyd observed, and the social environment he sought to create in the PM space aimed to provide a context for the type of experience so desired by adolescents in their socialising. In finding their own space to be with peers, there is a sense of freedom, not only from the pressures of the parental gaze but from the structures that dictate their ordinary lives, as 'Emily' articulated to boyd (2014: 199) when talking about meeting with her friends at the mall or sporting events – "It's a time when you can just fool around and be free and do whatever you want. It's not fair to be tied down to chores or school. You need that little bit of freedom". In an environment in which young people are increasingly faced with pressures on their time and imposed structures by adults, opportunities for unstructured group socialising can become highly sought-after and valuable.

The absence of structure in social group bonding is therefore a powerful contrast to the rigours of structured adolescent life for these (predominantly) middle-class teenagers expected to excel academically. Alongside this, however, it also contributes to the creation and experience of the group as a liminal environment. In periods of liminality, separation is not only spatial and cultural but also understood as a separation from rigid external structures of time and hierarchy in such a way as to induce the experience of communitas in the participants. I shall return to the ideas of social structure within the group in greater detail below, but the collective liberation from harshly imposed time structures dictated by

parents or teachers in itself serves as a means by which existing power structures and hierarchies between adults and young people are dismantled in this space.[132] Edith Turner (2012: 167) argued that this escape from adult-inflicted structure had particular significance for Western adolescents – 'from the point of view of the youth in the Western world, ordinary habits, training, and obedience to formality become something to break free from'. A collective escape from this normality and experiencing the associated freedom can result, she argues, in 'the liberation of communitas, joy' with those with whom the experience is shared (Turner 2012: 167). It is possible that this aspect of communitas was limited in PM as it was not a situation in which young people had to actively rebel against structure and hierarchy in order to experience this freedom – there was nothing illicit about the relative lack of structure that the young people experienced, and as a result it lacked the possible strength of communitas that might emerge through collective transgressive escape from structure (for example from truanting from school) – and also clearly had a level of implicit structure with regards to expected behaviour.[133] The result of this, however, was a level of stability which enabled the experience of liminality and communitas to be maintained over a longer period of time. However, as I shall outline below, there remained fragility both with regards to social hierarchy and the fluid nature of group attendance.

Play

Above the noise of consoles and Spotify across various speakers, the dominant sounds emanating from the youth hut during the opening period were those emblematic of true

[132] Unspoken social hierarchies appear inescapable and continue to exist (both those determined within the group and those that stem from other environments, in particular school), but any conscious abuse of this would be deemed inappropriate by other members of the group. My experience of this environment was that it was not one of jostling for social power but rather for authentic group bonding.

[133] David did not state explicit rules for this time period, and the extent to which this these behavioural expectations were imposed by David or by the young people themselves was not always apparent. The clearest example of behavioural censorship that I witnessed during my time with PM actually involved three visitors to the group, who were friends with one of the regular members but were not with her at the time. During this initial period, they were playing table tennis in the Treeside Room, and were the only people in there at the time. As I walked into the room to collect some cups, the most exuberant member of the group was in the middle of saying "Shit" but cut himself off, throwing his hands over his mouth in shock. The other two laughed uproariously at this point, saying "you can't swear in a church!". I laughed it off to make him feel more at ease, but it was clear that they perceived this space and event as "a church" and therefore had very specific understandings of expected behaviour – particularly here surrounding swearing. For the rest of the session they engaged enthusiastically, albeit with uncertainty during the period of worship, but they did not return in future weeks.

communitas – excited social conversation, laughter, and authentic collective joy. At the heart of many of the social interactions in the opening period was some level of play, and this was then extended into the second period of the night, the first structured activity – the whole group game. On rare occasions young people sat out of the game for various reasons, usually to continue important conversations,[134] but the general assumption was that everyone would participate and engage. While it was generally accepted that people might not wish to participate fully in the worship or discussion, as Christopher told me in our interview, during the game "they would stand out more for saying 'I don't want to play this' than they would for just joining in". This was not only limited to the group members – as adult leaders we were encouraged to participate as wholeheartedly as the young people.[135] Each week the game would differ, with occasional returns to old favourites (such as 'Egg-Chicken-T-Rex-Superman'), but the example given in the vignette above provides a general impression of the nature of the games. These were predominantly active and physical games, utilising the flexibility of the space and the energy of the participants, and sought to incorporate as many people as possible. For situations when players were 'out' – for example after failing to respond quickly enough in 'Zip-Zap-Boing' – they would sit around the side of the playing area, usually offering critiques of the ongoing play or picking up on conversations that had been halted at the beginning of the game, before a winner was declared and the game was either reset or called to an end.

Once again, the institutional motivations behind the game were more considered than might originally appear. In David's explanations of the importance of this within the group there were three main interlinking themes. Firstly, the goal of providing a fun, enjoyable, and attractive atmosphere to which the young people want to return. The second theme, which was dependent on the first, was that of creating community through a period of collective embodied joy with a shared goal. While the social period was designed so as to create an

[134] It was very rare that group members would avoid the game as an active statement of refusal or rebellion, and when this did occur this would take place alongside a more general rejection of the session. The young people as a whole were also very active in attempting to incorporate individuals with additional needs into the games when necessary, including an acceptance of their occasional desire not to participate. A further example of group members not engaging in the game will be given below.

[135] It was nevertheless still more common for an adult to miss a game than a young person. This was predominantly due to the need for the adult leader to complete preparations for their teaching later in the session, though on occasion it was also the case that the particular game would be inappropriate for an adult to play with young people (for example, if it necessitated excessive bodily contact).

environment in which people felt at ease in the space and the group context, for David it was in the game that the young people were brought together and bonded as a group:

> A lot of [the games] are team-based and a lot of them revolve around kind of like names and pairing them up with different people and then, we do that so that we can start creating a sense of community with our young people and it just, it bashes down barriers […] it's a confirmation of […] the unity and kind of community that exists within the youth group because they do tend to divide into their own little groups during other social times but that's a time in which we're all doing the same task.

For David, this community emerged most significantly in this period through a breaking down of existing social barriers – both those within and between the young people themselves and between the adults and the young people:

> [The game] is just a way to break the ice […] for some [PM is] the only time that they're not putting on a mask, and this is a way of just levelling the playing field. Also adults get involved in the game and it automatically breaks through that kind of teacher mindset that there's the teacher and you've got to listen to them and you can't really have a friendship with [the adults…] it breaks that because we kind of lower, not 'lower ourselves to their level', but we elevate them to ours to a certain extent.

As seen in the vignette above, the games were predominantly planned and led by the young people themselves rather than an adult. I shall explore the significance of this in greater detail below, but the desire to diminish status differentiators between adult and young person and create a more socially level community, not only among the young people but also the adults, has potentially powerful implications for the experience of communitas in the liminal group.

In liminality, Victor Turner (2008: 95-96) argues, markers of social distinction are stripped away from participants and in this moment 'neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism', with the resulting emergence of 'society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals'. With regards to play more generally,

anthropologist Roberte Hamayon (2016: 4) has argued that the breaking down of social structures is both central to the nature of play as a whole, and a key reason as to why it can be viewed as transgressive: 'it is precisely the egalitarian nature of the playing relation that upsets the hierarchical structure of the centralizing power that crowns society'. As David's quote above shows, the bonding power of play is not only present in the removal of hierarchies regarding adults, but the ability for young people to take off the 'mask' that signifies their place in the external social standing. In collective play, these markers of social distinction evaporate. Edith Turner (2012: 4), in recalling Victor Turner's work on initiation rites, described them as 'bodily, breaking down personal superiority and pride, creating comradeship from person to person; creating bonds that are undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, spontaneous, concrete, and unmediated'. This is the experience of the liminal, the instigator of communitas, and while not a formal initiation rite, is what David seeks in the joy of the whole group game each week.

The relationship between play and communitas is not one that is universally recognised by play scholars, however. Thomas Henricks (2015: 66) compares the nature of communitas and that of play, noting that there are significant similarities between the experiences, both being 'consummatory, unpredictable, and episodic'. However, unlike play, Henricks (2015: 60) argues, in moments of communitas 'participants do not depend primarily on their own insights and actions to enliven those occasions', instead understanding themselves to be 'part of a setting which presents interesting occurrences… which they have opportunities to experience', dependent on '*conformative* behaviours' (emphasis original). Yet Henricks' definition of communitas is flawed on two counts. Firstly, he extends the definition beyond social and cultural forms by, for example, constituting 'taking a leisurely bath' as an opportunity for communitas (Henricks 2015: 59). Yet the bond formed between individuals lies at the centre of communitas, and while it is possible that this might be between a single human and a divine other or others, the experience of transcendence he describes as taking place during pleasant activities is not equivalent the deeply social understanding of communitas in Victor Turner and Edith Turner's works. Secondly, he assumes that communitas is something that is largely anticipated by participants when approaching specific activities and is necessarily dependent on external regulation in a way that is not necessarily the case with play. Yet the descriptions provided by Edith Turner in her accounts of communitas often present the opposite scenario. When situations are excessively orchestrated in a manner designed to bring about communitas participants can find the situation off-putting. Instead, communitas is often found in unexpected moments of

collective shared endeavour and joy – though of course situations such as the games at PM require a level of organisation and forethought by the leader. While communitas can exist outside of situations of play, and play does not necessitate the experience of communitas, the desires of David indicate that play and communitas can be powerfully intertwined in liminal environments. Henricks (2015: 66) does offer two versions of play that do overlap more convincingly with understandings of communitas – '*Communal Play'*, in which the focus of the play is on 'what people can do together', rather than on achieving success over another, and the enjoyment is communal and depends upon the actions of the group as a collective; and '*Playful communitas*', in which 'play is dominated by the major themes of communitas', such as the experience of oneness with the group. In PM, particularly alongside the breakdown of social hierarchies and differentiators, we see both of these being sought and, on occasion, being experienced by the young people.

In considering the nature of social hierarchies within the group – both within the game and more broadly – and the relationship with communitas, two elements need to be accounted for: social capital and the youth leadership team. With regards to both, age was a significant factor. While complex webs of social capital extended themselves across the age range, the general pattern appeared to be that those who were oldest and most established in the group held the strongest position in this regard, with age being more significant than length of participation.[136] As a result, for the success of whole group participation in the game and the achievement of communitas it was essential that older members participated. In order to break down social hierarchies and thus enable communitas and the lack of self-consciousness desired by David, those with the highest social capital had to enter willingly into these practices. The fact that the majority of the members of the youth leadership team, responsible for leading these games, were in Year 13 themselves significantly helped with this increased participation. The importance of this could be noted in an example early in my fieldwork, during which Lily – one of the youngest members of the leadership team – was entrusted with leading the game. She initially struggled to gain the attention of the group, and her initial calls for conversations to cease and for the young people to partner up failed

[136] Christopher, for example, had started attending during Year 11, having previously been involved in the youth work at a different church. Despite this, the fact that he was in Year 13 (and therefore one of the oldest in the group), was heavily involved in leadership positions in the group, and his natural character – he was a confident and extroverted member of the group, comfortable with contributing to discussions as well as cracking jokes – meant that he had quickly become an influential figure.

to evoke much response. It was not until she decided to use a microphone (unusual for this period of the night) that she was able to make progress, but a larger than usual number of older members still declined to participate – though did appear to pay attention to the game, laughing and cheering along, and enthusiastically calling out when they believed players should have been disqualified. As the months progressed, Lily settled into her position and became more comfortable in leading these sections of the night and participation was equivalent to any other leader. Yet this first attempt indicates something of the precarious nature of communitas within the play aspect of the group, dependent on a range of factors.

The nature of the strict age range of the group also introduced a further disruptor to the experience of communitas. Each summer, a cohort of Year 13s left for university and were replaced by Year 9s coming through from Morning Meetup. While in the year of my fieldwork the move to Cecil Place overshadowed the impact of this transition, the annual fluidity of membership could cause tension. Oscar, a former member of the group who was passionate about the importance of his own friends on his adolescent faith,[137] recalled a year in which an influential group of Year 13s all left:

> [There was] this big group of friends, then all of a sudden once they had left of course you still have to do games but that group of friends weren't there anymore so there wasn't, they were like the glue that kept everyone together because they were so loud and friendly and chatting the whole time and then all of a sudden it's kind of left over people just standing around and there wasn't that glue anymore, and I think that, that just meant that… this is only my perspective, but it meant that the community feel didn't really, wasn't really there.

Communitas is not necessarily an automatic result of organising a whole group game in PM. Wilful and enthusiastic participation, in particular from those with high social capital, is necessary in order to truly create the hierarchy-less environment necessary for communitas.

The final motivating factor behind the game, again dependent on the success of the previous elements, was the belief that through the breaking down of social barriers and bonding in

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[137] At the point of our interview, during his second year of university, Oscar no longer considered himself a Christian.

collective joy young people might be more open to experience of the divine. David describes the game as

> a major spiritual development of what we do. […] [O]nce you start breaking down social awkwardness barriers or social barriers, that opens up movement for the Holy Spirit because people are a lot less kind of inhibited to the work of God when they feel accepted, they feel loved, and they feel part of a group. So I think that very much we do it intentionally before the talk and all of that kind of stuff, because I think it gets people into better state of mind with engaging with God.

Through making the young people feel at ease in the space and in the community, "social barriers" that might otherwise inhibit experience of the Holy Spirit are removed. In this way, it might be understood as akin to the 'sharing of the Peace' during Anglican communion services, in which participants are encouraged to heal relationships with one another prior to encountering God in the Eucharist. The game is therefore not only understood as a means by which relationships can be built and developed with peers and adult leaders, but also with God – albeit later in the session. The social is intertwined with the spiritual in the act of collective play in this context.

While not often considered in the context of Christianity, this would not be unusual in wider contexts of ritual. Anthropologist of play Johan Huizinga (1949: 173) has argued that play is at the origins of collective ritual practice – 'Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play'.[138] Roberte Hamayon (2016) similarly looks at the relationship between ritual and play, arguing that studies of ritual have too frequently ignored play due to the association in the West with childishness and casualness – in contrast to the presumed solemnity of ritual. Interestingly for the purposes of this project, Hamayon (2016: 4) argues that this devaluing of play stems from the early years of Christianity, as the church fathers' condemnation 'of all that is play and game' led to the play being 'downgraded to something frivolous and futile, insignificant, and suited for children'. The significance of play in evangelical youth and children's work, and its absence in

[138] In considering play as a potentially liminal activity, we are drawn back here to Victor Turner's (2008: 128) assurance that liminality provides a fertile context for exploration and creativity, and in particular the creation of new ritual practices.

adult expressions of worship, suggests that this legacy of suspicion continues. This has also contributed to an absence of play in scholarship of evangelicalism. Play is a constant presence across much Christian youth and children's work, yet as Strhan (2019: 59) notes in her study of evangelical engagement with younger children, '[a]lthough play is common across Sunday schools, it is a rare focus in studies of religious or spiritual subject formation'. In her study, Strhan (2019: 57-8; 141; 143; 170) found playfulness and games scattered throughout the majority of organised activities for under 11s, both on Sunday mornings and beyond, with games being a key feature of groups run in schools, holiday clubs, and residential camps. Her contexts are not, I would suggest, unusual in this regard, and play is a significant feature of religious formation in these environments – yet play of this kind does not feature in any ethnographic study of evangelical adulthood.[139]

Yet while play is not seen in the adult context, embodied collective action through which one encounters the divine, of course, does occur, and similarities might be drawn here. The clearest examples of these by adults are the practices that are directly related to worship, such as positions adopted during prayer or charismatic physical responses to sung worship. Beyond this, however, there are more unexpected contexts in which embodied behaviour is seen as spiritually significant and formative. Abby Day's (2017: 74) study of 'Generation A' women in the Church of England, for example, found that the practice of cleaning the church building and sacred fabrics – a role regularly undertaken by retired laywomen – brought with it a deeper experience of relationality with the church community and with God – 'As spiritual practices, team cleaning was an act of communion, meditation, and belonging… we were one body, a family, joined in our shared beliefs and practices of cleanliness and purity, performed through our physical bodies'. The behaviours of play do not have the specific repeated ritual movements described by Day as variation of games week on week was an expectation of this period of the night, and rather than the solemn quiet cherished by the older women (compared by Day (2017: 75) to the experience of a Zen Buddhist retreat) there was a constant sound of joyful engagement with the activity. Nevertheless, these games

[139] While Tanya Luhrmann (2012: 92-5) draws on the language of play to argue that the evangelicals in her study use a form of imaginative playfulness to converse with God, for example by setting out a plate for Him in order to carry out a conversation over dinner, this differs from the form of play seen in PM as it explicitly centres on spiritual activity.

contributed not only towards fostering a community through collective embodied behaviour but specifically a *divinely-focused* community. Or, at least, this was David's intention.

As outlined above, beyond the structured games, we see an attitude of playfulness that resonated across every aspect of the evening.[140] From games – both video and board – and playful peer interactions in the opening social periods, to the laughter that rang out during small group discussions – even occasionally in the most serious of topics – a spirit of play was central to the group's social dynamic. When individuals felt incorporated into this playfulness, they were more likely to feel more closely integrated with the group as a social and spiritual body, and so again we see the potential significance of play on the experience of the young people as they developed as individuals and a wider group in this evangelical environment. The experience of communitas particularly through these games served only to increase the power of this bonding experience, and brought the young people closer together as a single peer-oriented unit, at ease with one another and with the adult leaders, as they shifted into the more explicitly and traditionally evangelical periods of the night.

Worship

One of the reasons that breaking down social barriers during the game was so important to David was due to his awareness that the period of sung worship that followed could be an unusual and potentially exposing experience for young people who had not grown up in the church. Singing together outside of a concert is rare in contemporary society, but also, in David's words, "worship's such an intimate, such a vulnerable experience, that to step into that and seeing other people kind of go for it is strange. So we find that breaking down social barriers and forming community does help with integration into worship." It is notable that this was the section of the night in which PM differed most significantly from Morning Meetup, the group aimed at 11-14-year-olds, and shared most obvious similarities with the older adult environment. Whereas PM, like the adult services, would have sung worship as a central and consistent part of every session, in the younger sessions this was only an occasional feature – and then only in the context of the young people joining the simultaneous adult service for their period of sung worship. Interestingly, this was also the period of the session in which peer-relationships were least emphasised by David and Jordan.

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[140] Play was also a central feature of other elements of the youth work provision at St Aidan's, with social activities and midweek groups frequently centring on play in some form.

Instead the focus was placed on the individual experience of worship, both in addressing discomfort and encouraging personal encounter with God.

Unlike the game, participation in worship was to an extent optional. Young people were expected to all be in the main room (having been gathered together following the game), and clearly understood that this was a time to either participate or remain quiet and respectful, but there was no obligation to join in with the singing. Often, the person leading the worship would open the period by inviting the group to sit or stand, whichever they felt most comfortable with. While most of the young people usually stood, particularly those who were singing, this gave a licence for those who were not comfortable with this explicit expression of charismatic evangelical religiosity to avoid active participation. For example, one week when three friends of a regular member were in attendance for the first time there were differing responses to the invitation to sit or stand. While the most confident of the group stood up, clearly seeing this as the expected and polite thing to do in a 'church' context, he seemed restless and unclear how to conduct himself physically in this time and did not join with the singing. His two friends stayed sat down, slouched back on the central sofa nearest the sound desk at the back of the main room, also not singing. In between these two was a regular member of the group whose friends they were, who also remained seated but sang along.

When St Aidan's moved buildings, the options for individuals during sung worship was extended further. The main worship space in Cecil Place, pictured in Figure 10, was furnished similarly to the main room in the youth hut, however the architecture of the room (significantly longer and thinner) meant that the group were more densely gathered towards the front of the room, leaving an empty space at the back of the room. There was also a small room across the corridor from the main worship space which was available to young people during the worship period. David very intentionally saw these areas as spaces for those who did not look to engage with sung worship for whatever reason:

> We've got a space open that, for people who don't feel comfortable with some worship, they can go and there's like a bunch of sofas and stuff and they can sit there, we've got a blackboard they could draw on, there's Bibles that they can kind of like go through. We discourage them from using phones […] But we've given them the option if [worship] is a little bit too much for them they don't have to be a part of it. We've also got a separate room […] that if, especially for kids with additional needs

> worship can be a full-on experience for them and we do have a few kids with autism but sometimes it's just a little bit too overwhelming, it's too sensory, it’s too much, it's an overload, so this is a very quiet space in which they can come and they can just sit.

We therefore see that the focus of the game period on whole-group participation, peer-bonding, and shared experience, was lessened during the period of worship in order to prioritise “looking at the individual, looking at the needs of our young people and trying to create an environment in which they can encounter God through their specific needs”, in the words of David.

Figure 10: The PM worship space in Cecil Place during a period of sung worship.

The second shift towards the individual in the sung worship was in the theological rhetoric that surrounded this period. As the quote above indicates, individual experience of God is central in the worship experience. Studies on evangelicalism have frequently identified this relationship with the divine as in some form central to the evangelical and wider Christian experience. Matthew Engelke (2007: 12), for example, argues in his study of the ‘Friday Apostolics’, a Zimbabwean Pentecostal sect, that at the heart of Christianity lies the struggle to build relationship with a God who is simultaneously present and absent. Woodberry and Smith (1998: 36) argue that modern (American) evangelicalism fits within a larger category of Conservative Protestants, who ‘emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ’ among other distinctive characteristics, while Omri Elisha (2011: 20) argues that the ‘evangelical tenet that each and every believer can (and must) attain a direct personal relationship with Jesus Christ is essentially individuating, in that it ostensibly distinguishes one's path of

salvation from socially determinative factors in one's life'.[141] Tanya Luhrmann's (2012) study focuses on the nature of personal relationship with God in American charismatic evangelicalism, and finds an emphasis on the deep intimacy, accessibility, and personal connection of this relationship. Amy Wilkins (2008: 90-2) found that for the young adult evangelicals she spent time with, a personal relationship with Jesus was at the core of being Christian, along with the experience of conversion and the continuing influence of scripture on daily behaviour. Nick Shepherd (2016: 153) argues that relationship with God was an important source of identity for the young people with whom he was working. A desire to establish and maintain an intimate, personal relationship with God as an individual believer is evidently central to the anticipated evangelical experience, and this was emphasised during PM in particular in the worship period.

This was particularly the case from Jordan, an experienced musician who often led the music group. He regularly began worship by encouraging us to engage with the worship individually and emotively in order to deepen our personal relationships with God. This took a diverse range of forms, often related to a Bible passage that he would read to the group. This might include an emphasis on what we were doing in sung worship, for example expressing our love for God or praising Him (as in the opening vignette above). Alternatively, it might consist of an encouragement to engage with the songs authentically, not simply through a sense of duty – "Don't let this be a religious thing, sing them with your heart".[142] This mirrors a common saying (or variant thereof) in some evangelical circles: 'Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship'. This emphasis on individual relationship in worship was made explicit again during one session in which Christopher led the worship. The session was dedicated to managing the hectic nature of modern adolescent life and finding time for spiritual practices, and Christopher began the worship by softly playing the piano, alone, and encouraging the group to "forget everything else, this is about you and God […] sit down, stand up, do whatever you want but this is time between you and God". Therefore while worship was corporate, in many ways the young people were encouraged to ignore the group context and instead focus on individual experience during this period and in particular on personal and

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[141] Elisha (2011: 20) does, however, argue that this emphasis on relationship with God also leads to an emphasis on relationships with other humans, both with evangelicals and potential converts.
[142] This quote follows in a wider trend within evangelicalism that views the term 'religion' as something suspicious, inauthentic, overly ritualistic, and impersonal.

experiential relationship with God.[143] This period, that which most closely resembled the adult services at St Aidan's and had the least in common with the younger environment, was therefore the period in which peer relationships were given the least significance. This is not a coincidence, and points towards the expected individualisation of evangelical faith as the young people reach adulthood. Yet as I shall outline below, the collective and particularly peer-based experience of worship – both in PM and at larger evangelical gatherings – remained highly significant for the young people themselves.

'Biblical Conversation'

The final section of the night was the period of teaching, described by David as 'Biblical Conversation'. The format of this could vary depending on the topic and the speaker,[144] but this usually involved some level of formal teaching intertwined with both small and whole group discussions. The vignette that opened this chapter gives a representative example of this structure, involving short sections of teaching from David on a theme or topic deemed relevant for adolescent evangelicals with regular opportunities for the young people to both ask and discuss questions about the topic, with some reference to particular Bible passages.

This contrasts significantly with the form of focused listening that Strhan and Morgan observe as described above, but also with the emphasis on sermons in the wider St Aidan's context.[145] In the main services, a preacher would usually speak for around 35 minutes from the stage with minimal interaction from or active engagement with the audience. Occasionally the speaker would invite the congregation to discuss a question that was shown on the large screens for around two minutes with people seated near them, before a microphone was carried around in order to collect responses. Yet this provided little opportunity to either challenge the normative teaching or grow into a fuller and fluid discussion, not least due to the limitations of a single microphone as contrasted with the more open environment of PM discussions. Most significantly, in PM there was an emphasis

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[143] This emphasis on the individual is frequently further reinforced in the worship songs themselves. The lyrics will frequently read as a personal interaction between the singer and God, as opposed to the collective body of the congregation (or wider universal Church).

[144] The Biblical Conversation was not always led by David – as Jordan became more settled into the environment he was increasingly involved in the teaching, members of the wider church (usually drawn from the young adult community) were often invited to lead on a topic for which they had particular insight, and on two occasions I was able to use this section to gather data from the whole group. Most frequently, however, David himself led this section.

[145] These differences will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

not only on learning from David (or the other speaker, who would have been theologically approved by David[146]) but on learning from one another as discussions involved not only questions and answers from the normative voice but from other peer voices within the group. Theological understanding was therefore co-created within the group of peers alongside the normative teaching of David. The result of this pedagogical approach was therefore an environment in which peer-relationships were strengthened and valued not only as sources of enjoyment but as mutually beneficial interlocuters in the exploration and formation of personal and collective understandings of theology and practice. Despite the presence of a normative voice in David, the voices of peers – in theory made to feel comfortable through the course of socialising, bonded through the collective endeavour of the game, and having reflected on their own individual relationship with God in the period of worship – were raised to be an important presence in the context of evangelical formation. The nature of this pedagogical approach and its impact on subject formation within the group will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

Perspectives of PM Members

Parents Preceding Peers

In their large-scale study of American teenage spirituality at the turn of the millennium, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005: 261) argued that 'the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives is their parents'. While they said teenagers 'do not seem very reflective of the fact', and other adults (such as grandparents, mentors, and youth workers) can still have an important role, 'parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives' (Smith and Denton 2005: 261). As a result, 'the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents *do* look like' (Smith and Denton 2005: 261, emphasis original). There are two aspects to observe here. Firstly, this does not seem to distinguish between the influences that are significant throughout childhood and those that are of particular prominence in adolescence. A teenager might share the same faith identity as their parents as a result of this influence growing up, but this does not necessarily mean that they remain

[146] When others did lead this period of the night David would always request an opportunity to read and edit what they planned to say in advance in order ensure the theology was "correct".

the most active influence for shifts and reflections that occur during adolescence itself. Secondly, the assumption here – including in the examples given of alternative sources of influence – is that adults are the overwhelming sources of influence over adolescent spirituality. Yet in both of these aspects the influence of peers is entirely overlooked.

The young people I interviewed did overwhelmingly share the same basic faith identity as their parents,[147] and many cited their parents as their most important influence in matters of faith. However, there were often complexities to these relationships and the continuing impact on their own faith. Christopher and Euan offered interesting examples of the nuanced nature of the continuation of influence relationships with parents at this age. Both were Year 13 students and members of the youth leadership team, both first attended church as children as a result of their parents' committed Christian faith and therefore recognised the impact of their parents' influence on their faith, and both mentioned the desire during adolescence to explore ideas that might be different from those of their parents. The extent to which they saw their parents as continuing influences within this depended in large part on the ease with which they felt they could talk to their parents more generally.[148] Christopher mentioned how he appreciated the "debates" he would have with his mum about the aspects on which they disagreed, in particular over the teachings and practices of the church that he grew up in and that his parents still attended. An active influence therefore continues, but it has taken on a new form – one of interlocuter and debating partner, rather than teacher. Interestingly, this practice of debating ideas of theology and faith was also one he regularly undertook with peers, both within PM and in the school environment, suggesting that this relationship with his parent had taken on some of the characteristics of a peer relationship with regards to faith formation.

In contrast, Euan found the relationship with his parents in adolescence to be a more difficult one, and as a result his contemporary faith was not so reliant on his parents:

[147] Interestingly, neither David nor Jordan shared their parents' non-religious identities.
[148] This resonates with Bengston *et al's* (2013), which found that having a positive relationship between parents and children was a key factor in whether intergenerational transmission of faith took place successfully.

> *Rob*
>
> What do you think are your most significant influences in terms of how you perceive your faith? As in, is it PM, your family, your friends, just reading the Bible, just thinking?
>
> *Euan*
>
> I think more conversations with friends and PM. Because I feel my family, basically my mum like, I think she sugar-coats everything when she talks about Christianity, like it's because she's really strong as a Christian so she already like believes everything totally, so it's like I can never really have a debate with her or like challenge something that she… So I guess when I talk to my mates it makes me feel more about like 'why do I believe this?' or 'why do why do I think this?', rather than just like accepting stuff straight because I've just been told it

The active role of parents in this period of faith exploration and formation, even in situations in which they shared their faith identities, was significantly dependent on the individual relationship, with peer (or peer-like) relationships instead taking precedence over the more traditional parent-child relationship seen in Euan's example.

As the young people began to explore aspects in which they differed (or potentially differed) from their parents and wanted to challenge or question the faith understandings on which they had been raised, instead of looking for people to instruct them they were looking for discussion partners and those who were sharing their experiences at this stage. This aspect shall be explored in greater depth in the following chapter, but the centrality of peers in this was significant. This transition of influence from parents to peers was something that was also understood by Andy, a parent of one of the young people in the group and a member of staff at St Aidan's. In considering the primary benefits of an environment away from their parents, Andy's first thought was the importance of peers:

> I think peer experience – so both good and [bad], helpful and unhelpful, I think can help my kids grow. When they see […] kids of their own age worshipping – or not worshipping – when they see kids of their own age being kind or trying to apply teachings about generosity – or not doing that – I think it helps them, it paints a, a discipleship picture that we

> simply can't do because we're a different generation, you know we're these strange objects called parents and so, so for them to be able to see Christianity working well or otherwise among their peers, I think it's something they simply couldn't get in the home, and I thank God for that.

The opportunity to share this period of their faith with friends and others their own age was a recurring theme in the interviews with young people and one to which I shall return later in the chapter, but one further important aspect to consider is the progressive importance of personal – as opposed to parental – decision as young people progress through adolescence.

I have discussed above the importance placed in evangelicalism on individualised faith and the personal decision to follow Jesus Christ in the process of conversion – and the role of adolescence within that – but on a more pragmatic level there is also a moment of decision for the young people as to whether or not they attend church at all. For those who grew up in the church, coming along as a child with their parents was a necessity. Yet by the time they arrived at PM this had become an active and intentional decision – in part due to the fact that unlike the younger groups, PM was on at a different time from the adult services when each of my interviewees started attending. As a result, they were not simply being taken along by parents attending a regular service, but rather they had reached an age by which they had been largely trusted to make their own decisions around attendance. This did not necessarily mean that this was a decision that was taken with great thought behind it. For Samantha, whose father worked for a church and had been raised going to St Aidan's, continued attendance was never really in doubt, saying that for her, "it was just, I've always liked church, so I don't really think I've ever not wanted to go." Similarly, Ben, a Year 12 student who had grown up in the church, said that his parents had given him the choice whether or not to attend from the age of 14, and when I asked what drove his decision to stay, said "I dunno, I just quite enjoyed it […] it was just quite nice. I didn't especially have too much of a faith back then, but I enjoyed it." Continued attendance therefore pivoted on their continued enjoyment of the different sessions. Having never ceased their enjoyment, they never saw the need to consider not attending, even once they stopped going with her parents.

For Samantha's friend Anna, however, the situation was more complex, and parental influences continued to play some role in her church involvement. She was raised in a

different church which had smaller youth provision and did not provide anything specific for young people over the age of 16:

> *Anna*
>
> For me like when I was younger I liked it a lot more and then when I got to like 14 I started really hating church and was just like 'I hate this, I hate that I have to go', and then like my youth [group] finished and then like I started coming here and like, yeah like I come here by choice like I do like it, but then when I go to my other church it is like I am going there because my parents want me to go there, and I know it makes them happy that I go. I don't go there for my choice
>
> *Rob*
>
> But you do come here for your own choice?
>
> *Anna*
>
> Yeah

The desire to appease her parents continued to play a role in her attendance at her previous church, despite there being much she disliked about that environment. However, her attendance at PM was understood as wholly without parental obligation. Undoubtedly this sense of parental obligation and pressure was present in some attendees of PM – for example Joshua, a graduate who attended St Aidan's until leaving for university, spoke of how his parents "definitely basically forced me to go to church even if I [didn't] want to", and Oscar, a second year university student who as a teenager would on occasion pretend to his parents that he was going to PM while actually meeting with school friends. Broadly speaking, however, the decision to attend PM appeared to be a genuine and active one taken for reasons that differed from those for attending previous children's and youth work. For many, the authentic and committed friendships that were formed at the group, along with the general enjoyment they experienced at the group, were a central reason as to why they continued to choose to come. Helen, a recent graduate, spoke of how she had struggled at a different church as she "didn't really feel that included with the youth at my other church", before her brother "suggested coming to St Aidan's and I made friends quite quickly!". When asked what it was that made her stay at PM, she replied "I think it was the

community really". Similarly, as I shall discuss in greater depth below, for those who ceased their involvement in Christianity – either during their time at PM or following the shift to university – friends often played a significant role in this shift. As David warned in the talk mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, as parental influence diminishes in adolescence – even for those who have followed in their faith identities – peers and friendships become an increasingly important factor in deciding to continue in their engagement with organised evangelicalism.

The Prominent Presence of Peers

In the previous chapter I outlined the nature of separation between the adult and youth evangelical contexts, and one consequence of this was the absence of the adult, and in particular the *parental*, gaze in these spaces. Of course, the adult gaze was not entirely absent – some combination of David, Jordan, me, and other adult volunteers was constantly present in order to facilitate the session and abide by child protection protocols. However, if the possibilities of the game were fulfilled in the manner that David envisaged then the social barrier between adult and young person was broken down, and a communitas state of oneness was achieved across the group – old and young alike. At the very least, the PM space was a *predominantly* adolescent and therefore peer-centric environment. Engaging with issues of faith amongst other people of their age was of great importance to the young people I spoke with. This gave them the opportunity to meet with people with shared experiences, shared levels of understanding, and a shared openness to learning from one another. As Elena articulated it when she described what she liked about PM,

> I feel like I'm actually being listened to and it's not just like a lesson, it's like we can actually speak and have conversation and I also really like being with people that are like me because it's hard, I mean it's not like a struggle like an oppression or whatever, but it's sometimes like when you're with friends outside of school who aren't really Christian you can't really freely speak about like struggles that you're having, like things like that because it's not always what you want to hear sometimes when you come here the advice that you're given is not always what you want to hear but it's what's best for you. And just everyone's kind of helped me grow like the friends that I've met here and the relationships that I've made.

Talking with and hearing from people their own age in this context was an important distinctive aspect of the group within a church context.[149] While opportunities to socialise freely in an unstructured manner might be difficult to achieve regularly for modern teenagers, this does not mean that they are not often in the company of a significant number of peers in a school context. Yet as outlined in the previous chapter, this is not always a comfortable environment in which to talk about faith issues. As a result, PM became an environment valued because of the opportunities to spend time with people who shared similar life experiences *and* a similar openness to issues of faith.

This opportunity to spend this time with like-minded peers in a faith context was similarly one of the aspects most appreciated by those who attended larger evangelical conferences, such as New Wine. As with St Aidan's, a peer focus was far more prominent in the youth-oriented spaces of New Wine than in the adult contexts. Firstly, the ages were strictly separated. Secondly, the space was fluid and unfixed, with both young people and leaders seated on the floor wherever they felt most comfortable, in contrast to the strict rows of seating present across the adult spaces. While the group was significantly larger than PM – into the hundreds at each main Thirst session – play was always attempted, for example encouraging the group to run to one side of the converted cow shed or the other depending on whether they thought a given quote was from Scripture or a Taylor Swift song. Whole group discussion was not practical, but the young people were regularly encouraged to discuss topics with those around them. Overwhelmingly, however, it was the simple presence of other Christian teenagers that was powerful for attendees. These larger environments can eventually prove to be pivotal in the formation of a committed faith – evidenced by the fact that of the six young people who were either baptised or confirmed in the service I attended at St Aidan's, three explicitly mentioned experiences at these festivals as key moments in their faith development. Lily and Molly, two of the young people who attended New Wine with their families while I was there, spoke of the encouragement they found in being surrounded by fellow teenagers who were also Christian or exploring Christianity in the space, and the freedom they felt to open themselves to spiritual experience and transformation as a result. Samantha, who went to New Wine every year,

[149] This will be explored, along with other elements of the pedagogy at PM, in the following chapter.

and Anna, who went to a smaller camp every summer, saw these peer-focused experiences as highlights of their year and were enthusiastic with their praise for these experiences:

> *Samantha*
>
> When you're in school and stuff obviously like there's not many like Christian people in your classes or stuff or if they it's like they don't go to church they just like say they're Christians and don't really, yeah, but like when you're at New Wine everyone, well pretty much everyone there, is like in the same position as you, so it's sort of like you're learning about it together and like going back to your own places, like… […] You've got like something in common, even though you don't know them, there's something in common so it makes you feel more comfortable around them
>
> *Rob*
>
> Is that something you've found as well, Anna?
>
> *Anna*
>
> Yeah so because camp's like really small the same people go every year so like you make friends so like, some of my best friends are from camp and it's so nice because you spend like a week or two weeks or however long you're there with the same people and you get like a really close bond and then it's like really nice because like if you like suddenly are like 'Oh I feel like I want to pray for you' they don't like get freaked out, they're like 'yes please do!' and then like you sing like the worship songs and it's so nice and it's not like, I don't know… I love it!

An environment of peers with a shared faith focus, both in the PM context and in larger groups such as evangelical camps and festivals, was highly valued by these young people as reasons to continue in their engagement with evangelical youth culture.

Conclusion: Friendship and Faith

Having been separated into their own space, away from the overbearing gaze of parents and other adults, young people were able to explore evangelical faith in a distinctive way. In the

language of a rite of passage, this liminal period enables anti-structural practices that would be unknown outside of this environment. Yet these practices are not only notable in their distinctiveness, but rather in their focus and in the form of religious subjectivity they therefore encourage. In this chapter I have argued that the primary focus of these activities was the development of a relational community of peers within the group – through which, in turn, relationships with the divine could be fostered. I have also shown that PM, and in particular the organised games, encouraged an experience of communitas, a particular form of transcendent bonding that can emerge in the midst of liminality as a group of neophytes travel through a rite of passage together. This is not automatic and can be disrupted, but the high level of participation and active peer leadership meant that an experience of communitas was a frequent possibility. The particular significance of peer relationships during adolescence means that this element takes on added importance as we consider the nature of young evangelical subjectivity, centred around sociality. While the relationship with God encouraged in the periods of worship may be envisaged as deeply personal and individualised, the general experience of religiosity in the PM environment, and thus the form of religious subject encouraged through it, was overwhelmingly social. As young people moved away from the singular influence of their parents with regards to religion, their friends instead began to increasingly shape their religious perspectives. Friendships within the group became important points of contact for the young people in three forms: firstly in the shared exploration of faith; secondly in the opportunity to spend time with numerous other Christian teenagers – a rarity in school or other adolescent spaces; and thirdly a reason simply to attend church in the first place. A number of interviewees referenced the friends they had or made as key reasons for continued attendance at the group – but the inverse was also true for some. For Will, an 18-year-old who had stopped attending the group two years prior to our interview in a café at New Wine, it was the fear of missing out on opportunities to socialise with friends from school – rather than any particular doubt or loss of faith – that led him to drift away from PM. However, in time, he believed that losing this evening spent with other adolescent Christians and instead spending more time with non-Christians had impacted his faith:

> My friends [at school], they're not really Christian and then I started hanging out with them like on Sundays, I stopped going to the to the youth group… And then, it's not really like a bad thing that I don't hang out with Christian people it's just like it kind of became less of a habit now? […] that's sort of like led to the moving away of like my faith

Whether for its benefit or detriment, friendships and wider engagement with peers appears to play a significant role in the formation of religious subjectivity during adolescence. This was emphasised within PM to bring socialising and intersubjectivity to the fore of evangelical formation. In the following chapter I shall look in particular at the pedagogical approaches drawn on in PM. As I have highlighted in this chapter, these were communally focused and engaged the voices of the young people themselves alongside that of David or other adults. This breadth of ideas and input into each session enabled a level of comfortable uncertainty that is significant in liminal evangelical subjectivity of this period yet stands in apparent contrast to that which would be expected in their adult evangelical future.

Chapter 5: Pedagogy and Practices of Uncertainty in PM

A Session on Sex

The six-hour drive from the Lake District had been timed to near-perfection but arriving at 16:45 nevertheless meant that the team meeting was in full flow when I entered at the hut on the cold January evening. David brought the briefing to an end earlier than usual, and as the young leaders began to drift into wider conversations he called the adult leaders – including the members of the youth leadership team who had passed their 18th birthday – for an additional meeting. David explained to us that during the teaching he would place us with groups and encouraged us to keep the discussion moving freely and remaining on topic. However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, he requested that we refrain from attempting to undertake any additional instruction of our own. On a topic such as this, he told us, he wanted to ensure that he was the one who guided the teaching.

Following a social time of table tennis and “Silly Salmon”, a chaotic group game of ‘Human Knots’, and worship led by Hannah and Josh, David stepped up and welcomed the now seated group. Before launching into the main body of his teaching David asked for “a bit of maturity from everyone” due to the nature of the topic under discussion. Crucial within this was creating an atmosphere that enabled open and respectful discussion in which the young people felt comfortable sharing their opinions – including responses that went beyond what might be the ‘correct’ answer in the eyes of their church leaders. This form of honest, considered discussion was central to this model of church, he explained: “This is a church and this is how we do church, but this needs to be a safe space – Don’t just put on your Sunday School hats and say ‘Jesus!’”. Following this introduction, David opened with an activity in which the young people raised their hands if they agreed with certain statements. While the first and second statements – “It’s sexy when men wear mankinis” and “Women belong in the kitchen” – were met with universal disagreement,[150] the third saw a genuine split among the group: “Sex should be saved for marriage”. The unanimity of the previous responses was lost, along with the laughter. Among those who did raise their hands many appeared hesitant and uncertain, lacking the enthusiasm with which they had rejected the previous statements. The following statement brought greater agreement, however, with all

[150] While some hands were raised for the first statement, the accompanying laughter suggested that this was done in jest rather than sincere agreement.

members appearing to raise their hands in response to David's claim that "Sex should be saved for a serious relationship."

Following this activity, David clarified with the group the position that he would be taking during the session: "Just a heads up, we are coming from a biblical view, this is the Christian teaching today". At this point the group was split into three smaller groups, each with two 'adult' leaders.[151] I joined a group of boys along with Jordan and we launched into the first discussion question posed by David – "Other than procreation, what is the purpose of sex?" After discussing in our smaller groups, we were brought together as a larger group to share any reflections.[152] For some, the importance lay in the relational aspects, sex understood as an expression of love or a way to develop and deepen intimacy. For others, the physical experience was highlighted, emphasising fun and pleasure. One young person believed the act to be a physiological necessity. Building on these responses, and again breaking us into our smaller groups, David's second question asked "What has influenced your view of sex?". None of the responses referenced scripture directly, and when David next asked "What does the Bible say about sex?" the group primarily drew on concepts and passages from their school Religious Education teaching on the topic. This question, and the responses emphasising the significance of marriage within the biblical view of sex and of two people becoming "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) in sex, served as the springboard for the primary period of active teaching within the session. Ultimately, David told us, the commandment to keep sex in marriage is not about God being "sadistic", but rather the completion and fulfilment

[151] These consisted of two all-female groups and one all-male group. Having previously witnessed (and experienced) evangelical youth sessions on topics around sex I was not surprised by the gender split, however David assured the team during our debrief at the end of the night that it was not his original intention to separate the genders, and the decision was instead made as it was a straightforward means by which the group could be split into three evenly sized groups, and the young people themselves showed little interest when asked whether they would prefer to be split by some other criteria.

[152] While this question was being discussed I was considering my approach to notetaking during this session, and as a precaution took only minimal notes during the first period of discussion. Due to the particularly sensitive nature of the evening's topic I decided not to take detailed notes with specific quotes during the small group discussion periods of this session, instead only recording those comments which were shared with the group as a whole. At one point in the discussion, following a question I asked the group as a whole about social media use, David remarked that "of course, this must be very interesting for your research" (at this stage of the research process my focus was still on the role of digital and social media on the formation of young evangelical faith), which served both as a reminder to the group of my presence as researcher as well as an affirmation of my research even during a session such as this. I agreed, but also clarified to the group that I would not be recording any names in my notes to ensure that they felt at ease, though no young people appeared concerned with my presence.

of a relationship that interweaves *all* the different facets of love – in contrast with the perils of contemporary societal views. “In today’s society we put too much focus on sexual love”, he told the group, at the expense of the other forms of love, leading to an image of sex that emphasised personal gratification above all else. After opening up to the group about his own personal experience prior to conversion, he attempted to tread the fine line in the Christian life between un-ending grace and forgiveness and particular ethical and behavioural expectations. For David this meant that while he did not want them to leave focusing on drawing up a particular system of rules and behavioural lines, he was nevertheless clear about one aspect: “I’m not going to beat around the bush – sex outside of marriage is a sin because it is damaging to *you*.”

For at least some of the youth this remained unconvincing, and one member asked David in what *way* it was damaging. David’s response was broad, touching on the relational aspects mentioned in his descriptions of love as well as mental and physical health risks. There were no opportunities here to respond directly, with David instead asking what turned out to be the final and most hotly debated question of the evening – “What about other sexual acts like oral sex?”.[153] While the phrasing left no room for challenging his premise that sexual intercourse was damaging outside of marriage, the young people nevertheless used this opportunity to share the range of perspectives that existed within the group. They debated as much with one another as with David, with particular concern over the level of intimacy and emotion necessitated in these acts. While some evidently believed that they were similar to intercourse in this way, one young person argued that non-intercourse acts were as emotional and intimate as kissing, which received some agreement (though notably and evidently not from David). After prolonged debate, Jordan referenced a verse from 1 Corinthians in which Paul critiques his interlocuters’ antinomianism (‘‘I have the right to do anything’, you say – but not everything is beneficial’), at which point David drew the conversation in by reiterating his desire to avoid strict regulations while emphasising the importance of personal relationship with the divine: “I’m not drawing up legalism for you. I want you to ask in your relationship with God whether this is beneficial for you.”

[153] It should be noted here that this question, as with all of the preceding teachings, sexual acts were understood exclusively within heterosexual contexts. David mentioned to me after the session that he had intended to cover a number of other areas, including broader issues of sexuality, but the time limitations meant that this was not possible in this session.

David closed with a final passage – 1 Thessalonians 4: 3-8 – that emphasised the significance of avoiding sexual 'immorality' as a part of the ongoing process of sanctification.[154] With oral sex outside of marriage, he challenged the group, we had to ask ourselves: Is it beneficial to being a Christian? With one final clarification on the assurance of forgiveness, the group dispersed into the night or their own social groups, the lessons of the evening swirling around with no certainty of settling in the lives and minds of PM's members.

Discussions, Debates, and Doubt

In the various descriptions of PM sessions throughout this thesis we have seen the significance of discussion as the primary form of pedagogy. This was not the exclusive model for this period of the night – on one occasion, for example, David set up five 'Prayer Stations' across the rooms that the young people could explore at their own will – but overwhelmingly the group utilised this model for the final third of each session. In Chapter 4 I outlined how the different elements of the group structure contributed towards spiritual formation of participants in David's perspective, but the period of discussion – or 'Biblical Conversation' – was the primary period of explicit teaching of Christian beliefs and values. In chapter I will argue that this approach and these practices – not visible in the adult environment at St Aidan's – foster a form of evangelical subjectivity that is adapted for the liminal subject. At the heart of this is the idea that certainty – a characteristic prized and expected in evangelicalism – is yet to be settled during adolescence, with young people instead seen as between two states of certainty. A level of uncertainty is therefore not only anticipated but accepted as a natural part of the development of faith, with the expectation that it would eventually evolve into a confidence and certainty of faith. What emerges is a creative engagement with uncertainty and questioning, an exploration of beliefs and practices that is highly individualised yet inseparably communal as the young people shift from dependence on parents to the desired state of personal and confident belief. Understood within the context of a rite of passage, here we see again a shift away from ordinary structures of authority and practice from that seen in the adult sphere, alongside a clear acceptance of the nature of liminal beings in formation as distinct from the vision of the final, re-incorporated subject.

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[154] Sanctification is understood as the ongoing process of developing in holiness.

What we see in the above vignette – most explicitly in the debate around oral sex – is the opportunities that this approach gave the young people to both challenge the authoritative voice of David and engage with the perspectives of their peers, while the periods of explicit teaching saw David attempting to impart and reinforce the normative Christian teaching as the young people developed as evangelical subjects. Yet this relationship of teaching and active open discussion is one that does not assume universal agreement or confidence, but rather is an approach premised on the idea that the views of participants will differ from that of the primary speaker, and they are to an extent in need of not only informing but also *convincing*. This is thus active and dynamic as the teacher endeavours to gradually bring the learners to a point of shared agreement, but in the meantime participants are empowered to contribute and challenge the teacher. Yet this approach, and the tensions that emerged from it, were not unique to sessions on sex. The prominence of this pedagogical approach in the group meant that all topics – from theodicy to structural racism – were opened to discussion and the airing of questions and varied opinions. The strength of feeling would differ, but rarely was there unanimity on a topic across the group. Interaction with adolescents at St Aidan's thus involved both a pedagogical approach that enabled collective exploration of ideas and theology, but also an openness to *un*certainty that lies in sharp contrast to the norm in adult evangelical contexts.

In this chapter I will first explore the relationship between evangelicalism and certainty, one that is reinforced through the dominant pedagogies in adult environments, engaging what Philip Salim Francis (2017: 35-51) terms 'practices of certainty'. While previous studies have shown the accepted presence of doubt within evangelicalism, this is seen as a position to be managed and overcome, rather than desired. Following this I will explore the pedagogical approach adopted in PM, considered in the context of other spaces of Christian faith development as well as drawing parallels with the work of educational philosopher Paulo Freire and his theory of democratising pedagogy. Freire's approach challenges the nature of authority within a teaching scenario, breaking the singular voice of the 'lecturer' model and instead creating an environment in which learning and formation are in some way mutual.[155] If these practices were indeed in place at PM, this would reinforce the argument of the

[155] As I will explore below, while the experience of the young people may be one of Freirean liminality and communitas, it appears that this model was utilised by David for its contextual appropriateness for the audience rather than any explicit desire to engage with uncertainty or adapt his own views as a direct result of hearing from the young people. As a result, the PM pedagogy may not be a truly mutual model in the way desired by Freire.

previous chapter that this space was one that fostered communitas between peers as a part of the liminal experience. I shall close the chapter by returning to Francis (2017: 51-62) and his concept of 'practices of uncertainty' within evangelical environments, arguing that within PM we see a context that enabled a position of peaceful uncertainty among these liminal evangelical subjects – a position that becomes tenuous as they are thrust out of youth environment into one that expects, and is structured around, a shared level of certainty among adherents. This liminal state therefore becomes difficult to maintain, and in moving into the Conclusion the absence of a ritual end point to the rite of passage will become increasingly significant as the young people are thrust into the world of higher education and adult evangelicalism.

Certainty and Doubt in Evangelicalism

The pedagogical focus of PM resulted in sessions that explicitly engaged with significant potential areas for uncertainty. Generally, these could be divided into those that addressed behavioural questions and those that focused on the more explicitly theological, with the thematic nature of PM sessions meaning that these were often approached discreetly – as was the case with the evening outlined above dedicated solely to sex. Sessions looking at the topic of partying (as explored in Chapter 4) and addiction were similarly behavioural focused. Meanwhile, programmes such as the 'Big Questions' series intentionally explored contentious areas of theology as they related to everyday life and social issues, with sessions asking (for example) "Is God Cruel?" and "Is God Sexist?".[156] Yet it was not simply the topic that enabled these sessions to engage with uncertainty, but rather the pedagogy, as will be explored below. In each of these sessions discussion was fluid while David attempted to present his interpretation of a normative Christian view – usually prefaced by the phrase "as Christians we believe that…", stopping short of insisting it to be the singular truth but nevertheless indicating that if the young people were, or were to become, Christians they should (eventually) believe likewise – while also encouraging an openness to authentic

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[156] The primary attractive feature of all the topics covered in the sessions for the young people was their "relevance". This either related to their application to adolescent experience – as in the case with sessions on social media, for example – or struggles that they or their friends were going through with regards to faith consideration, as with the 'Big Questions' series. Along with the discussion element, it was the relevance and relatability of topics that meant the teachings avoided the "boring" tag that many young people attributed to the teaching in adult environments. The focus on relevant topics also frequently emerged as a priority when the members were encouraged to consider ways in which the group might be more appealing to their non-Christian friends.

discussion and questioning, avoiding stock responses. At moments where responses or questions aligned too closely with what David saw as orthodoxy, he even encouraged the group to probe further. In the session asking whether God is cruel, for example, David eventually resorted to listing and outlining specific examples of God's cruelty in scripture and bemoaning that "we [Christians] try and justify every example of God's cruelty". Closing the session, David commented on the specific importance of interrogating these topics during this formative, liminal period ahead of evangelical adulthood: "I think sometimes when you grow up in a church you don't question things, and then you can start questioning everything – we want to give you a space to explore these safely rather than just sending you off". Questioning, challenging, and exploring issues of Christian theology and practice was seen as central to the nature of formation in this liminal environment. I will explore this in practice in greater depth below, but it is important to note in this comment from David that this is understood as appropriate for the adolescent evangelical experience. Yet in the adult environment, expectations are different.

Navigating Divine Relationship and Behavioural Legalism

David's comment towards the end of the session on sex – desiring divine relationship over strict legalism – reveals a tension that lies at the heart of the adult evangelical experience. As outlined elsewhere in this thesis, personal relationship with the divine is central to evangelical understanding of God. Often this relationship is emphasised beyond all else, contrasted with the term "religion" that is considered a negative concept tied to human-created rites and regulations. This was even present in the worship sung earlier in the above session, with the song 'Simple Gospel' by American worship band United Pursuit (2015), including the refrain "*I want to know you Lord / Like I know a friend […] So I'm laying down all my religion / I want to know you Lord*". Evangelicalism thus encourages a faith that is built upon and experienced through a deep singular and personal relationship with God. It is here that we see the primary desire for certainty within evangelicalism, one of trust in a divine other who intimately cares for the individual and with whom the believer can have a direct and active relationship.

Yet alongside this individualised faith there are also significant specific expectations imparted by churches setting clear parameters over what is and is not 'correct' theology and behaviour. Thus even in the PM environment that acknowledges a lack of absolute agreement among members, and immediately following an emphasis on the importance of premising decisions based on the nature of one's individual relationship with God, David felt

it necessary to repeatedly restate that sex outside of marriage is understood as both damaging and sinful within Christianity. There therefore exists a challenge for the believer to have a deeply personalised faith – individually confident and independent of the trappings of "religion" and the invented teachings of man (along with the perils of wider secular society) – while simultaneously successfully following the normative ethical and theological teachings of their church and church leaders.[157] Of course, the secondary challenge here is not only that the individual experience of God and the teachings of the church should be aligned, but that the individual is then able to live out those teachings and expectations throughout their daily life with confidence and consistency.

As a result, combining these different characteristics into a Christian subjectivity that has certainty in the individual relationship with God, an alignment with the teachings of the church, and an internal coherence that enables individuals to live out these teachings throughout their lives, can be understood as an ideal state for evangelicals. This desire for religious certainty as collectively reinforced in a shared culture lay at the heart of Peter Berger's (1973: 38, 55) concept of 'sacred canopies', maintained through 'legitimation', the task of 'explain[ing] and justify[ing] the social order' to the extent that the social world reaches a point of being taken for granted, and made 'real' through social 'plausibility structures'. In the late 1960s when Berger (1973: 130) was writing his primary work on the topic, this legitimation appeared inevitably and irrevocably threatened by the onset of pluralism, and as a result 'for the first time in history the religious legitimations of the world [had] lost their plausibility… for broad masses of entire societies'. The previously held certainty of conservative religiosity would be impossible to reclaim, and theological liberalism – embracing doubt and scepticism – was the best hope for the survival of religion. Yet while Berger (1999; 2016) later acknowledged that the twentieth century did not progress in the manner that he had anticipated, with conservative strands of religion unexpectedly gaining strength in the latter decades, Christian Smith (1998) argued that the strength of late-twentieth century conservative evangelicalism remained its ability to retain barriers of certainty in the form of small community-based plausibility structures. This certainty not only concerned theological affirmations, but also 'morally orienting collective

[157] There are, of course, many issues on which church leaders themselves disagree, even within a single congregation. Although I will not draw attention to specific examples, David did appear to disagree with Steven on certain issues in the teaching, though he did not draw attention to these differences. I was not aware of whether Steven was aware of this difference in teaching or if this caused any difficulties within the church leadership team.

identities' that served to provide 'meaning and belonging' for followers that contrasted with the wider non-evangelical environment (Smith 1998: 118). Collective cognitive and ethical certainty are thus understood as invaluable for the perpetuation of a conservative religious community in modernity. Fostering these attitudes as a feature of the religious subject would therefore appear to be a significant goal of the formation process in these contexts.

Practices of Certainty and the Realities of Doubt

The accounts of participants in Francis' (2017) study sheds insight on how these attitudes of certainty are developed in conservative evangelical communities in the United States. Based on accounts from current and former attendees of 'The Oregon Extension', each of whom had attended an evangelical church as adolescents, he notes that 'virtually all' of his participants 'describe their former religious communities as fixated on the maintenance of absolute certainty in matters of religious belief and practice' (Francis 2017: 33). Through a series of discreet practices encouraged in these communities, Francis (2017: 34) argues, 'these women and men established an identity as a person of certainty, or as a "nondoubter", and in this way secured their place in the social order of the community'. Francis (2017: 35-51) identifies three such practices in particular as significant in this process of forming the "nondoubter" identity: child evangelism; vilification of doubt; and certainty of salvation. The first of these centres on the requirement, even as young children, to evangelise to one's peers, requiring therefore that 'one is not only sure for one's self but sure enough to convince others of the life-or-death need for attaining this belief' (Francis 2017: 35). [158] Francis (2017: 38) identifies within this the necessity of *practice* behind this form of certainty, with the *performance* of certainty preceding the *experience* of certainty. Yet performative certainty was not seen solely as a productive tool for evangelism, but an indicator of virtue. Doubt or questioning were seen as markers of immorality, not simply in their own right as indicators of faithlessness, but also as the fruit of the desire to justify (particularly sexual) sin (Francis 2017: 44). The mind is seen as 'vulnerable to the body, and the body is bound to sin', and so for the mind to be safe from doubt the body must be 'brought under control through

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[158] Interestingly, one of Francis' (2017: 35) participants during this section, Thomas C., notes that he grew up in a church which 'encouraged the youth to be "ambassadors for Christ," which meant sharing the Gospel at every opportunity'. While the term is the same as that used by David as the dominant model of understanding self in relation to non-Christian other in PM, as explored earlier in this thesis, David's usage lacked the explicit verbal evangelism element that lies central to Thomas' understanding.

a series of ritual practices – among them Bible study, prayer, and fellowship with other Christians' (Francis 2017: 44).[159] Finally, this identity of nondoubter was fostered in the need for certainty of one's eternal salvation in the face of hellfire and damnation (Francis 2017: 46-8). This is not purely a cognitive certainty of the existence of heaven or the possibility of the rapture, but a deeply *personal* certainty over one's own destiny.

Thus we see through these practices a web of certainty that is expected from young adherents growing up within the conservative evangelical environments that Francis' participants experienced. Firstly, the primarily cognitive level, wherein children are expected to defend their doctrines in the face of questions and non-believers. Secondly, the ethical dimension, through which they are encouraged to develop spiritual practices that maintain their bodily alignment with the ethical expectations of the church and thus protect their minds from the immorality of doubt. Finally, there is the personal-relational dimension, wherein believers are expected not only to affirm the existence of soteriological elements, but to have unwavering confidence in their own role within it. In Anna Strhan's study of British conservative evangelicalism we see a further related layer to this, the divine-reflective. This centres on the desire (and expectation) among followers to mirror the character of God in their own life, and in particular the singular coherence of 'divine simplicity' (Strhan 2015: 146). In order to mirror this, believers were told that they must offer nothing less than ''wholehearted devotion and affection'' to Him. The ideal is to be as God, with no division or uncertainty as believers dedicate themselves completely to the divine.

Yet while this multi-layered certainty is the desired ideal, studies have increasingly shown the ongoing existence and significance of doubt in contemporary religion, including evangelicalism. Strhan's (2015: 187-9) study uncovers the persistence of doubt in her context, describing it as an 'uneasy state' that was recognised as an inevitable "battle" for Christians by the church leaders who therefore sought to reassure their congregation and provide methods for managing and overcoming these doubts. Tanya Luhrmann (2012: xiii) similarly found doubt to be an almost inevitable 'struggle' for evangelicals, one that is 'everywhere in Christianity'. Yet she also argues that evangelicals have learnt not only to

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[159] Strhan similarly found that sermons at St John's encouraged their attendees to engage in similar spiritual practices in order to overcome fears of doubt, with the reassurance that they 'really *are* experiencing God' when they engage in these practices (2015: 186). She argues that this approach was also utilised in order to delegitimise 'other Christian traditions' practices that are perceived as taking away from the centrality of scripture', in particular those associated with more charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity (Strhan 2015: 186).

develop strategies for escaping doubt but also to actively 'understand their God in a way that adapts to the skepticism' that believers experience (Luhrmann 2012: 301). Indeed, Luhrmann (2012: 301) found that 'the very features that seem so irrational to skeptical observers… actually help Christians to manage their own doubts and the doubts of others'. Outside of evangelicalism, David Kloos (2018: 2) explores the nature of doubt within the formation of Muslim subjectivity in Indonesia, along with issues of 'ambivalence, indifference, and self-perceived religious negligence', each of which he argues should be seen as a factor in religious ethical formation. Each of these, while influential, are considered by Kloos (2018: 154) as evidence of 'failure', an approach which is similarly seen in a collection edited by Daan Beekers alongside Kloos (2018: 1). The work argues against a simplistic understanding of Christian and Muslim religious lives as exclusively 'coherent, consistent, or stable' by engaging with apparent failure as a part of the lived religious experience across different contexts, one that can even be constructive (Kloos and Beekers 2018: 2). Yet this present research takes a different approach to the absence of certainty, as I will explore below. Within the PM context, uncertainty was not understood or experienced as 'failure', or even necessarily as an 'uneasy state', but rather was the natural experience of the liminal evangelical subject in formation.

More recently, the conception of uncertainty as failure has begun to be challenged. Drawing on research with 50 nonreligious Americans, Jacqui Frost (2019: 828) argues that 'uncertainty is just as often experienced as positive and motivating as it is isolating or anxiety-inducing', and while 'certainty-filled beliefs and identities are available for the nonreligious', these are often rejected in favour of uncertain ones. While some of her respondents did find anxiety in their uncertainty, for others it was intentionally chosen and seen as "freeing", with a reluctance to 'give up that freedom by coming to any final conclusions' (Frost 2019: 840). Uncertainty can be a stepping stone to an eventual certainty, or a temporary point in oscillating experiences of certainty and uncertainty over a lifetime, but Frost (2019: 841) shows that for some it 'can be more than just a means to a more certain end — it can be a meaningful end in itself' as individuals find their own 'ways of "being comfortable with uncertainty"'. Thus she found that (non)religious uncertainty was not necessarily a failed or undesirable state for her participants, but rather could be seen as something both intentional and calming, with the possibility for meaning to be found within the uncertainty (Frost 2019: 847).

While the circumstances of my participants were significantly different, the idea that uncertainty may be a peaceful state – temporarily or permanently – is an important one to

consider, away from the conventional narratives that this is inherently unstable, challenging, and symbolic of failure. Indeed, in this formative space the language of *authenticity* may be more appropriate than failure, as the young people sought to explore and determine their own individualised and authentic spiritual journey. We can look here to Charles Taylor's (2007: 489) argument that religion in modernity encourages that 'everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don't be led off yours by the allegation that it doesn't fit with some orthodoxy'. Thus, this uncertainty is a feature of the liminal, explorative, formational journey towards the authentic and settled self, which may or may not align with the expectations of the adult church. But the process of exploration within this separated environment, separate not only spatially and structurally but also separated from the expectations of certainty in the adult environment, results in the moment in a largely peaceful state of uncertainty. This will be outlined in greater depth below.

Pedagogical Pre-Requisites of Certainty

I have written in Chapter 3 of how the evangelical use of space and architecture within adult environments is oriented so as to encourage collective practices of listening, in particular to the sermon and reading of scripture, but the centrality of the sermon as primary pedagogical tool in turn reveals the expectation of a certain level of confidence – if not quite comprehensive certainty – from the congregation. Without opportunity for contribution or questioning from the congregants, the preacher is alone as a singular authority imparting teaching to the listeners each week, who are perceived as sufficiently confident as to be expectant recipients, ready and willing to absorb this wisdom in broad agreement with the preacher – as I shall explore below. While the sermon model does not necessitate an absolute absence of doubts and uncertainties – and past doubts can be used as an example of spiritual progress within a relevant talk – it is nevertheless premised on the understanding that listeners will desire their doubts be assuaged through the guidance and authority of the speaker.

Within the adult St Aidan's environment, with the exception of infrequent moments of evangelistic address towards those who are yet to be convinced or converted, the expectation within each sermon was that the listeners were broadly in agreement with the preacher. There were no moments for questions or challenges from the congregation, and opportunities to discuss the topic at hand with other members were limited both with regards to time and scope, as well as the number of people it was possible to speak with and

hear from due to limitations of technology and orientation of furniture.[160] The expectation, therefore, was that by the point of participating in adult evangelical worship attendees will have reached a level of confidence in their faith – a faith that is shared with the leadership – that means they are ready to learn from the priestly authority with little expectation of challenge or disagreement.

What was anticipated of adult congregants was outlined by the speaker during the final stages of the heaving candlelit carol service I attended, one of two identical services that night to accommodate the largest attendance of the year. The sermon argued firstly that "the Christmas story is God's rescue plan for the human race", before emphasising that this was something deeply personal – "Christmas is at the heart of our greatest need: A personal relationship with God". The preacher identified three things that can "threaten the assurance of a believer", namely "opposition", "accusation", and "fear of separation", but – with reference to a passage from Romans 8 – assured the congregation that "Jesus came to help you overcome them and make you more like him". While therefore these threats were experienced, *true* faith and experience of Christ through scripture resulted in renewed certainty and confidence. As a part of this, he later said, one's personal relationship with the divine *had* to progress beyond merely being Christened, growing up in a Christian family, or even regularly attending a Sunday School or youth group. "All these things are great", he told us, "but they don't in and of themselves make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger".[161] Deep, *adult,* faith found form in an authentic relationship with God and sustained certainty in the face of threats. Mature faith is therefore presumed to have both overcome doubt and be deeply personal, built on an intimate

[160] These moments were more frequent in the evening service than the morning services and would usually occur towards the beginning of a sermon. They would consist of a specific question asked by the preacher, which would often also be displayed on the multiple screens around the room, with the congregation encouraged to turn to the person or people next to them in order to consider their answers. Rarely would the preacher give more than two or three minutes for these discussions, and only occasionally would time be given for responses to be fed back to the congregation as a whole in the form of a wireless microphone being taken around the room and given to those with raised hands. The requirement of the microphone in order for wider feedback to occur significantly limits the opportunities for members to actively discuss and debate ideas as they emerge and gives a distinctly static feel to these brief periods of audience interaction.

[161] This quote is itself interesting in revealing possible adult attitudes towards child and youth spiritual engagement, suggesting that it is to some extent insufficient relative to adult engagement. Again, therefore, we see a prioritisation of adult faith and an expectation that individuals who have grown up within the church are transformed from their childhood selves.

relationship with the divine that exists beyond the distracting trappings of 'religion' and ritual.

Pedagogies in PM

The session outlined at the start of this chapter indicates the significant differences between the pedagogical approach within PM and the dominant sermon model of the adult services at St Aidan's.[162] While the format could vary slightly depending on the topic and speaker, each session included a half-hour – or, in practice, forty-five-minute[163] – period of teaching in the form of group discussion intertwined with more conventional teaching, described by David as a time of 'Biblical Conversation'. Any single session could include a range of approaches. The above session, for example, included quick-response opinion-based binary questions to the whole group; small group discussion followed by brief feedback; conventional authoritative transmission of information; answering of spontaneous questions; and a period of interactive debate across the whole group, including adult leaders. At other points other methods might be adopted within the Biblical Conversation, for example asking groups of young people to read over different Bible passages and offer their reflections back to the group as a whole. As discussed in the Introduction, this is a common approach used in Christian youth work, and Jason Brian Santos (2018: 40) clearly perceives establishing a 'welcoming environment filled with people their own age in order to wrestle

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[162] The question could be asked as to whether it would not be a fairer comparison in this regard to liken the PM group to the midweek Bible study groups that took place for adults at St Aidan's. While I was not able to attend a midweek group for adults, encouragements during services suggested that the groups shared similarities with those studied by James Bielo (2009). While these meetings may have shared similarities with the PM sessions – for example, a higher level of informality, a greater emphasis on developing communal relationships and, most relevantly here, intentional time for discussion – this does not in itself mean that these sessions were equivalent to PM. Fundamentally the distinction is one of ecclesiastical priority and expectation. While midweek sessions ran for both adults and young people, in both cases it was engagement with the Sunday congregations that was valued above anything else. PM was understood as the clear equivalent and alternative to the Sunday services for young people as the primary point of spiritual development. The expectation was that individuals should prioritise these Sunday meetings, with midweek sessions understood as a valuable addition. Thus, while stylistically they may not have shared the most similarities, their relative positions in the church indicate that it was the Sunday services that should be seen as the contrast point with PM when considering experience of church.

[163] While the group was supposed to finish at 18:45 each Sunday in order to coincide with the close of the evening service in the main church, the period of discussion frequently overran and – as with the session on sex outlined at the beginning of this chapter – had to be cut short in order that the group could finish by 19:00. On at least one occasion this drew frustration from the youth leadership team, with members complaining that they were excessively and restrictively tied to the adult congregation in this regard.

with their faith and ask hard questions without embarrassment' as a standard approach for religious formation in these contexts. In discussing her observations of contemporary British Christian youth work, Naomi Thompson (2018: 183) noted that '[i]n direct contrast to traditional church services, these youth groups allow for dialogue, for questioning, and for the formation of authentic and critically thought-through faith', indicating that not only is this method common outside of PM, but also that it frequently significantly differs from approaches in comparable adult contexts.

David's particular rationale for this varied format was based around both attention spans and the impact of social media on this generation of adolescents leading to an attraction towards more active discussion-based interaction in which views can be expressed and heard – an attitude that was viewed with some suspicion by David. He had hinted at these generational concerns in our first meeting prior to my fieldwork, and these were repeated during the second of my interviews with him as we discussed the general structure of an evening:

> With this generation who's come through our youth group, social media kind of gives people this kind of delusion of, that their opinion matters, and that their opinion is heard. And only for a small minority is that the actual case in social media, but that is kind of the culture that's come through […] So we don't do the lecture, preaching kind of style of things just because like only 10% of the population engages like that.

For David, adopting the model of interactive Biblical Conversation appeared to be something of a compromise, adopted not so much for its specific benefits as for the fact that the young people would struggle to engage with the sermonic model that was so central to the adult experience of St Aidan's. Using this pedagogical approach appears to have been driven by a *missiological* focus of David, comparable perhaps to Western Christian missionaries adapting their methods to appeal to the contextual expectations of their desired converts.[164] This would suggest that rather than any fundamental embracing of questioning or doubt as a sustained religious state (as might be seen in certain strands of emerging or post-evangelical

[164] As noted in the Introduction, this is not an unusual approach for Christian youth work (Shepherd 2016: 38-42; Linhart 2014). Strhan (2019: 206) argues that work with children (even those who had grown up within the church environment) was seen by adults as fundamentally a *missional* activity, satisfying the adult evangelical desire to be 'agents of transformation or salvation', 'bringing 'good news'', and 'building a better world'.

churches), or perception that discussion is ultimately the optimal mode of religious formation, this is an instrumentalist approach perceived as the best means by which to appeal to the particular audience.

As explored in Chapter 4, however, for the young people themselves the opportunity to share with and hear from peers was a highly valued feature of the group. The benefits of peer-presence went beyond the opportunities to catch up with friends or socialise, or even the reassurance of knowing that they were not alone as adolescent Christians. The opportunities to explore and formulate their spiritual beliefs and practices with and alongside their peers, and not simply according to the singular voice of a church authority, emerged as a recurring theme when young people were asked about their perspectives on the group. This was regularly contrasted positively with the experience of sermons in the adult church, a model which was seen as restrictive and unengaging. Molly, for example, when asked about her thoughts on the opportunities to both contribute herself and hear from her peers as well as David in the sessions, told me:

> It's good because like in adult services you're not really allowed to just put your hand up [and say] 'I object!', like you could do that in PM because like you're able to voice your opinion, and if you don't understand something you were able to get someone else's opinion and they'll explain it, whereas I think in like the adult's session it's just like listening and feeding it in but like if we had that now we would all just be a bit confused like 'wait could you repeat that?' and like it just helps you understand and give you more of a wider range of experiences and how it can help your knowledge as well as other people's knowledge.

Through enabling and encouraging active discussion between peers alongside the authoritative teaching from a church leader, this model challenges that authority by offering alternative voices and interpretations within the context of a church meeting. While it is David's intention that this offers him an opportunity to 'correct' unorthodox theology, he proved reticent to challenge beliefs directly during the sessions beyond affirming what he understood as orthodox Christian teaching – as indicated in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. Regardless of his challenges these alternative voices are shared and heard in the group, and Molly's response above indicates that it is in the variety of voices from across the group that her view is fully formed.

It is important to note that challenging authority was not the singular (or even primary) rationale for questioning or sharing individual opinions. Rather it was the desire for exploration and clarification, not only assuring that they had understood the original intent of the speaker but clarifying that it made sense *to them*. Again, therefore, we see the desire for an authentic personal faith understanding, uncovered through questing and questioning that is sanctioned within the group. This stands in stark contrast to the accounts found in Ayala Fader's (2009) study of Hasidic girls in Brooklyn. For Hasidic girls, any questions asked surrounding issues of faith must be 'genuine questions for information', asked 'respectfully of the male adult authority, so that they might participate appropriately in Jewish communal life' (Fader 2009: 69). The risk of getting this wrong is not only challenging the authority of teachers or other adults, but ultimately of challenging the authority of God (Fader 2009: 63). Inappropriate questions are ignored, dismissed, or met with chastisement, with part of the formation process being to learn to avoid asking these forms of question and instead developing an 'unquestioning faith… accepting the limitations of their own independent reasoning' (Fader 2009: 66). The ability (or rather inability) to question issues of faith or consider them independent from the teaching of adult authorities is intrinsically tied to their understanding of their personal relationship with the divine and the wider faith – one of submission to a greater authority. Questioning is nearly always understood as an intrinsic challenge to this authority. The practices of PM, privileging a deeply personal relationship with God cultivated collectively through a journey of exploration and individual authentic experience, enable a level of questioning that would be impossible in the Hasidic environment. As I shall explore below, the opportunities to challenge the authoritative voice through asking questions and sharing unorthodox views resulted in an environment that softly fostered uncertainty, exploration, and gradual formation of the individual evangelical subject. Prior to unpacking ideas of uncertainty in the group in greater depth, however, it is valuable to understand the use of this particular pedagogical approach through the lens of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire.

Paulo Freire, Authority, and Pedagogies

While there are limits to the parallels that can be drawn between the pedagogical structures visible in PM and Freire's model, it nevertheless offers a useful point of comparison. At the heart of Freire's approach is an emphasis on empowering democratic dialogue between educator and learner, in particular with the intention of fostering a process of 'conscientization' around issues of oppression. Honed from his own experience as an educator in Brazil and Chile, Freire saw even basic literacy education as an opportunity to

counter oppression by making 'peasants aware of their social and political context in order to work at changing the status of their existence' (Johns 1993: 14). In order to do this he instigated a new model of pedagogy, disrupting what he saw as the 'passive' traditional model of teacher and learner and attempting to balance the power dynamic within a classroom – 'Instead of a teacher, we had a co-ordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants' (Freire 2007: 38). The pedagogical approach was therefore not simply concerned with improving the absorption of information among the students, but was desired to be an 'examination of the power relationship between educator and educated' (Forrest 2005: 95), and through this challenge wider structures of oppression and authority – structures in which education cannot remain neutral. The process of "awakening" in participants through education was described by Freire (2018: 109) as one of developing critical consciousness (*conscientização*) – the 'deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence'.[165]

Freire (2018: 71-2) was deeply critical of traditional models of education as instruments of oppression, in particular what he termed the "narrative" or "banking" model. In this model, the relationship of teacher-student involves a 'narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)', with the task of the teacher to '"fill" the students with the contents of his narration – contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance' (Freire 2018: 71). Through this relationship, students are transformed into '"receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher', with passivity and meekness the most prized characteristic in a student (Freire 2018: 72). Knowledge becomes 'a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire 2018: 72). Authority structures are set and reinforced within the structures of the pedagogy, as the students passively absorb

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[165] Interestingly for scholars of religion, Freire was significantly influenced by liberation theology and other radical Catholic theologies that were being developed in South America during the middle of the twentieth century in the development of his pedagogical approach (Darder 2018: 24-30). Despite this, Irwin Leopando (2017: 178) argues that due to Freire's 'dexterity at transposing his Catholicism into nonreligious and non-sectarian terms', his theological grounding has often been overlooked or erased by 'secular readers', and as a result 'the religiously grounded power and authority that undergird and permeate much of Freire's work have often been reduced to an idiosyncratic feature of his personality and rhetorical style'. This link has been noted by religious education organisations, however, and in 1983 the Religious Education Association in the United States gave Freire their William Rainey Harper Award, along with his wife Elza (Bridges Johns 1993: 15).

the singular authoritative voice of the teacher. The students are not expected to contribute as they have nothing that is not already known and taught by the teacher.

In contrast to this model, Freire's pedagogy is one built on a dialogical (as opposed to narrative) relationship between teacher/co-ordinator and students/group participants. This is premised on a 'problem-posing pedagogy', in which students are understood as 'free thinkers and actors within their world' and is generated through 'dialectical engagement of teacher and students' (Darder 2018: 112). This form of dialogue, for Freire, is '*indispensable* to developing relationships of cooperation and collective action within schools and society' (Darder 2018: 113, emphasis original). With dialogue at the heart of pedagogical practice, the hierarchical relationship of the banking model can be disrupted. Instead, the 'teacher is also taught in dialogue with students, *who in turn while being taught also teach*', leading to 'a sense of responsibility *for a process in which all grow*' (Darder 2018: 113, emphasis original). Thus the authority of the co-ordinator is far from absolute, and participants are expected to contribute and thereby learn from and teach one another. But we also see characteristics of humble compassion lying at the heart of Freire's pedagogy. Authority relationships between teacher and student are no longer vertical and 'rooted in authoritarianism', but rather horizontal, built on the characteristics of genuine dialogue – 'namely *love, humility, faith, and trust'* (Darder 2018: 12, emphasis original). Finally, it is important to note that in Freire's model, a key part of the collaborative and dialectical nature lies in the opportunities for participants themselves to determine the topics of discussion, as opposed to following a rigid and authoritatively imposed curriculum.

Freire and Christian Formation

Freire's approach suggests a binary model starkly contrasting the traditional approaches with his own, but the experience of practitioners and students is inevitably more diverse than this. As a result, David Yamane (2014: 100-1), in his study of the Rite of Christian Initiation in Adults (RCIA) in the American Catholic church, takes the approach of 'reconceptualizing Freire's traditional-critical pedagogy dichotomy as a continuum', focused on the '*extent of student engagement with the material*' (emphasis original). Yamane's model places 'lecturing' at one end of the spectrum (in which the teacher 'stands in front of the class and tells students what they are supposed to know') and 'discussion', followed by 'experiential learning' (that is, 'learning by doing'), at the other (Yamane 2014: 101). Despite the RCIA having a set curriculum anticipated for initiates, these pedagogical approaches were utilised

in vastly different degrees across his field sites.[166] In the examples from Yamane's work we can see clear parallels with the pedagogies employed at St Aidan's across the youth and adult spaces, and through this appreciate the nature of religious subject formation and expectation across the different contexts. The relationship between these pedagogical approaches and the structures of authority they both create and anticipate are also closely tied to expectations of certainty. The vessel model of student, as in Freire's banking model, is not a questioning contributor, but rather a passive and accepting listener, confident in accepting whatever is given to them by their teacher. The expectations of the alternative model are fundamentally different.

In the example of a 'lecture' presented by Yamane (2014: 104-7), in the church of St. John Bosco, we encounter a traditional classroom environment with rows of students sitting at tables facing the lecturer. The students are passive, reaching a point of disengaged restlessness after forty minutes of the hour-long session, with only minimal responses to questions. This attitude, Yamane believes, stems from the pedagogical approach presenting the priest as 'the authority in charge of catechesis, the possessor and deliverer of certain information', with the role of students being 'to sit quietly, hear and accept as part of their faith' what the priest is saying – or at very least not challenge it (Yamane 2014: 107). As with the evangelical examples noted by Francis, '[q]uestioning, participation, and engagement are not part of this vision of the church' (Yamane 2014: 107). Arguably the sermonic style of St Aidan's is even closer to the lecture model that Yamane proposes. I have already explored the spatial aspects of this in previous chapters, and while it would be disingenuous to suggest that the congregants are as disengaged as those Yamane observed, boredom was a recurring theme when the young people I interviewed spoke about their experiences of the main church services. Euan told me that "the main service is a bit boring sometimes, sometimes when I go to the main service I just sit there during the sermon and I'm just like 'please can it end!'", while for Samantha boredom was a concern to the extent that she anticipated it would negatively (and potentially permanently) define the experience for any visiting friends:

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[166] Drawing on Freire and his emphasis on the relationship between pedagogy and authority, Yamane (2014: 102) argues that implicit within these pedagogies and their utilisation are 'different conceptions of what it means to be a Catholic in relation to the locus of authority in the church', with conceptions of authority impacting on the understanding and formation of the Catholic subject.

> Let's say you had a sleepover with your friends and the next morning was Sunday, and then you're like 'do you want to come to a main service in this church?' it would be like the most boring thing, you would probably like never say the word 'church' again

Alongside this boredom came the frustration in the inability to ask questions or hear from people other than the speaker – as Molly's quote earlier in this chapter indicates, a congregant audibly challenging the speaker during a sermon would be highly unorthodox, and not something I encountered at St Aidan's. While engagement was possible with the inclusion of questions as already described, these were primarily established as introductory to the primary teachings rather than in any form pedagogical in themselves and were not encouraged to be a trigger for wider discussions within the service. Boredom and inability to actively participate are of course intertwined insofar as regular participation is likely to encourage a higher level of interest and engagement, but there is also within this a hint towards the relationship with ecclesiastical and theological authority. The boredom experienced and described by the young people is an act of rebellion of sorts, indicating their lack of willingness to be merely '"receptacles" to be "filled"' by the preacher, or show the passivity and meekness that is desired (Freire 2018: 72).

In contrast to the example of St. John Bosco, Yamane (2014: 107-111) details a session of the same course delivered at Queen of Peace church. While using the lecture model occasionally, the Queen of Peace leaders were far more likely to incorporate discussion and experiential methods within their sessions.[167] Here responsibilities are split across the parish staff and lay members, including parishioners, with individuals leading sessions in their areas of expertise. Over the course of a single session multiple voices are heard in different tasks, and while one person will take the lead on the specific teaching each week it is clear that spontaneous contribution from other leaders is common. Along with verbal delivery of doctrine, the teaching also incorporates small group discussions and active tasks for the participants to do themselves (such as writing a prayer around the passage being discussed), before ending with whole group discussion. Despite being twice the length of the session at St. John Bosco, Yamane (2014: 111) notes that even at the end of the session '[t]he group is fully present and alive'.

[167] For Yamane (2014: 107), the Queen of Peace church utilising this pedagogy is 'reflective of the parish's embrace of the idea of the church as the "People of God"'.

Parallels with the session on sex outlined at the start of this chapter are immediately apparent. Across the course of the night the voice of David was joined by that of my own in leading the game, Josh and Hannah's in leading the worship, and Harriet's in guiding the group between formal sections. Multiple pedagogical modes were intertwined, with tasks, formal teaching, small group discussion and whole group debate. The session overran due to continued engagement, with eager questions remaining unanswered due to the time limitations. Most significant, however, was the range of opportunities for contribution available to the group members throughout the session. David's views were prominent at various points throughout the session, most notably in the closing assertion that sex outside of marriage was both damaging and a sin. The clarity of these views – including the nuances he wished to outline with regards to avoiding a legalistic guideline while judging one's actions in light of a personal relationship with God – were important enough for David to request that we as adult leaders not attempt to offer our own additional teaching, a rare appeal based on the perceived sensitivity of the subject matter. Nevertheless, throughout the session the young people were able and encouraged to offer their own questions, thoughts, and beliefs on the topic both to David and to their peers – most notably in the whole group discussion concerning oral sex. This followed the brief period of lecture-style teaching (which was itself interrupted with occasional questions from the group), and it would likely have been clear to the young people at this stage what the "correct" answer would be in the eyes of David. Yet the openness of the discussion and range of views, expressed even among young people within the youth leadership team, indicates that involvement was not simply concerned with the appeasement of an authority or seeking confirmation that one had understood what had been taught, but rather a desire to actively contribute to the environment of collective learning and formation of understanding. Authority belonged not only in the voice of David, therefore, but in the voices of their peers and of themselves.

There are important differences to note from Freire's concept that are absent both from Yamane's analysis and from the PM context. Firstly, with regards to the dialogical practices of the group, it cannot be said that David sought to be equally taught by the group as much as he taught them, as with the idealistic horizontal authority model suggested by Freire. While I do not doubt that David gained some insights from the responses and conversations, this was not the primary motivation or concern with regards to the period of teaching. Instead, in my first meeting with him before I started the period of fieldwork, David emphasised the importance of using these periods each session as opportunities to correct "poor" theology that the young people might have picked up from other sources, most

notably at home. This also underlies how he perceived the input from other adults in the teaching. While the request that preceded the session on sex was unusually strong, it nevertheless belied David's concern around different 'authoritative' voices being heard by the young people – authoritative in so far as they were the voices of adults. This also meant that David would request that guest speakers, such as those from the adult congregation, sent him their plans for the talks in advance to be checked.

Yet at other moments it appeared that this caution over alternative authoritative voices stemmed not only from a theological concern but also a pastoral one, in particular over topics that might be personally significant to members of the group. One notable incidence of this came during a PM session in which members of the church congregation and leadership team formed a 'panel', with the young people invited to ask questions – both by submitting anonymously in advance and by offering them in the moment.[168] Following questions on doubt, pre-destination, the eternal fate of non-Christians, and being angry with God, the final question of the evening was one drawn from the pre-submitted box – "What does God think about the LGBTQ+ community?" After the panellists emphasised the importance of loving people unconditionally, and somewhat uncomfortably skirted around the question of whether homosexuality should be considered a sin, Kimberly – who worked in administration for the church – recommended that the group listen to Steven's recent sermon on the subject "if you have any questions". David immediately responded to this in order to discourage this, instead advising the young people that they talk with him personally about such issues. This was premised on the depth of the individual relationships they had with David, with the understanding that more would be gained from a conversation than listening without discussion to the teachings of Steven. Again, therefore, we see a level of guarding by David over the authoritative adult voices to which the young people were exposed in addition to his own, as well as an indication of his pastoral and pedagogical preference towards the conversation rather than the lecture.

By approaching the pedagogical practices of St Aidan's and PM through the lenses of Paulo Freire and David Yamane we gain a deeper understanding of the nature and expectation of the evangelical subject across the youth and adult spheres, in particular with regards to the individual relationship with authority. More significantly, we gain an insight into the form of

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[168] An interesting note here is again the assumption that adult believers have a level of implicit authority and theological insight that enables them to answer questions of young people in a manner that would be beyond the capacity of the group themselves.

religious agency being embodied within these environments. While the sermon context encourages a more 'active' form of listening than Freire's banking model anticipates, the individual is nevertheless understood as primarily a *receiver* of religious knowledge and practice, both from scripture but also significantly from the authoritative voice of the preacher. In contrast, within the discussion heavy sessions of PM we see a religious subject that is not only a receiver but an *explorer* and even potentially a *creator* of this religious knowledge and practice (albeit with limits on this creativity), in collaboration with their peers, *alongside* the voices of scripture and 'adult' authorities.

Liminality, Non-Conformity, and Peaceful Uncertainty

This more democratic, if not entirely horizontal, relationship with authority in the pedagogical practices came naturally to members of the group due to the emphasis on egalitarian communitas as discussed in the previous chapter. Beyond this relationship with authority, and the collective joy that could emerge throughout the period of Biblical Conversation, this approach also reinforced the experience of communitas by enabling these young people to understand themselves as on a *collective* journey of exploration and formation. They were not simply individuals being taught what it means to be a Christian in belief and practice, but rather gradually developing in understanding as a communal body. Alongside and interwoven with communitas in the liminal experience is the crucial understanding and expectation that the initiates are not yet the 'finished article', whatever form that might eventually take, both as individuals and as a group. With this understanding, the presence and acceptance of questions and vibrant discussion, incorporating layers of agreement and disagreement across and between the group and David can be seen as pivotal practices in the nature of evangelical subjectivity within this space. In particular, in their position as liminal beings was a level of acceptance of uncertainty within the young people that was not possible in the adult environment. As I shall outline, this was evident not only in the sessions themselves through these periods of discussion, but also in the broader lack of concern the young people displayed at their own questions or doubts, contrasted with the accounts of anxiety that emerge from other ethnographies of evangelicalism. Notable points of comparison emerge at other periods of intentional points of liminal formation within Christianity, further contributing to the understanding of the evangelical youth work process at St Aidan's as one of prolonged rite of passage into the status of evangelical adult.

Between Two Certainties

Central to this approach is the understanding that adolescence exists at a point between two periods of certainty in the religious life. As David described it when discussing the priorities of Morning Meetup, the St Aidan's youth work sought to move individuals away from an "inherited" faith that took on the faith identity of their parents as an unconsidered, default position during childhood and early adolescence.[169] Significant questioning and exploration of faith is therefore not perceived as expected features of religious childhood.[170] If socialisation is successful in this period religious faith is taken to be self-evidently true and natural, and as a result there is an expectation of religious confidence and certainty. As explored above, there is a parallel expectation of the certainty of the evangelical adult believer post-'conversion', with a confidence that can carry the believer through the challenges of life. Yet the intervening period, the period of transition – the liminal period in which youth work operates – is seen as one of inevitable challenging, questioning, doubt, and a quest for independence of individual belief and practice. This is not exclusive to evangelicalism or Christianity, and Madge, Hemming, and Stenson's (2014: 211) study of religious attitudes among over 1000 young people in the UK shows that the desire to exert individual religious agency during adolescence is a recurring feature across belief structures.

However, the emphasis on individualism in evangelicalism places a particular importance on this desire for individual religious agency. For David, providing a space in which young people can be guided through this period of personal religious independence and (at points rebellious) exploration is fundamental in the rationale for separate provision for young people as described in Chapter 3, as relates both to their separation from adults but also from younger children:

[169] There are, of course, significant difficulties with this assumption, not least that it delegitimises childhood faith in its own right and reduces the possibility of individual child agency in their faith. Interestingly, however, it does align with the expectations of faith development models as described in the Introduction.

[170] This can be witnessed in the above vignette during which David advises the young people away from "Sunday School" answers, meaning simplistic responses that are seeking to be 'correct', rather than personally reflective and truthful. One example of this amongst the young people themselves came some months later, when a younger member of the group (who had also attended the Morning Meetup session earlier in the day covering the same topic) was desperate to show that he "knew the answer" to one of David's discussion questions. While he was very proud and amused by this, both David and the older members of the group largely ignored his antics as immature, and instead focused on their own personal reflections and those of their peers.

> Youth ministry needs to be addressed in a way that's different to the rest of the congregation [because] they're entering into a stage where they're trying to find independence from, well they're trying to find independence from their parents. So they're establishing their independence. Before, their parents were the most influential people in their lives, now they're trying to find out "Who am I?" And when those questions come into effect that's where they start questioning the faith that they grew up with because they didn't really question it before […] Some kids towards the end of Kids Church start that process of, kind of independence, but most of them start it between 11 to 14. So that's why I think it's quite different from Kids Church is just the mindset of questioning "is this my faith? What does this mean? Oh I don't really believe in that" and I think faith is, especially in Christian circles, is one of the first ways that they start establishing independence is "oh cool my parents are Christian but I don't really believe in that", that's the one of the first things that they start doing, so we try and take them on a trip that they see that like faith is a *personal* thing, it's not a family orientated thing.

In Chapter 4 I described the shifting religious influences during adolescence away from parents and towards peers, with questioning and uncertainty understood as a central feature of this for David. Thus, the pedagogical practices at PM were centred around an expectation of uncertainty, with the gradual progression towards the hoped-for religious certainty of adulthood.

It is important to note that the majority of the young people I interviewed were comfortable to identify themselves as Christians, and unlike many of the participants in Abby Day's (2009: 266-7) study of young people's constructions of belief, attached particular beliefs and practices to this identity.[171] Nevertheless, this was often understood in the context of an incomplete – and often inconsistent – journey, one which had taken important steps during adolescence but remained in development. This had two features in particular. Firstly, it was a process of deepening one's understanding of Christian faith and practice. This was fostered primarily through the collective experience of discussion outlined in this chapter, with the voices of their peers valued along with the input of respected authorities such as David. The

[171] Some young people in the group appeared to derive frustration from those friends at school that referred to themselves as Christians yet rarely (or never) attended church, criticising their perceived insincerity when using the label in contrast to their own faith.

second element consisted of increasing their personal relationship with God, in particular through developing individual spiritual practices. Increasing in both frequency and 'sincerity' of reading the Bible and personal prayer were viewed as positive indicators of religious maturity and depth of relationship with God, as 17-year-old Cate told me when we met over waffles at Cecil Place during a free period from her Year 12 classes:

> *Rob*
>
> What do you think the differences are between your understanding of your faith when you were a kid and how it is now and how that's changed?
>
> *Cate*
>
> I think when I was a kid… I've always known like, all my family's like Christian so I've always known like to love God and everything, and I've been going to church since I was little so I've been brought up in that background. But I think it's when you're older is when you start to learn more about God and how He can change your life, and… Just expand your knowledge!
>
> […]
>
> *Rob*
>
> Is there a Sunday or an event where you remember thinking 'oh I get it now', or 'this is real to me' or was it more just like every week it's kind of a slow growth of understanding?
>
> *Cate*
>
> Oh right, ok so erm… Until like… when I was a teenager, so like 14, 15, 16, I wouldn't really know like how to pray properly, in like I wouldn't pray often. I remember when my mum used to drive us to school we used to say the Lord's Prayer like on the way and then… I feel like I just didn't really connect with God that well. Like I wasn't really praying or like reading the Bible or anything. I don't think I really understood… about… Like I don't think I really explored my faith yet, like I wasn't… I don't know how to put it! Like… I just didn't really know God. […] Like I didn't have a strong relationship. And then, like when I was studying and like struggling with school I started to pray more, more often.

Cate had been confirmed earlier that year, and for her this was important as an opportunity to get a "fresh start" in her faith following these developments, as well as marking her relationship with God. But this remained a turbulent journey, and one that she hoped she

would continue to develop. Later in the interview she told me that she had worried that she had "lost that relationship a bit" recently, having slipped out of the daily habit of prayer, listening to worship music, and having "quiet time", and as a result had "forgotten that I had that relationship and I'd like to build it back up again". This experience of deepening personal relationship with God through adolescence – in particular attached to personal spiritual practices outside of PM – combined with a sense that there is further growth to be made in the area, was common amongst the participants. Anna, for example, told me when I asked her about her "faith journey":

> I feel like if it was like a timeline like when I was younger it would be like, so it would be like very like strong and then they would definitely be doing some dips along the journey like there's some days or some times where I'm just like 'oh this isn't even real like this is impossible' and then I'm like 'no this is real like what are you talking about' and it like it goes up and down and then there's some things I'm like 'I don't believe that but can I still be Christian if I don't believe that?' and then like there's questioning and then at the moment I'd say like I'm in like a place where I'm like I know that God exists I know that Jesus exists I like believe this and this, and then there's some things I don't agree with but then like that's okay, I can still like be Christian it's like I'm not perfect but that's fine.

This flux and uncertainty rarely appeared to cause any notable anxiety, with an apparent sense that this was where they were expected to be at this stage. For Cate, having separate groups for teenagers was important because "not all teenagers know where they are with their faith or with their relationship with God", whereas for most adults "their faith is, not like big but has grown a lot more than ours so they might have more understanding and more knowledge like about the Bible for example and like a stronger relationship with God". Certainty of doctrine and practice and intimate relationship with God was expected at adulthood, but not now.

Comfortable and Uncomfortable Uncertainty

This is not to say that these elements develop in perfect tandem over adolescence, and nor does one necessitate the other – as evidenced in Zoe's account. Year 12 students when we spoke in the Summer of 2018, close friends Zoe and Naomie met me in the Treeside Room on a hot afternoon between revision sessions for their end of year exams. Even through the shaded windows the room remained warm, but their comfort in the space and with each

other was evident as each slid their shoes off and tucked their feet under their legs on the simple sofa. The interview was full of laughter and rapid shifts of speakers as the friends eagerly finished one another's sentences, but this was not indicative of a lack of serious engagement with the topic. While they shared much, their faith experience to this point differed substantially. Unlike Naomie, Zoe had not grown up going to church, and after attending the Friday night youth group at St Aidan's she first attended PM with Naomie the previous March. When I asked them whether they considered themselves Christians, it was clear that she perceived herself being on an incomplete, ongoing journey:

> *Zoe*
>
> I wouldn't say I'm a Christian, but I would say that I'm on the *way* to becoming a Christian. Yeah, I feel like it's
>
> *Naomie*
>
> You feel something
>
> *Zoe*
>
> Yeah, but I haven't yet, like explored that so I'm getting there gradually. […] I have times where like I really believe, like I really do […] but then I have days where I'm just like 'I don't know if I believe, I just don't know' and I don't want to have like a false dedication

PM, she told us, was the ideal space for the continuation of this journey. Central to this for Zoe were the pedagogical priorities – "we can discuss with our friends and it's comfortable for us to discuss things because firstly we're allowed to, and also we're like, with our friends [and] we feel they almost encourage us to say our opinions". The culture of the group and the encouragement offered through these practices meant that she felt comfortable speaking about her uncertainties and concerns, something she felt would be impossible in any other form of (adult) church she had experienced. The teaching approach enabled not only an opportunity for hearing from others but also an openness to reticence towards acceptance of authority:

> *Zoe*
>
> I think that it's really important that we gradually go into things here, it's not like, really thrown in our face. It's like, it's eased into our lives rather than like 'this is what we should be doing now, change it now, don't do this, do this' it's really like

Naomie

He never tells us like what to do

Zoe

He just teaches us and then he tells us how to, and then it’s like it’s our, it’s almost like he’s still giving us an opportunity to incorporate that into what we do, like it's not, he's not forcing us, we can choose what we do with his teachings. And I prefer that

Naomie

And he always says that as well

Zoe

Yeah, he says that too, so we know that

This is not to say that David’s talks could not have powerful transformative impacts, but rather that there was space for uncertainty if agreement was not forthcoming. One aspect of this for Zoe was the reticence to grant exceptional authority to the teachings of the Bible, as she “wouldn’t say I’m a believer of the Bible”. Contradictions in the text, the fact that “although it’s the word of God it’s still written by man and personally I just don’t trust people!”, and the fact that it appeared to advocate for social viewpoints that she could not abide by meant that Zoe did not necessarily hold the Bible in the high regard expected from evangelicals. Instead, her focus was on her direct relationship with God rather than an ancient text: “I feel like I’d rather let God talk to me rather than the Bible talk to me […] like I'm getting the word of God from God now.” Her personal experience with God, within the important experience of PM as church – both Zoe and Naomie consistently referred to PM as 'church’ – and an environment that allowed for exploration and uncertainty, meant that the doubt over the significance of scripture did not pose a concern. As she was speaking there was little anxiety or shame about her position, and neither did I sense that she felt this was a view inconsistent with her position in PM. In this space, comfortable uncertainty felt natural and a part of the developing spiritual experience for this period. One notable exception to this sense of peaceful uncertainty was Euan.

Euan was in Year 13 when we spoke, his final year of secondary education and his final year of PM, with aspirations of studying at a Russell Group university. “I would identify as Christian”, Euan told me, “but at the moment at least I don’t think I’m that strong as a Christian”. I asked him what it would mean for him to be a “strong” Christian, and while later

on in our conversation he called back to the idea of the "strength" of his religiosity when he told me of his desire to more consistently engage in prayer and other spiritual practices, initially he pointed out that "I haven't actually even been baptized yet" – something that he saw as "one of the main stages like if I actually am proper committed". His reticence to be baptised thus far was due to a lack of an "affirmative sign that I should" or a "pivotal moment" in which he had an undeniable experience of the divine:

> So far at least there hasn't been a moment in my life where I've been like, 'oh I have like a revelation' or like 'Oh God is like definitely 100% here' […] it'd be good to have like a really big like moment or like God appears to me in a dream or something and then I'd be like, I don't know, like that happens to some people and it doesn't happen to other people.

Alongside this desire for confirmation of God's presence were further questions and uncertainties surrounding, for example, the fallibility of scripture, or the inability to address the doubts of non-believing friends. These concerns appeared to lead to anxieties that were intimately tied to his imminent move out of PM and into the adult context. From that point he would no longer be in the environment of formation and exploration, in which uncertainty and transition were expected, but rather he would be expected to have reached a point of 'adult' faith, and all of the certainty and commitment that entails.

Uncertainty, Disagreement, and Non-Conformity

Francis (2017: 50) found that the practices of certainty that had been in place in the churches in which his participants grew up, while persistent, were nevertheless fallible, and there 'remained a gap, a space for the mind and the body to revolt against the norms and compulsions that shaped them'. In the Oregon Extension, however, the participants were offered space for 'students to create new practices of *un*certainty' (Francis 2017: 51, emphasis added). Students began to question the norms into which they had been socialised, often resulting in a 'recognition that the gaps… in their identity as nondoubters were in fact present all along' (Francis 2017: 58). Previously these had been present but ignored as 'they simply were not part of the *performance*; they were negative spaces within the imagined coherence of subject' (Francis 2017: 59, emphasis original). At the Oregon Extension, doubts and questions were modelled by their leaders, but were also encouraged through the pedagogical approaches utilised – in particular through open discussions. As one participant described it, the professors "provide[d] a place where questions were allowed and where doubt was a part of faith" (Francis 2017: 60).

While the techniques of the Oregon Extension may be more extreme than some, it is not unusual for these forms of pedagogical techniques enabling uncertainty to be used in Christian formation, both among adults and young people. The examples from Yamane's work above indicate how these practices can be brought in for the process of preparing American adults for the RCIA, but Rachel Hanemann's (2016: 244-7) study shows us that this is also utilised in the context of Catholic Confirmation classes among British teenagers. Central to the experience of these classes for her participants was the opportunity to question, evaluate, and consider the Catholic faith before making an active decision to follow this for themselves. While Hanemann places the emphasis on the ritual act itself, the account of her participant Belvie suggests that it is this *process of exploration* that precedes the decision – a decision that is then certified through Confirmation – that is most significant. She notes that Belvie 'attended Confirmation classes before she had, in her mind, truly committed to Catholicism' – an approach that was not uncommon among her participants – and it was during the period of the sessions in which doubts could be assessed and reconciled that she felt able to personally commit to the Catholic faith and identity (Hanemann 2016: 246).[172]

While British Protestantism does not contain within it a formal process of formation akin to Catholic Confirmation, the charismatic and evangelistic Alpha course – originating at Holy Trinity Brompton Anglican church in London and now a global brand with 'over 1.3 million participants' in 2019 alone (Alpha 2020) – offers a model by which those new to Christianity might be introduced to the beliefs and practices prior to commitment. Following a meal and a talk (either given live or through a video), small group discussion is a consistent part of every session. Stephen Hunt's (2004: 65) study on the programme shows the extent to which discussion leaders are encouraged to allow for heterodox beliefs and practices, in particular in the earlier sessions, with training tapes 'seemingly convinced in the optimistic view that the truth will prevail and that people will over time change their beliefs and values'. Leaders are encouraged to avoid concrete answers to difficult questions and to admit to their uncertainty, before utilising one of the 'coping mechanisms' that are encouraged, for example by moving the conversation on to a different topic (Hunt 2004: 66). Hunt (2004: 66) also notes that many topics that may be 'open to interpretation' are presented in 'quite

[172] Development of personal religious practice and opportunities for individual religious agency were also significant features of this process for Belvie (Hanemann 2016: 245-6).

dogmatic style', affirming a singular (often charismatic) doctrine that may not be agreed with by the majority of Christian believers. Despite this, the centrality of discussions in the sessions as a place for people 'to be heard and ask questions' (Hunt 2004: 66) on a course designed to guide people from curious ignorance to committed faith over eleven weeks further reinforces the idea that this pedagogical approach – enabling questioning, uncertainty, and unorthodoxy – is understood as beneficial in the process of formation within contemporary Christianity.

The mode of questioning and discussions used at PM enabled a wide range of opinions to be shared, and those I interviewed – ranging from one young person who named right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro as an influence to another who labelled her role models as Marxist Angela Davis and influential Black Panther member Kathleen Cleaver – all noted the openness of discussion as a highlight of the group. This included disagreements (these two young people clashed on issues of gender identity, for example), but it was overwhelmingly understood as a comfortable space in which to express their own perceptions, even when this differed from their peers or David. One notable example came in a session that I led on the topic of social media. Talking about her appreciation of Christian celebrities, Hannah – a Year 13 member of the youth leadership team – used the example of celebrities openly talking about not having sex before marriage, saying that while "I'm not sure if that's a decision I'm going to make yet or not", she valued that these conversations were being normalised in wider culture. While this session preceded the one outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I do not doubt that Hannah would have been aware of the normative evangelical position on sex before marriage and thus would have suspected David's position, yet despite her position as a 'leader' she still felt comfortable expressing her uncertainty on the topic. Non-conformity extended beyond the discussion periods, and again was accepted and accommodated by David and the group as a whole. One example of this can be seen in an incident early in the group's time in Cecil Place.

As noted in Chapter 4, the room in which the group conducted most of their periods of discussion and worship was long and narrow, and at the far end of this was an area of reflection including Bibles and a chalkboard. Prior to the period of sung worship on the week in question, David reminded the group about this 'quiet area' that they were welcome to go to during the worship as "we understand sung worship can be a bit weird for you". They would not be "judged" for doing so, he assured them. As the band started, Elena made her way to the back and knelt in front of the chalkboard, pausing for a while as she reflected on what was there – and what was not. The previous week she had used this board extensively,

including drawings as well as written comments and quotes. These were relatively unorthodox in Christian terms – reflecting Elena's personal, more mystical spirituality[173] – including an image of a face with a 'Third Eye' along with quotes about the oneness of all humanity, as drops in an ocean. This week, however, these contributions had been erased, while those from other young people in previous weeks remained. These were more orthodox in nature, as with the comment in Figure 11 – a direct quote from Philippians 4:13. As Elena knelt motionless in front of the chalkboard I wondered whether she had noticed this discrepancy, and after some time she eventually stood up and left the room, moving through to the adjacent space which contained the consoles along with some sofas. After I told him about this, David went through to speak with her while the worship music continued. Following the session, David told me that Elena had noticed and been upset by the removal of her contributions. He had reassured her that this was not personal, nor was it done by him, and suspected that this had been unintentional as someone was distracted while attempting to clean the entire board. David had the previous week expressed his concern to me about the drawings, noting that while they were representative of Elena they were not necessarily "helpful" for the others in the group, but did not suggest that he would remove them. Elena appeared to be calmed by his reassurances and moved back into the room, eventually drawing something new on the board. Despite some personal theological concerns, David remained eager to assure the young people at PM that it could be a space of spiritual expression – even when it did not conform to the evangelical norm.

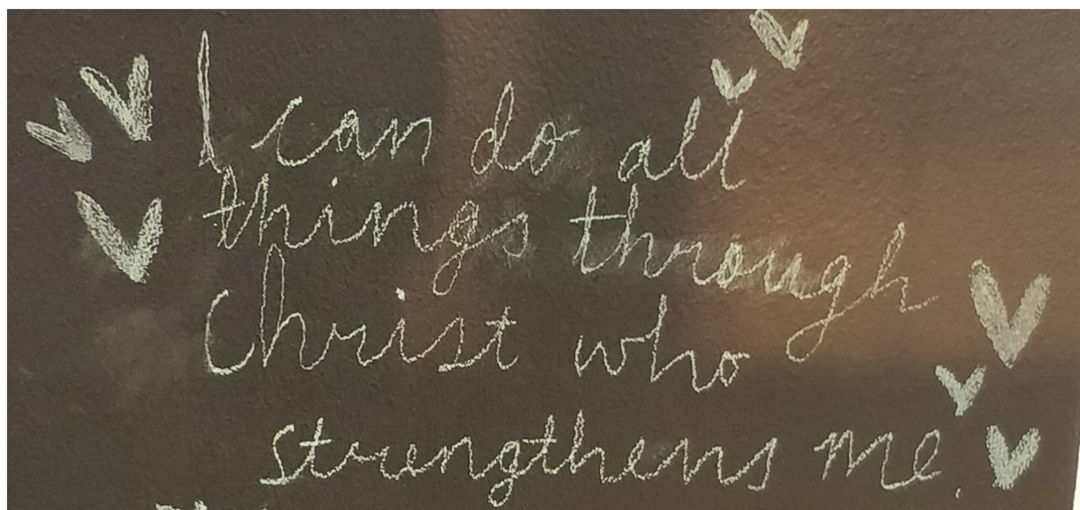

Figure 11: A Bible quote written by a young person on the chalkboard in Cecil Place.

[173] This spirituality included, for example, prayer with crystals.

This example is indicative of the wider tension within David's approach to the group which I spoke of at the beginning of the chapter, a balancing act between encouraging the young people towards an eventual end point that they must reach individually while avoiding overly prescriptive approaches – an approach praised by Zoe and Naomie above. In place of direct prescription, condemnation, and "preaching", came a guidance driven by personal experience with God, deep relationship with the individual(s), and a modelling of faith in his life that the young people could look to. In this way, David's approach mirrored the one he encouraged the young people to take with regards to their non-Christian friends, being "Ambassadors for Christ" (as explored in Chapter 3). Through intentionally modelling his faith in his relationships and actions, rather than didactically preaching expected theology and practice, he hoped that they collectively and individually might be formed as evangelicals. In the meantime, exploration and uncertainty were acceptable and even expected as young people found their own, authentic, way to a faith centred on personal relationship with God formed through their experiences of his modelling and teaching in the PM sessions.

Conclusion: The Inevitable Impermanence of Acceptable Uncertainty

The Oregon Extension cannot be a permanent place of residence for those attending. It serves as a semester long programme for students, and understands itself as a temporary escape, a place of challenge, transition, and liminality, in which "confusion is ok, is actually a somewhat natural state of being" (Francis 2017: 18). Yet by virtue of being a temporary space, separated from ordinary experience and without a clear next step after completion, alumni of the programme move in different directions. Francis (2017: 18) notes that some leave the church only to return later, others leave for good, and others still remain involved in the church, serving as 'what they call "a voice of protest from within"'. But some do not know how to move on from their experience, and 'seem to dwell forever in a liminal state, standing always on the doorstep of the church. Sometimes facing in, sometimes facing out, neither able to leave nor enter in again' (Francis 2017: 18). Evidently while uncertainty is a natural state within liminality, it can be a struggle to maintain once thrust back into ordinary life in the search for a permanent space that can accommodate this uncertainty. Betty, for example, told Francis (2017: 55), "Although I still consider myself a Christian, I refuse to settle into a church that does not risk mystery – that does not embrace honest contemplation over ease and convention… Therefore, I am still an orphaned believer".

Within PM we see a space of acceptable uncertainty, fostered by pedagogical approaches that enabled questioning of authority, contributions from peers and leaders alike, and a collective formation of religious belief and practice. Discussions were lively and engaging, with a sense that young people (even those in positions of leadership) felt broadly comfortable sharing their opinions and perspectives, even when they diverged from those of David or some of their peers. This is not to say that David did not have a clear sense of that which he wanted to teach the young people, and he was overwhelmingly liked and respected by the members of PM, but nevertheless young people felt comfortable challenging or questioning his teaching. While David's views may have been made clear, unorthodoxy was to an extent accommodated and expressed within the group, and non-participation was understood. These aspects were possible due to the fact that these young people were understood as having left one period of their faith life that revolved around a simplistic certainty dependent on parental influence and entered into a new one of independent agency and exploration of individual faith. On this journey questioning and doubt are anticipated and normalised, and the experience of relational faith may be inconsistent and non-linear in its development. In this liminal environment, separated from that which went before and that which comes after, and characterised by an atmosphere of peer-centred communitas, young evangelicals – or potential evangelicals – are able to dwell in collective exploration and uncertainty. But, as with the experiences of those at the Oregon Extension, this can only ever be a temporary state for these young people.

At the end of secondary education, whether the young people moved away to university or remained local to St Aidan's, the members of PM were required to leave the group. If they were to remain at St Aidan's, the evening services – advertised towards Young Adults' aged 18-35 – offered the primary option. Yet as I have shown here, the pedagogical approaches differed substantially to the extent of impacting the individual relationship with ecclesiastical authority and their fellow congregants, shattering previously democratic and active models of spiritual education and instead introducing strongly hierarchical, passive structures. As Yamane argues, these pedagogical approaches not only affect the momentary experience of the group but develop starkly different understandings of what it means to be a religious subject, in particular with regards to one's relationship with religious hierarchy. The subjects formed in one setting differ from the subjects formed in the other. Closely intertwined with this comes the expectation of agreement and confidence in one's faith, an individualised relational faith that is simultaneously shared with the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the congregation as a whole. The evangelical subject in this situation is idealised as confident

and coherent in their faith and actions, eager and willing to learn from scripture and sermon and absorb this into their daily faith life. Having passed through the process of binary conversion into a new life with Christ, this is a new state of confidence in one's faith, relationship with God, and eternal salvation.

As with those who depart the Oregon Extension, however, this transition from uncertainty to expected certainty, from questioning to compliance – from liminality to permanence – is not always straightforward. The account of Euan indicates the anxiety that this imminent shift can bring about for those who felt that they had not yet fulfilled the expectations of the liminal phase and were not yet ready to be moved into the certainty of the adult sphere, yet were reaching the enforced end of their period in the youth. This endpoint had no relationship with any aspect of their personal faith – there was no means by which spiritual development for this period is considered as "complete", and nor do the individuals have any option to remain within the PM environment. Instead, this decision is entirely based upon reaching the end of a specific educational stage. As a result of this arbitrary endpoint, it is perhaps not surprising that despite the prominence of practices that both teach and expect high levels of certainty within adult evangelicalism, the reality appears to be that uncertainties and doubts continue into the adult evangelical experience. Strhan (2015: 186-7), for example, found that many of her participants found doubt to be a real and frequent yet 'uneasy state', despite the attempts of preachers that they find their certainty in the experience of reading scripture. Luhrmann (2012: xii-xiii) argues that even committed evangelical Christians sometimes 'find it hard to believe in an invisible being – let alone an invisible being who is entirely good and overwhelmingly powerful', with the result that '[m]any Christians struggle, at one point or another, with the fear that it might all be a sham'. Even Charles Colson, author of the 'best-known book-length conversion narrative of the twentieth century', admitted that the linear and binary nature of this narrative belied the more complex reality: that his conversion was not an 'accomplished narratable fact' but rather a 'work in progress' and 'open-ended' (Oliver 2014: 886, 890).

The expectation of adult evangelicalism, and the premise on which the normative pedagogy is based as contrasted with that of the youth context, is not necessarily therefore reflective of the experience of individuals. Considering the role of youth work as a formative period in the lives of many evangelicals this should not be a surprise. In his argument for an expanded understanding of the concept of 'belief' beyond the merely cognitive, David Morgan (2009: 6) contests that we must pay attention not only to affirmations of doctrine but the habits and practices that are developed in the believer. Central to this understanding, therefore, is

not only *what* religious parents and communities teach their children, but also '*how, when,* and *where* do people teach their children *what* they teach them' (Morgan 2009: 6, emphasis original). The particular pedagogies adopted in children's and youth contexts are central in the formation of the evangelical subject throughout their lives, and thus the sharp distinctions with practices and expectations in an adult environment may be expected to result in a level of unease and readjustment. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the environment and practices of PM can be understood as a rite of passage, and thus a liminal experience. A central premise of these liminal beings is that they remain in the process of formation, a process completed in the ceremonial act of reincorporation at which point they are affirmed in their new state. Yet in the context of PM, lacking a defined moment of reincorporation or any metric of graduation beyond academic school year, there is the risk that these liminal beings, evangelical subjects premised on uncertainty and questioning, remain in this liminality as they are thrust into an environment that cannot accommodate this. This tension will be explored in the Conclusion.

Conclusion: The Incomplete Ritual

On a warm, muggy Friday night in June 2018, the young people and leaders from both Morning Meetup and PM gathered in the front hall of the old St Aidan's building to celebrate the end of the academic year. England had been knocked out of the FIFA World Cup only three days before, and the ominous clouds in the distance indicated the oncoming summer thunderstorm, but cries (and scribbles) of "It's coming home!" and umbrellas raised above the barbeques on the front lawn showed that the joyful spirits would not be quenched. Over the course of the evening, burgers and ice cream were feasted on, Jordan led the group in a chaotic pub quiz, young people drew over tables covered in parcel paper for the evening, games of UNO and sponge football in the main church space erupted spontaneously, and people danced to whatever played through the Spotify playlist that was accessible to all. The climax of the evening was an awards ceremony in which members of both groups – and even me – were awarded certificates in various bizarre categories that had been voted by their peers, before David clarified that "If you didn't receive an award then we love you still!". As the evening came to a close the younger members either drifted home or returned to playing sponge football, while older youth stuck around to help clear up as well as continuing to dance and chat with friends. While this celebration marked the end of the youth work year for all of the attendees, for Euan, Hannah, Christopher, Sophie, and Harriet, tonight also marked the end of their time in the St Aidan's youth setup. After the summer holidays, having turned 18 and left the secondary education system, they would no longer be able to attend PM. The following week, for the final Sunday of term, the group would not be meeting as usual but rather would be running a "Youth Takeover" service in the main church space during the adult meeting. This would not involve significant disruption to the ordinary structure for the adults, with instead young people taking on positions of responsibility in what was otherwise an ordinary service. The ordinariness, and its apparent importance, was prioritised in David's advertisement, particularly targeted to those in Year 13, about the service: "It's really good for you to experience a regular service because when you go to uni you won't get services like PM." The message was clear: whether they stayed at home, left for university, or travelled the world on a gap year, what had been would not be again and they would be required to change their usual church habits in a significant way – if they continued with church engagement at all.

The Hidden Rite of Passage

Throughout this thesis I have explored the nature of evangelical subjectivity during mid-to-late adolescence, both as it is experienced by the young people themselves and in the institutional structures and practices that are in place to foster or engage with this form of subjectivity. The ethnographic process, combining both participant observation and interviews, enabled novel insights into this balance between individual (and collective) experience and institutional processes, which intertwine in the ongoing formation of subjectivity. This is a form of evangelical subject that is both in formation *and* significant in its own right, not purely as a precursor to the 'adult' evangelical that may one day emerge. As mentioned in the Introduction, it is not enough to consider young people purely as the "future" of evangelicalism. At any moment, thousands of young people would consider themselves evangelical Christians, or at least a part of an evangelical Christian church, and in order to understand evangelicalism in the present it is necessary to understand it as a whole – including young people. Considering the young evangelical subject – as dynamic and temporary as it may appear – is crucial to understanding evangelicalism.

While I have intended to show that it is important to understand young evangelicals as more than beings of becoming, I have also argued that the structure of evangelical youth work is oriented in such a way as to attempt to bring about a lasting transformation in the lives of young people that leads them to a confident and lifelong evangelical faith. This, I have argued, takes the form of a series of practices over many years that, while apparently unintentional, largely mirror the structures of a rite of passage as outlined by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner in particular, albeit with the variety and inconsistency that can be expected with an ideal-type model applied cross-culturally. While formal rites of passage were in place at St Aidan's in the form of adult baptism and confirmation, and were celebrated in the moment, the perception of these rites both before and after the events indicated that they were not understood as in and of themselves the transformational processes necessary to bring about maturity of faith. As has been explored in other studies of evangelicalism[174] there existed in St Aidan's a wariness over ascribing too much significance to these rituals. Nevertheless, an experience of overwhelming transformation is not only desirable but necessary for the evangelical adult, regardless of whether this is a transformation from devoted atheist to believer or from child of a believer ('inherited' faith)

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[174] See Strhan (2019: 168) and Keane (2007: 216), for example.

to believer in one's own right ('individualised'). In order to facilitate this transformation, therefore, St Aidan's created a 'hidden' rite of passage in their youth work structures, and in particular, PM. As a result, this environment can be understood as one of transition and liminality, as outlined in Victor Turner's understanding of a rite of passage.

I have presented three clear elements that are substantial features of a rite of passage that were evident and significant in the practices of PM. These were neither peripheral nor rare in PM and were in fact core features at the heart of every session and were almost universally valued by the members themselves. These three intertwining elements are separation, communitas, and anti-structure (in particular in the form of pedagogical approaches).

Separation

Whether in (or rather, around the back of) the old building or on the third floor of the new, spatial separation from the main congregation was a constant feature of youth work at St Aidan's. This space was not only separated physically but in the manner of its internal decoration and intention, with informality, flexibility, and interaction central in a manner that clearly distinguished the space from the adult environment. Alongside this came a powerful sense of ownership over the space for the young people in the group – especially those who were more established and comfortable in the space. The result of this was an experience of PM space that was akin to a teenage bedroom: a space in which identities can be explored, experimented with, and gradually formed away from the prying eyes of the parental authority figures who, in order to retain the trust of their young, must also respect the sense of ownership over the designated space within the larger adult environment. While the spatial separation from the parental gaze is important, this was also understood as an important separate space from the wider world in which likeminded peers could gather in comfort and without threat of hostility.

Yet separation is not simply experienced spatially, and some level of separation in the form of 'distinction-with-engagement' from the wider non-evangelical world is an important feature of adult evangelicalism (Smith 1998: 218). While this is also a feature in the youth context – particularly in the encouragement to become 'Ambassadors for Christ' in their school environments – the liminal nature of youth evangelicalism also means that this distinction from their non-believing peers is not as sharp as anticipated among adults. In their group practices they actively engaged with mainstream cultural products, but more significant was their desire to be accepted by their peers while retaining their personal

behavioural practices. While these may be distinctive – for example not taking drugs – they did not wish to be known and identified by their peers by these characteristics. Thus spatial separation from *both* the adult evangelical environment and the wider adolescent world was evident, and as a result the group sat between these two cultures. Members were often reluctant to engage fully with the entirety of British teenage life as they experienced it, yet also unwilling to commit to the scale of separation that would be anticipated in the adult evangelical context. However within this liminal context, in which they were expected to be betwixt and between, not yet at the point of requiring to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to one camp or the other, this could become one facet of a wider process of adolescent identity negotiation in which elements were explored and experimented with, for the meantime unsettled.

Communitas

Two important features of this separation are firstly that this is a collective separation, and secondly that this is a separation decided along age lines – creating a communal context focused on a single peer group. This was further reinforced through the practices of PM. With the possible exception of collective sung worship, in which the group members were encouraged to focus on their own personal relationship with God, every element of the Sunday evening PM meetings – including the use of the space itself – served to foster a peer-focused experience of church. Relationships were central to PM, both from the perspectives of the church leadership and parents and of the young people themselves. These relationships, whether lifelong or newly formed, came together in the collective experiences of activities such as whole-group games, creating shared moments of joy reminiscent of the descriptions of communitas outlined by Edith Turner (2012) – something she sees as particularly powerful and prominent in periods of collective liminality. These young people were not simply engaged in a shared activity, but rather a wider shared journey of theological and spiritual exploration over the course of their time in the group, and thus the experience was heightened collectively. A feature of this collective journey in liminality, according to both Victor and Edith Turner, is an openness to creativity and exploration, an aspect which emerged in the final section of each night – the 'Biblical conversation'. Through this period of teaching and discussion the young people were able to learn from one another alongside the normative authoritative voice of David in constructing and discovering what it meant for them to be Christians in the modern world.

On a more fundamental level, however, it is clear that the opportunity to spend time with likeminded peers was a crucial element of the group for many, if not all, of the young people at PM. While some had Christian friends at school, it was not uncommon for those I spoke with to be the only Christian in their friendship group outside of St Aidan's, and while they were content to be friends with non-Christians the friends that they had at PM were invaluable in their developing faith life. As they had grown up, the significance of parents as influences on their faith had slowly given way to the significance of friends who were sharing their journey. Even beyond their known friends, the opportunity to spend time with any people *of their own age* who were also Christians, or exploring Christianity, was highly valued by many, with experiences such as those at New Wine cited as key moments not only due to spiritual experiences but also due to the simple opportunity to be alongside so many peers with whom they could relate. Communitas, in the form of specific moments of shared joy or the more sustained periods of shared exploration – whether at PM or a larger festival – is central to the liminal experience of faith in this environment. As I shall outline below, where this is not found within a church environment, young people (and young adults) can find serious challenges to their existing faith.

Anti-Structure

These group practices are not only notable for their peer-focus, however, but for their sharp distinction from ordinary, 'adult' evangelical practices. For Victor Turner, the liminal phase of a rite of passage was one in which structures were removed or subverted, both in the sense of usual practices but also in the breakdown of normal hierarchical social stratifications through communitas. While authority figures were undoubtedly present, the significance of peers noted above – alongside the opportunities for peer-based leadership – should not be underestimated in this regard. Yet more significant in the overhauling of usual adult evangelical structure was the introduction of pedagogical practices that emphasised the wisdom of the group alongside the normative voice of David or other adults. The significance here is not simply that these practices were different from those expected in adult evangelical environments – including at St Aidan's – but that they were particularly suited towards and indicative of a liminal environment. Questioning, discussion, and exploration of uncertainty were central at the expense of authoritative lecturing, with members of the group not only able to share their responses to questions posed by David with the group but also to challenge the normative voice through posing questions and offering alternative viewpoints that would never be heard in the adult context. Here we see the potential of dual elements of the intention from David and the St Aidan's leadership – of uncovering and

addressing “false” theology – and the experienced reality of the young people – of hearing from a range of views and challenging normative teaching, with the possibility of creating collective alternative theologies – competing in the PM environment. Yet while this potentiality exists, the reality was that the mutual trust and respect that existed between David and the young people, along with the expectation of the young people that they were attending the group in part to grow and learn, meant that this clash was rarely fully realised. Instead, the result of this subversion of usual evangelical pedagogical practices was a level of flattening of authority structures within the group, as well as providing opportunities for collective exploration of religious beliefs and practices.

While presented here as distinct, these elements are interrelated in the experience of PM for young people. For example, not only does the separation from the adult space enable the anti-structural, questioning practices, but the aversion to excessive separation from non-religious culture and peers also contributes towards the comfortable embracing of uncertainty. Likewise, the separation into a peer-centred group enables a greater likelihood of communitas, which in turn fosters an environment in which young people feel comfortable sharing their varied opinions and questions. The result of these three intertwined characteristics, each central to the theories of van Gennep and, in particular, Victor Turner, provide substantial evidence for understanding this youth work environment as a prolonged rite of passage. Thus, the environment was also a fundamentally *liminal* environment, in which the young people were understood to be collectively exploring and learning about evangelical religious subjectivity with the anticipation of eventual individual transformation and readiness for evangelical adulthood. Yet in the meantime, in this liminal space and period, the nature of adolescent evangelical subjectivity is significant and distinctive.

The Adolescent Evangelical Subject

The Liminal Subject

Formed and fostered in this environment, it is unsurprising that we can understand adolescent evangelical subjectivity through the lens of liminality – or in some cases of *multiple* liminalities. For those who have grown up in the church, the primary form this takes is of understanding oneself as on the threshold between childhood faith – seen as ‘inherited’ and to some extent unconsidered – and full adult, ‘individualised’ faith premised on a moment of intentional decision and, ideally, transformation through religious experience.

For others in PM who were new to Christianity the decision to commit not only to group attendance but to the associated beliefs and practices in their wider lives often involved a greater level of transformation than those who had been socialised in the faith, but was equally necessary for progression into adult evangelicalism. While some from both groups felt they had already made this decision, for others this was an ongoing process that remained in limbo. For the meantime, however, they appeared content in this liminal experience as they continued to explore the nature of religious commitment. Regardless of the extent to which they believed they had made this decision, the experience of faith in this liminal environment alongside those who remained in the process of settling in their faith identities, meant that the young people continued to see their faith as in the process of developing and maturing. While this was not always consistent or in the same direction, it was nevertheless in a constant state of fluidity. While reflecting on those moments in which they believed they had taken a backwards step may bring about some remorse, the sensation that they were in a period of ongoing 'incompleteness' did not, on the whole, bring about anxiety.

Interestingly, there was also limited anxiety when considering their position in relation to their wider cultural milieu, a relationship which I would again describe as liminal, caught between full adherence to cultural norms and the 'distinction-with-engagement' encouraged in the adult environment. While the opportunity to have more Christian friends would have been welcomed, evangelism (and particularly direct preaching the message of Christian scripture) was not a priority. Instead, the overwhelming desire was to be accepted and respected for their own decisions – including those that were driven directly by their faith, such as avoiding drugs – while simultaneously respecting those with different patterns of belief and practice. Through this approach they were able to navigate the liminal identity and develop valuable friendships with peers while retaining their personally determined distinctively Christian identity markers. These meaningful and authentic relationships – encouraged by David in the language of "ambassadors" – combined with a broadly appreciated attitude of indifference from non-Christian peers, appeared to have also lessened the moments of intellectual challenge (or at least lessened their significance). These were therefore reserved primarily for brief moments of incredulity during Religious Education lessons, at which point the resident Christian was called on by classmates to verify or defend the claims of the teacher or curriculum.

The Questioning Subject

However, this is not to diminish the significance of challenges from non-Christian peers, whether they be intellectual or behavioural – as I shall show below, these moments can be pivotal in the trajectory of a young evangelical's faith. At this point, however, these can also be understood in the context of another facet of adolescent evangelical subjectivity fostered in this environment – that of the questioner. As a part of the exploration of their faith identity, the young person is expected to challenge and seek to understand the beliefs and practices that they are being taught. The pedagogical approach of PM shares more similarities with the democratic pedagogies of Paulo Freire than the lecture-style teaching in the adult services, though David's rationale for utilising this action stems more from a missiological belief that this will be most effective for this group than a genuine desire to learn mutually as Freire would advise. Nevertheless, this approach encouraged PM members to consider and share their own responses to questions posed by David and one another, but also to question and interrogate the teaching itself. While it may have been the institutional desire that they ultimately absorbed the normative teachings, they were nevertheless encouraged to be active in their thinking and questioning. This questioning was not abstract, but rather deeply intertwined with how their religious self interacted with everyday life. Thus, many actively brought those questions that non-Christians had posed to them or posed their own that they struggled with.[175] From the perspective of the young people, good sessions were on topics that they considered 'relevant' to teenage life, whether that was practical issues such as partying or 'Big Questions' such as whether God (or the Bible) was sexist. These sessions, focusing on the topics with which the young people themselves continued to struggle, offered opportunities for resolutions to some questions, but also spaces for questioning and encouraged a culture of continued collective exploration and consideration. The opportunities to hear from and discuss with others and ask questions during the sessions were among the most consistently cited elements of the sessions appreciated by young people during members.

When aligned with an understanding of these young evangelicals as liminal subjects, this questioning nature further contributed to the experience of comfortable uncertainty and

[175] It is interesting to consider this in light of the relationship with (and partial separation from) non-Christian peers. The fact that they did not see this separation as severely as was encouraged in the adult environment perhaps increased the extent to which they saw these questions and doubts as valid and personally relatable.

exploration of belief and practice, without having to align themselves absolutely. As noted above, even for those who had settled on their post-liminal religious identity, this questioning nature nevertheless empowered them to continue with doubts, uncertainties, or provisional understandings as they continued in their exploration. For the majority of the young people in the group, therefore, questioning of some form appeared to be a significant feature of their religious subjectivity, as well as being one that was actively encouraged by the adult leadership during this process in order to create a deeper, more personal, and more authentic relationship with God.

The Communal Subject

Understanding intersubjectivity, and the role of inter-personal relationships on the formation of the subject, is invaluable in understanding the nature of young evangelical subjectivity in PM. The fact that the group encouraged socialising throughout the evening was far from incidental, but rather was at the heart of PM and the experience of individuals within. Despite the general insistence on individualised faith in evangelicalism, within this liminal space peer relationships and deeper friendships were inseparable from the experience of faith. The process of exploration through spiritual liminality was a collective one undertaken alongside peers, peers who may be at different stages of the journey but are nevertheless also venturing. Questions were asked and answered in the group, and the regular experiences of joy and bonding through play and conversation were experienced together. A sense of belonging was crucial to members of PM – though I cannot present a utopian vision in which all experienced this– as this was not a solipsistic experience but a collective one. Yet coming together as a group on a Sunday evening was not simply a matter of having fun and catching up with friends, but rather the whole process of forming understandings of theology, practice, and personal faith identity was undertaken collaboratively through experiences that went beyond belonging and into communitas. Thus, their understanding and experience of faith was deeply intertwined not only with charismatic evangelicalism or even St Aidan’s, but also with the particular group of peers with whom they collectively formed this understanding. At very least, this is a model of church that is fundamentally centred around a collectively constructed experience, in which all – leaders and congregants – are involved.

While it may be possible to slip into the back of a cathedral during a service, participate, and leave without interacting with another congregant, the nature of PM meant that it was impossible to engage fully in the sessions without doing so in some way collectively. It was

also evident from both observation and interviews that this connection with peers was highly desired by the members of PM, appreciating not only the opportunities to share these experiences with known friends but simply knowing they as teenage Christians were part of a bigger whole in contexts such as New Wine. While this is not to say that some of these young people did not also engage in personal spiritual practices, these were far from universal and always sat alongside a deep appreciation of the value of spiritual community. Thus the young evangelical subject in this context is one that is deeply communal, formed and experienced alongside peers in a manner unparalleled in most adult evangelical environments.

Placing Adolescent Evangelicals in the Sociology of Evangelicalism

Both Future and Present

The primary addition of this research to the existing body of literature is to offer an ethnographic insight into the practices of evangelical youth groups and the nature of religious subjectivity that is formed and fostered within them. While the research was based with a single site, my previous experience with evangelical youth groups indicates that this was not an exceptional case. In addition to the material explored in the Introduction showing the ubiquity of these practices across British Christian youth work, I also sent a pseudonymised summary of the typical practices and priorities of PM to a figure involved in youth work for the Diocese of London, asking whether it was representative of a typical youth group in the Diocese. The response was clear – "for better or worse… this is what youth groups still look like where they still exist". What is notable here is not only the confirmation that what is present in PM can also be seen at other youth groups, but also that this is 'what youth groups *still* look like', indicating that this is not a new phenomenon – within evangelical Anglicanism at least. Without attempting to infer too much from his wording, the phrase "for better or worse" may also point towards ongoing debates in particular surrounding the separation of church communities into age-oriented groups. Recent advocates for 'intergenerational' worship (such as Holly Catterton Allen (2018)) argue that segregating congregations along age-lines must be replaced by multi-generational contexts – yet this remains a minority practice in contrast to the structures seen at St Aidan's. While further research exploring the lived realities of religious youth groups more broadly would be valuable, understanding St Aidan's as largely representative of the typical Anglican

evangelical youth group (albeit larger than average) strengthens the place of this research alongside other ethnographic studies of evangelicalism.

Alongside Strhan's recent work into the nature of childhood within three London evangelical congregations (2019), a wider and more complete picture of evangelical subjectivity is increasingly developing. It is important to stress that these studies of childhood and youth should not be understood purely as offering background to the primary focus of adult evangelicalism. Rather, these are individuals and groups exploring and living out their evangelical faith presently, impacting both on their wider surroundings but also on the wider evangelical church as it is currently – depending on the extent to which the church is receptive to the voices of these children and young people. As with evangelical adults, these young people are also constantly negotiating aspects of faith identity in their everyday life, all the while determining whether or not they wish to commit to that identity in the longer term, and what it would mean in their own lives if they were to. We can see this in their approaches to relationships between the evangelical self and the non-evangelical other, an element that recurs throughout ethnographic studies of evangelicalism. The approach – influenced by their experience of liminality and centred on a desire for quiet acceptance, enabling difference premised on individual religious decisions without seeking the level of attention for this difference that is prized in adult evangelical adults – offers an important additional insight into the nature of evangelical engagement with the world.

Alongside this, the fact that evangelicalism places such a high importance on the role of youth work, as identified in the Introduction, indicates that within this we shall see some of the broader priorities of evangelicalism more generally, beyond simply a concern for socialisation of their youth. Nevertheless, if we are to consider these personal attitudes and collective practices, or variations thereof, as being in place for a number of years then the findings offered in this research can also offer an insight into the formational practices that influenced both adult leaders and lay-people in the contemporary British evangelical movement as they grew up in the church. Looking forward, we can also learn more about the possible future of the adult evangelical church as those who lie at the centre of this study grow up over the following decades.

Not what, but how

This thesis has not dedicated extensive attention on the particular theological content of the young people at the centre of the study, nor of the particularities of David's theology. This is

in part due to the very factors that I have outlined as central to the nature of evangelical subjectivity at this stage. The emphasis on ongoing formation of beliefs and practices through exploration and questioning means that determining concrete specifics of individual cognitive beliefs is not only difficult but counters the very nature of these young people's religious subjectivity. Many religious adherents will continue to wrestle with particular theological specifics as they go through their lives, but the openness to spiritual exploration – and in particular the extent to which this is institutionally allowed and even encouraged – is likely to lead to an additional layer of fluidity than may be evident at other life stages.

Beyond this, however, shifting focus away from theological content also stemmed from a desire to see beyond the cognitive in the formation of evangelical subjectivity. In the Introduction I quoted David Morgan (2010: 6) in his call for scholars to ask not only '*[w]hat* [people] teach their children' with regards to religiosity, but also '*how, when,* and *where* do people teach their children *what* they teach them' (emphasis original). This research therefore contributes towards a wider understanding of religious socialisation that goes beyond the content of either teaching or of individual beliefs and towards a focus on the broader institutional practices that are in place, and the relationship between these practices and individual approaches to religiosity. A second important element to my approach, also in line with Morgan's perspectives, was to see belief as going beyond individual cognitive assent and rather as something collective. For Morgan (2010: 7), belief is a 'shared imaginary, a communal set of practices that structure life'. I have shown the particular significance of the collective experience for the young people, and this communal exploration of religious subjectivity – both in embodied ways through play and in more cognitive forms through the discussion period – offers a means by which this imaginary and these practices can be progressively formed together as peers, alongside the influence of normative institutional voices.

Looking Forward – Understanding Strengths and Struggles

Understanding evangelical subjectivity as fundamentally one of liminality, drawn through a process functioning as a hidden rite of passage into evangelical adulthood, can help us to understand some of the complexities that have emerged in other studies of evangelicalism – and *post*-evangelicalism – in the British context. Prior to exploring the experiences (and struggles) of former members of PM, it is worth considering what may be the benefits to a 'successful' passage through this ritual from an institutional perspective.

In a ‘conventional’ rite of passage scenario, the liminal status would be understood as a temporary state in which identities and statuses can be deconstructed and reconstructed away from normal societal structures before being reintegrated back into these structures in their new state. In the context of evangelicalism this can be understood most straightforwardly in terms of conversion, with the mature religious believer being one who has made an active and permanent decision to follow the beliefs and practices of Christianity (built on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ), and has correspondingly ridded themselves of any false beliefs or sinful practices that were present prior to conversion. Thus, they are ‘born again’, with the pre-conversion self abandoned forever. Within a youth work context, in which many members are expected to have grown up in the church, this can be understood as a shift from ‘Inherited’ to ‘Individualised’ faith.

This progression is the evident desire of institutions for those who go through the youth group. This is the ultimate purpose and desire of the rite of passage: the formation of a believer who has their own personal faith, strong against the challenges of doubt and temptation, able to live a life that is markedly different from the non-Christians around them, and comfortable in the more hierarchical authority structures of the main church. If this is a success, they are able to integrate into a community in which their confidence and coherence of individualised faith is reinforced through structures and practices designed to emphasise both the shared convictions of the community and their distinctions against outgroups. It was necessary for believers to go through the anti-structure of adolescence in order to reach the renewed settled identity of evangelical adulthood. Thus we begin to see how this understanding of the youth group context as a desired rite of passage for believers grants insights into the nature of *successful* adult evangelicalism as uncovered in previous studies.

However, building adult practices around the assumption that young people have reached this end point – despite having no marker of this other than leaving secondary education – may represent a barrier for retaining young people in the church as they move into early adulthood. The reality is, therefore, that many young people appear to remain in a state of prolonged liminality upon leaving PM. In identifying adolescent evangelical subjectivity as liminal, built around friendships, collective exploration, and peaceful uncertainty, and taking place in an environment that enables (and even encourages) each of these elements through distinctive spaces and practices, we are led to ask what happens if this state is not ‘overcome’ at the completion of secondary education. The result of this would be individuals entering into contexts with vastly different worship priorities – including in their use of space and in

the centralisation of a singular voice in the sermon, with limited or no opportunities for meaningful challenges or discussion with peers, alongside an absence or marginalising of significant social features that bonded the group in PM. The lack of opportunities for questions is not experienced only as a change in service structure, however, but as an indication that the time for uncertainty and decision making is over – it is now the time to 'fall in line' and share in the certainty of belief and identity of the church in question. Through exploring the lived experiences of some of those who previously attended PM we can get a glimpse of how this transpires in young evangelicals who have lived through this rite of passage and progressed to the other side.

The `Ideal Graduate', Lingering Liminality, and University Uncertainty

I opened this thesis by outlining what David envisaged for the young people leaving PM after Year 13. For David and St Aidan's, the fact that following secondary education the young people would no longer be involved in the church – at least during term time – was essentially an inevitability, with the vast majority expected to go away to university. As we consider the expectations of the leadership and the experiences of those PM members who have gone on it is valuable to revisit this quote as David expresses his perception of the "ideal graduate" from PM:

> I think the idea of what the ideal graduate from our youth ministry looks like. It would be somebody who is very, has established Christianity as their own; is mature in their faith to the point that we've walked a path with them; they understand what faith looks like in practicality within their lives; they're prepared for what lies ahead and in university; and they will engage by, there won't be kind of like this follow-up of, the church like just sit around the church will come to you, but Christianity and their desire to know it and worship God is so ingrained in their identity that they will seek out a church, and they will try a number of churches until they find one that they can feel at home in, that that community that we've established is so pivotal to how they kind of function and how they identify themselves – they are Christian that's who they are, they're children of God, it's not a part of what they do it is who they are – I think that would be the ideal situation and we've seen quite a bit of that.

We can see clear parallels here with representations of idealised individualised evangelicalism portrayed elsewhere. Within this description is a desire for a faith identity that 'lodges in the bone, in its very marrow', in the words of Ronald Grimes (2000: 7), inspiring a confident and pro-active faith that can be seen in every aspect of their lives. Yet despite this desire for wholesale transformation of the believer following the liminal experiences of PM, the external forces of education meant that leaving was not dictated by the individual's spiritual readiness to progress to life beyond PM. Be it as a result of this, a broader Protestant scepticism of ritual, or personal choice on David's behalf, the lack of any significant rite of reintegration into the community is the singular glaring omission in seeking to understand this process as a rite of passage. This is not to say, however, that approaching groups such as PM through the lens of rites of passage is misguided. Rather, it is to understand this as a rite that remains in some sense incomplete. As a result of this incompletion, it appears that many young people leave the group while still in a liminal state.

From the interviews with former members, a number of themes emerged that resonated with accounts of those currently involved. Two deeply intertwined aspects were the continuing presence of uncertainty and the significant influence of friends in the sustaining and development of individual faith. Nearly all of the participants interviewed had encountered some period of crisis of faith while at university. These took different forms, but the presence or absence of Christian friends appeared to be pivotal in the likelihood of the individual retaining their Christian identities. It would be over-simplistic to claim that deeply personal and highly consequential shifts of belief and practice are determined purely by the friends one makes, but it nevertheless appears to be the case that close friends remain central influences in the faith lives of young adults as they were in adolescence. For Joshua, for example, it was not until he made two new Christian friends in his second year and – crucially – moved in with an old school friend who was also a Christian that he felt motivated to return to church and discuss his faith with them, following an initial evangelistic impulse that had rapidly waned when faced with indifference from non-Christian friends. For Helen, faith at university was "a lot harder" than it had been as a teenager because "no one around [her] was trying to live for God". Without the community of PM – an aspect that she emphasised as central to her adolescent experience – she struggled spiritually: "It just felt spiritual dark if I'm honest and I felt distant from God, I missed having people to pray and talk to about faith all the time". Again, finding a group of Christian friends with whom she could attend church and talk to was crucial. While Helen and Joshua eventually retained their adolescent faith identity in part due to developing Christian friendships, for Oscar the

situation was different. Speaking to me at the beginning of his second year, he recalled how his faith had changed since starting at university to the extent that he no longer considered himself a Christian. Once again, peers proved to be central in this process. The sense of insincerity he felt in his interactions with institutional church and Christian students contrasted with the more 'authentic' friendships he had with non-Christians, and this combined with questions and challenges both of his own origin and coming from significant respected others over the course of the year led to the decline of his faith to the point of non-belief.

According to research undertaken by Mathew Guest *et al* (2013) into the Christian experience at a number of different English universities, the continuing impact of friends on religiosity is to be expected. As with my interviews, their research found that while there was overall a great deal of consistency in faith affiliation (Guest *et al.* 2013: 88), many students had encountered difficulty in their faith during university for a range of reasons that extended beyond academic study and included 'social activities, friendship networks, housing arrangements, employment and extra-curricular experiences' (Guest *et al.* 2013: 113). Overwhelmingly, however, they found that it was 'the challenges of fitting in and of navigating their way through different student social groups that affect [Christian students] most', and as a result 'the impact of the university experience was less challenging for students who sought out Christian community and friendship' (Guest *et al.* 2013: 114, 134). While intentionally seeking out these relationships is important, however, this is not to say that they were necessarily forthcoming for the former PM members I spoke with when they went looking for these communities.

Desiring Continuity and Authentic Community

A primary reason for David's particular concern that this transformation into individualised faith was completed by the point they left PM was his belief that the experience of PM was not easily replicated in the adult church:

> *David*
>
> We are very aware that one of the biggest downfalls of the current structure is that they are never fully integrated into the main church body, and that is a problem because if this is what they identify as church they're never going to find this again, because this doesn't exist in a young adult sphere, because it can't… it just… it can't exist

> *Rob*
>
> Why do you think it can't exist?
>
> *David*
>
> Oh well I guess maybe if you've got a church completely designated to students, but even then, that idea of them all being in a very very common, kind of environment that's gone. […] It's hard to put your finger on it but like I don't think that a ministry structured the way that we do it can exist because there's also, they've gone to that point where they're independent of their parents. They won't want something like this in that, in that space that they're at because they're trying something new, they're excited to try something new.

It is interesting here to note three aspects. Firstly, David's response appeared less confident than many of his other reflections about his work, perhaps suggesting that he struggled to even envisage the idea of an adult church replicating the experience of PM. These practices are so associated with the liminal adolescent context that to imagine them being utilised in an adult environment is alien. Secondly, however, it is worth noting an element I will explore in greater depth below – the fact that these practices and priorities are (to an extent) mirrored in certain models of adult evangelicalism, and in particular the emerging church. Despite this, the third aspect is the fact that these expressions of church are not easily found by young adult evangelicals struggling with prolonged liminality.

While Strhan's 2015 study gives an insight into the wrestling with desired coherence among those who have chosen to stay within evangelicalism, Alan Jamieson's (2002) work focuses on the experiences of adults who decided to leave evangelical churches while largely retaining their personal faith. Significantly, recurring features that emerge throughout his interviews centre around issues that may not arise were their adult environments more similar to PM. In particular, opportunities to challenge normative teaching and be flexible in personal belief were rare, a situation that proved to be too restrictive for many individuals. Stuart, for example, 'perceived a lack of space within the church for the kinds of questions that educated or intellectual people might bring' in the church that he had helped to lead (Jamieson 2002: 4), while Jane found that leaders were attempting to cease her questioning to the extent of placing her in front of the church hierarchy to challenge her non-compliance: "The purpose [of these meetings], I think, was to try and get me to comply and come over to

their way of thinking, and be one of them" (Jamieson 2002: 29). For others, such as Michelle, issues lay in the struggle to create authentic and deep personal relationships with those in the church, even when she moved into a leadership position: "I found that even then, when I was fairly important within the church, I was still fairly unlistened to. Listened to but not heard" (Jamieson 2002: 4). The elements that lay at the heart of adolescent evangelical subjectivity, of the importance of questioning and peer belonging, evidently remain significant for many adult evangelicals, yet they find themselves in church environments that are unaccommodating to these desires.

During my fieldwork I was able to lead a session with the young people asking them to consider their idealised images of church. While some took this in a more fantastical direction – including one that would be located in an 'underground nuclear bunker with [a] swimming pool' – overwhelmingly the descriptions incorporated features that were already central to their PM experience. Games, informality, discussions on relatable spiritual topics, an accepting and welcoming atmosphere in a comfortable space, and opportunities for socialising and joy were recurrent themes emerging from the groups. For these young people, this is what 'church' both is and could be. In the interviews I followed up on how they envisaged church in their future, and often this desire for continuity returned. When I asked Samantha this question it was clear that she had considered this in depth:

> I think that every service in an adult church should have a game to start with, not like a little kids game, just a game that gets everyone a bit out of their comfort zone so they can like mix with other people because when you're in an adult church you sort of stick with the same people all the time, so if you play a game to like get people to know others and stuff, and then after you've done that that would just like wake everyone up, and then you can have like the worship and then you can have like a talk but like with people engaging with you, like instead of just speaking at people like here it's more of a discussion but in churches it's more of just 'boom' instead of like, and nothing back.

For Elena, a Year 12 student approaching her final year in the group, the desire was overwhelmingly for continuity wherever possible:

Rob

When you can't come here anymore, what kind of church, or Christian environment I guess, would you want to be a part of?

Elena

Anything like this. I really really really like this

Rob

In terms of…

Elena

Openness and everyone's so cool, and yeah everyone's really cool and we're all like the same type of age group and yeah, I really love everyone to be honest, it's just kind of like a family environment. It's a community. And they let us sing Stormzy

In talking with former members, it was this sense of authentic community reminiscent of PM that was most prized in a university church setting, though this appeared to be difficult to come by. Various participants described attending multiple churches before settling (if they settled at all), and alongside this many mentioned difficult experiences with their university's Christian Unions.[176] In both church and Christian Union contexts the primary difficulty revolved around the struggles to relate to the people they encountered in these spaces. For Bradley, the students he met in Christian Union were so overwhelmingly, singularly, and unquestioningly committed to their faith that they came across as in some way disingenuous.[177] Their eagerness and lack of observable identity-depth beyond their faith was disarming, which stood in contrast to the Christians he had encountered at PM who were "very down to earth people, like when you talk to them about their issues and stuff like that there's something that makes you feel fundamentally kind of human, something that

[176] Jacob was a notable exception to this.

[177] It may be that in this case we see a coming together of students who had been raised with very different adolescent church and youth group experiences, and thus had developed very distinct Christian subjectivities. However, the lack of comparative studies to the present research means that it is not possible to state how, for example, the adolescent conservative and charismatic evangelical experience might differ and the impact this may then have on university students.

makes you feel like that's just a real thing." His experience of student Christians was so drastic that it challenged his own faith in God and "really started to shake [him] to the core". This came alongside a realisation that the level of openness and vulnerability in community that he experienced at PM would not be possible in the church he had been attending early in his first year. Ultimately, Bradley's experience with Christian students contributed to him to finding a church that had "pretty much no students". While he was primarily attracted to other aspects of the church, he told me that "the fact that there were no students there was just an added bonus. Like I was very very happy to have no students because they freaked me out".

Joshua also recalled taking a dislike to the people he met in his Christian Union[178], again contrasting this with the Christian friends that he had made in his time at St Aidan's. Like Bradley, he drifted away from the first church he had found at university as he felt that he did not belong or know people there who really cared for him.[179] While both Joshua and Bradley were eventually able to find both Christian friends and church environments in which to settle, for Oscar the experience of Christians at university was unsettling enough as to be a primary factor in his movement away from the faith altogether. After a gap year abroad in which he had been an active member of a church, he decided to join a church in his university city from the same network. While stylistically familiar, he found that the people he encountered at the church appeared troublingly disingenuous:

> The issue there was the people were very… corporate. Like it's like they'd all been to a course of how to talk to new people, and any discussion with them they had three reactions […] and that really just made me think 'what is going on here?' Like it made, it made it seem more like a cult than a, than what St Aidan's had always been to me.

After leaving this first church, he attempted to find another ("I was trying to find something like St Aidan's") but still struggled to fit in. "I don't want to sound rude", he told me over Skype, "[but] it seemed more like a place where people who didn't have other friends came

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[178] "I *hated* CU, I went like, I went in a little bit and I fell out with a few people and I was just like 'well I'm not coming back here'".

[179] It is interesting to note that Joshua also felt a struggle when returning to St Aidan's over the university vacations due to the fact that many of the friends he had made during PM no longer came, unlike his older brother's friends. While he had grown up in the church environment, without his own group of friends he lacked a sense of belonging in the adult St Aidan's context.

to find friends and there […] wasn't really anyone I connected with". In contrast, his relationships with his (non-Christian) flatmates and girlfriend felt deep and authentic. With these figures as his primary discursive partners he began to question the authenticity of the institutional church – even reflecting back on his own role in St Aidan's – and eventually onto the "fundamentals of faith and how I don't, I no longer believe that… I think faith comes more from the human need to accept something higher". Reflecting on the interviews, it is notable that particular theologies, social values, or worship styles of churches or Christian Unions were not mentioned as primary issues of concern for the students I spoke with. Of course, there are interrelated factors – for example, the confidence to openly express one's views on issues may be influenced by the extent to which these views are generally perceived as orthodox or controversial – yet these were phrased in relational and cultural, rather than necessarily wider institutional, terms. The conservative evangelical theology of many Christian Unions (as outlined by Guest *et al* (2013: 147-9)) doubtless clashed with what many may have become accustomed to at PM, which was itself more liberal than St Aidan's as a whole. Yet this was not how my respondents expressed their difficulties. Instead, the struggles were reflective of their adolescent evangelical subjectivity: peer focused and desiring collective exploration.

Authenticity in these accounts comes through as central, and something that was often seen as lacking in their Christian peers – in contrast to their experience at PM. The openness to question and interrogate one's faith beyond the superficial was important – Bradley said that it was this element that "separates the mature Christians from the immature Christians", even among adults – but beyond this was the desire to form genuine *friendships* with people to whom they could relate and continue to explore faith alongside. We see that the forms of Christians identified in Amy Wilkins' (2008) ethnographic study of 'Unity Christians' can be experienced as not only disconcerting but actively troubling to the faith of some university Christians. This is despite the fact that, in many senses, Wilkins' (2008: 92) students appear to be examples of 'successful' progression through the rite of passage. Yet the cultural strategies she describes, of opting out of the social categories of "coolness" and actively embracing activities that are more associated with conservative adulthood,[180] appear to be

[180] Wilkins (2008: 115) argues that, as a result of being '[u]nsuccessful at coolness, Unity participants opt out. Instead, they invest in the "geeky," "boring" characteristics associated with goody-goodies, transforming them into sources of validation and distinction'. This bears striking resemblance to Oscar's perception, mentioned above, that church was a place for the friendless to find friends.

off-putting for Christians such as my participants. Understanding these Christians as remaining in a place of ongoing liminality, reluctant to commit to the same level of both certainty and cultural distinction that is required by members of a group such as Unity Christians, gives a framework for understanding this fractious relationship. Fundamentally, the significance of authentic peer-focused relationships and openness to exploration remained crucial for these young people long after they left the PM rite of passage.

Adolescent and Post-Adolescent Evangelicalism

Having considered the cases that emerged directly from St Aidan's, it is worth thinking more widely about the relationship between adolescent and post-adolescent evangelicalism before determining areas for future research.

Firstly, as was the case with the students I spoke with, those who arrive at university from an evangelical church are highly likely to remain engaged in Christianity in some form during their studies. The evidence of Guest *et al* (2013: 95) suggests that, beyond all other expressions of Christianity, 'Evangelical churches… are most successful at *retaining* (although not necessarily *recruiting*) active members within the university context' (emphasis original). This appears to be not only due to the vocal nature of highly resourced evangelical groups in the university environment[181] but also due to the work that evangelical churches have done with young people prior to reaching university. In their research, Guest *et al* (2013: 95) found that 'over 70% of students who attended an Evangelical/Pentecostal church fall into the *active affirmers* category, making it by far the most likely denominational grouping to produce students who continue in their committed churchgoing after they reach university'. If the practices of PM among adolescents are common across British evangelical churches, then they appear to be 'successful' with regards to encouraging sustained church engagement into the university context.

This is not to say, however, that the liminal subjectivity in adolescence is entirely overcome. As Ruth Perrin (2016) found in her study of young adult evangelicals and their relationship with the Bible, one of the factors that distinguished the younger groups from the older was their propensity to question further and desire deeper answers. She states that 'the most significant age-related pattern was that the oldest groups typically asked fewer theological

[181] For example, the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) who oversee the majority of university Christian Unions.

questions than other cohorts did; their questions predominantly focussed on cultural or historical context. By contrast, the youngest cohort asked more theological questions and appeared least equipped to answer them' (Perrin 2016: 228). Perrin (2016: 230) argues that 'the process of forming a coherent theological framework is not complete in many ordinary evangelicals by their mid-twenties but that development is ongoing', and that while the 'ability to critique theological ideas seems to be more advanced than in the late teens', the uncertainty that was a feature of my research 'appears to persist'.[182]

One aspect that emerges from both Perrin's work and that of Guest *et al* is the expectation that this period of young adulthood continues to be one of flux and formation. Perrin (2016: 10) cites the work of Jeffrey Arnett (2004) in arguing that the developmental process which used to be undertaken during adolescence has now extended through to the mid-twenties at the very least. Perrin (2016: 226) argues that her research indicates that this includes the prolonged development of 'the formation of coherent theological frameworks and consequent worldviews'. It is interesting to note that James, the young adult pastor at St Aidan's, referenced this theory during our interview discussing his role and its relationship with youth work structures, telling me that

> the formational developmental age for becoming an adult used to be 17 to 21 and now it's like 19 to 30… there's this extended developmental period which is kind of a blurred line between youth and adulthood but the people in that category aren't really aware that they are in that developmental period, a lot of them don't see themselves as requiring input to help them shape their faith.

Similarly, Guest *et al* (2013: 118) found that the university experience was understood by many Christians as one of continuing exploration and negotiation in the area of faith identities, seen by some as the key moment of decision making.[183] Thus the period of

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[182] The work of Philip Salim Francis (2018), highlighted in Chapter 5, also shows the continuation (or origination) of this uncertainty into evangelical young adulthood.

[183] For example, Oliver, a final year student at Durham, 'remarked on university as a key transitional experience "I think there is a large group of people that come from home, were brought up in a Christian home but then university defines a point when… it is make or break… now [your faith] is your choice"' (Guest *et al* 2013: 133).

liminality and exploration, opened in the rite of passage of evangelical youth work yet never firmly concluded in this environment, may continue into university and beyond.

Adult Ecclesiastical Comparisons – PM and the Emerging Church Movement

In considering the continuing state of liminality in which graduates of PM-type environments exist, we are finally pushed to consider whether these individuals might find similar practices to those in PM in any adult evangelical context. In contrasting the practices of PM with those of the adult environment at St Aidan's I believe I have presented not only a reasonably representative evangelical youth group but also a common adult charismatic evangelical environment, albeit both larger in number than average in Anglican churches. Yet the differences between the two contexts – separated only by two walls, or two storeys – were persistent and stark. As I outlined above, however, the young people in PM longed for a comparable experience when they reached adulthood. Is there anywhere this could be found?

While these youth groups are accepted comfortably within mainstream evangelical movements and denominations, we have to look towards the intentionally subversive fringes of evangelicalism in order to find an answer. The closest comparison, I believe, is in the varied practices of the 'emerging church'. The studies by James Bielo (2011) and Marti and Ganiel (2014) offer an insight into this disparate movement, and while youth work practices are not cited amongst the influences behind the movement, I believe that similarities are clear in a range of areas. Firstly, we see an emphasis placed on informal spaces that foster relationships and intentionally differ from the conventional features associated with Christian worship space such as 'pews, altars, or elevated pulpits' (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 128). Instead, they are more likely to be found in pubs or coffee shops, or alternative spaces that have been intentionally decorated to emphasise their theological and ecclesiastical priorities. Secondly, and again incorporated into the use of space, is the emphasis on developing a strong sense of community in the individual groups and congregations, bonded through a shared vulnerability and sense of exploration. This exploration is most visible in the third shared emphasis, that of discussion and open conversation. One respondent told Marti and Ganiel (2014: 13) that through an emerging group in a pub, they realised that "many of our friends, as well as friends of friends, needed a safe space to ask questions that have no good answers, to deconstruct their past experiences of church, and to voice the fragility of whatever faith they did have" – something that was enabled through their pub meetings. This also aligned with not only an acceptance of doubt and uncertainty, but an

active suspicion of and even hostility towards the level of theological certainty and rigidity that they perceive in the most common forms of evangelicalism (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 99). Many groups also incorporate discussion actively into their periods of teaching in the form of 'Communitarian preaching', a conversational approach in which '[e]veryone is given an opportunity to share their thoughts without the obligation to do so' (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 114). Sharing similarities with the pedagogy explored in Chapter 5, this approach 'more closely reflects certain approaches to adult education, where the "teacher" is seen as a facilitator of conversation rather than an expert on high' (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 114).

The fourth shared aspect, intertwined with the elements mentioned above, is the openness to and active adoption of alternative approaches to worship. Again, this was seen as an intentional 'escape from churchy atmospherics' as well as an opportunity to express spirituality in a variety of culturally relevant forms, incorporating – for example – art, poetry, and spoken word performances (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 13). Along with a focus on the arts, we also see activities that seem even closer to those normalised in the PM environment in that they 'foster games and nonformal interaction. Playfulness and participation are highly esteemed' (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 29). Where play is absent, alcohol may also be used for the purposes of social bonding that David identified as lying behind the weekly game – 'beer loosens the tongue in an effort to promote conversation about matters of life and faith', argue Marti and Ganiel (2014: 13). Through this brief overview of emerging church practices, we can see immediate similarities with the normal experience of PM, and thus a potential avenue for those leaving the group seeking a similar experience. Yet in considering the emerging church we are faced with the result of seeing these practices as rites of passage, of a particular liminal and separated environment, of anti-structure that is specifically *not* the usual mode. When elements that are commonplace in Anglican youth groups across the country are suggested in a context for adults, they are viewed as radical, transgressive, underground, and intentionally subversive. That which is suitable for the liminal is threatening in the mainstream.

Implications and Future Research: Within Evangelicalism and Beyond

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, in this thesis I have proposed a distinctive understanding of young evangelical subjectivity that can be understood alongside – but crucially distinct from – previous studies of adult evangelicalism. In approaching these young people as religious agents and subjects in their own right, this thesis has added a new lens to the sociology of evangelicalism in an area which is viewed as internally significant but has

previously been ethnographically overlooked. Yet this research does not only offer additional insight into young evangelicals but should also challenge future studies of evangelicalism to consider in greater depth the nature of 'adulthood' in evangelicalism. Deborah Durham (2017: 6-7) points to adulthood as 'the "unmarked normal" against which deviations are marked out', a category that is rarely considered in its own right and as a result has ended up 'articulated in anthropology primarily in youth studies', or alternatively in studies of 'emerging' adulthood. This has been evident in previous studies of evangelicalism which have focused solely on the adult sphere, engaging with adulthood unreflexively as the default and most important category of evangelicalism. Through this analysis of what it means to be a 'young' evangelical, future research must also intentionally consider what it means to be an 'adult' evangelical. This thesis has further pushed for the necessity of this approach by proposing that in these youth group contexts we see a desire to transform 'young' evangelicals *into* 'adult' evangelicals. As we have seen in this chapter, this is a process that is often left incomplete, leading to struggles as believers are unable to fully perform their adult evangelical role. Thus, understanding adulthood within evangelicalism as a distinctive and particular identity – and not simply as a default mode – may go some way to understanding the nature of evangelical subjectivity when this identity cannot be met. As noted in the Introduction, previous studies have frequently understood these struggles in terms of evangelicalism's relationship with modernity, but again this approach is shifted if understood through the lens of youth and adult evangelicalism. As I have shown through this thesis, however, variants in this relationship also need to be considered not only with regards to theological contexts but also in terms of 'age' understanding, taking account of the individual experience that may not align with the categories of youth or adult according to biological age and associated markers. Through seeking to understand the nature of evangelical adulthood beyond basic over/under-18 boundaries, these findings on adolescent evangelicalism may also speak more fully to the wider evangelical experience. In order to expand this understanding into more diverse areas, however, further research is needed.

While St Aidan's does not appear to be exceptional in its charismatic evangelical practices, either in their youth or adult contexts, it is inescapably distinctive. Significantly, it is larger than average, overwhelmingly middle class – as exhibited through the expectation of (predominantly Russell Group) university education – and, due to its London location, more ethnically diverse than the majority of British evangelical churches. As a result, further research would be valuable in order to expand the insights into contemporary evangelical youth work practices and young evangelical subjectivity. This would include ethnographic

studies in different evangelical contexts to better understand the distinctiveness of my fieldwork. How would the experience differ, for example, in conservative evangelical environments, or in evangelical churches that are not Anglican? It is also tempting to suspect that the emphasis on intellectual discussion is a preserve of the educated middle class congregations, and so understanding how this may differ in churches located in different socio-economic contexts may give a valuable insight into how the rite of passage may be experienced differently and which elements may be emphasised across different contexts.

The disruption experienced by PM graduates upon entering university, as explored in this chapter, appeared to be driven in part by a lack of easily accessible comparable worship experiences to that of PM and in part by a struggle to find authentic relationships with other Christians that mirror those formed during adolescence. While there are multiple factors at play, one possible cause of this may be significant differences in the forms of subjectivity encouraged during adolescence in different evangelical contexts. Alternatively, it may be that the young people at the heart of my study are representative of a wider generational shift for which the adult and student evangelical environments are unprepared. The conservative and certainty-focused[184] model of UCCF and other evangelical contexts is potentially not catering for those young people who may be not only more theologically and socially liberal than is normative in these structures but also continuing to consider and explore their faith beyond the traditional endpoints of adolescence. This thesis has provided considerable new contributions to understanding evangelical adolescence, and in this Conclusion has proposed some tentative considerations on the impact this may have as young people leave the youth group environment and enter into university, but further research into student evangelicalism – considering the lingering impact of this ongoing liminality and incomplete ritual – would be valuable. Research across different contexts, in particular those which do not have a culture of leaving for university at 18, would also give an invaluable insight into how this functions in an environment in which the young people are *not* expected to leave the church once they reach the age of 18. With young people no longer being sent off into the unknown of numerous university contexts, it may be that the

[184] While Christian Unions regularly orient their activities around big theological questions and those who are sceptical or inquisitive (Guest *et al* 2013: 147-8), this is undertaken within a binary framework of pre- and post-conversion. As with the model of Alpha, while uncertainty and questioning are acceptable and natural for those who are yet to consider themselves Christians, those who already see themselves as 'insiders' are desired to have the confidence and certainty to be *answering*, rather than asking, those questions.

period of collective liminality extends into the next period of life within the same church, potentially even with intentional structures in place to manage this. Alternatively, a study that intentionally followed a cohort of young people leaving a youth group through their university experience, studying how those with a shared adolescent journey navigate the post-adolescent process, would offer a deeper insight into how young people continue from the youth work process.

I do not here seek to provide any guidance or recommendations directly for the church or youth work practitioners, nor did I intend any value judgement over the practices and experiences I encountered at St Aidan's. Yet the findings presented here will doubtless give church and youth leaders pause for thought in considering how they envisage the process of faith formation and transformation during adolescence, how this is reflected in particular practices, and whether they have considered those who do not "complete" this process as envisaged. Beyond this, I would also encourage churches to reflect on the level of separation between practices common for young people and those for adults. This is not necessarily to advocate for the forms of intergenerational modes proposed by Holly Catterton Allen (2018) and others, although this approach may be determined as an option for certain churches – in particular, perhaps, for smaller congregations without sufficient teenagers needed to create a vibrant peer-focused, communitas raising environment. If age-segregation does remain, and groups and practices continue to remain separate, there are pitfalls to avoid. The inclination for many churches, I suspect, will be to create youth structures that more closely mirror those of adult services. However, I would tentatively encourage church leaders to reflect on the rationale for limiting so many creative and communal practices to solely the sphere of the young. As I have outlined in this chapter, similar approaches are not unheard of among evangelical adults but are often pushed to the margins, considered radical and questionable by the mainstream. But this strict separation need not be the case, and the religious lives of adults in congregations may benefit from these practices. It is perhaps also worth noting that Wilson McCoy (2018) and others in the intergenerational movement frequently emphasise the value that can come from precisely the form of discussion and sharing of uncertainty that I have observed in the youth group environment when applied in a cross-generational context. Utilising these practices that have previously been reserved for the strictly liminal period in other environments may be a positive way of easing the transition across generational environments. Most importantly, through listening to the young people in youth groups – as well as those who have left – the wisdom of youth and

the questions of the curious might bring fresh insights and positive challenge to the church, a church which exists not only for the adult, not only for those of "mature" faith.

Yet this thesis has not simply been a study of adolescent evangelicalism but has also proposed a model of understanding this context through the lens of ritual process and rites of passage. This offers two significant contributions to the field. Firstly, this offers a new understanding of the nature of evangelical formation alongside the literature on conversion discussed in the Introduction. While evangelical theology may desire a conversion experience of some form as a step towards religious adulthood – one that can then be relayed in the form of a testimony narrative – this is premised on a binary 'before and after' approach. While this may be the experience of some believers, in particular those who have come to faith as adults, this is insufficient for explaining the practices oriented towards young people growing up in the faith. As a result, I have proposed that this process of desired transformation is better understood as an extended (and to an extent hidden) rite of passage. Through this approach we can see the desired transformation as a distinct process with practices and priorities intentionally designed to bring this about in a manner different to conventional understandings of conversion. Secondly, this approach can also speak to broader discussions within sociology and anthropology of youth and adulthood. Studies of rites of passage have been largely absent in the recent sociology of adolescence, despite increasing interest into the struggles of transitioning into adulthood and the significance of 'emerging' (Arnett 2004) or 'elusive' (Durham 2017) adulthood. Where they have emerged, studies of rites of passage – in Christianity and beyond – have largely focused on discreet and intentional practices that are largely understood as such by the practitioners and identifiable as such by observers – for example in the important work of Susan Ridgely Bales (2005)[185]. I have argued that this model of a rite of passage can be applied to formative structures that might stretch over years without clear ceremonial markers, in forms that may look significantly different from the rituals that one commonly associates with the work of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and their successors. Christy Kulz's (2017) study at moments appears to take a similar approach in seeking to apply this model to a space not previously understood in ritual terms, yet as outlined in Chapter 1 this crucially misunderstands certain elements. My approach and arguments in this thesis show the potential significance of these

[185] An important distinction between Bales' study and my own when considering the transition to 'adulthood', however, is that the former focuses on childhood more than adolescence as a category.

theories for understanding contemporary adolescence and adulthood, within or outside of religious environments.

The most applicable area for this approach is the wider field of religion and youth – an area that remains under-researched ethnographically – offering a model of understanding religious formation and experience that may be evident across different religious contexts. While some that have already been studied clearly stand in contrast to my experience, with Ayala Fader's (2009) study of Hasidic Jewish girls in Brooklyn an example of this, it is probable that other models of adolescent religious formation in modernity do (intentionally or otherwise) draw on ideas of rites of passage and liminality within their approaches. Utilising this model across other religious and cultural environments may offer unique insights into youth religion in modernity, allowing space for peer-focused religiosity and potentially peaceful uncertainty (building further on the work of Jacqui Frost (2019)), understanding how young people in faith communities navigate transition over adolescence and into the curious world of religious 'adulthood'.

On March 17th 2020, while I was working on this Conclusion, the Diocese of London announced that all public worship would be suspended until further notice as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Along with this came the cancellation of formal youth group meetings, and within a week the country had moved into large scale 'lockdown'. As a result, religious gatherings – both young and old – were forced online on a scale that had never been seen before. Whether meeting through Instagram Live, Zoom, or other video conferencing software, or simply sustaining relationships through chaotic WhatsApp groups, the current face of British evangelical youth work is radically different from when I finished my research in November 2018. I started my research asking about the influence of digital and social media on the lives of evangelical young people. This was forced to change as I realised that, for these young people, the value of meeting in person with peers and influential leaders far outstripped the role of any mediated online relationships. As I write it is impossible to say what youth groups will look like once 'normality' has returned, but in whatever form, 'the new normal' will absolutely necessitate research into the new reality for evangelical youth work. What does the rite of passage into evangelical adulthood look like when the huts, halls, and upper floors are empty and moved online? As with the lives of the individual adolescents I spent a year with the future is unpredictable – for youth work and for evangelicalism as a whole – but in any single moment an understanding of the present experience is as important as an insight into the future. Regardless of the environment, physical or digital,

taking seriously the experiences and perspectives of young people as they explore and form their faith life through adolescence should be considered an essential element of the sociology of religion going forward.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheets

Young People

Rob Barward-Symmons – *The Formation of the Young Evangelical Subject*

Dear

Thank you for showing interest in my research. My research is looking into how young people come to understand and express themselves as 'evangelicals', and I am particularly interested in the role that your youth group might play in this. Being a young person yourself, involved in the youth group at St Aidan's, it would be great for my research if you could get involved!

As you know, my name is Rob Barward-Symmons and I am a PhD student at the University of Kent in the department of Theology and Religious Studies. My research has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the University of Kent Research Ethics board have approved the project. The leaders at St Aidan's have also approved my presence and the project as a whole.

The research hopes to understand more about the religious identities of young people like yourself, and how both church communities and external influences such as the media might play a role in how you come to understand and express yourself in this way. The purpose of the research is not only to better understand the members of this church, but young Christians (and young people more generally) across the country. My hope is that through participating in my research you might also get a better understanding of yourself too.

If this does sound interesting to you then there are a few different ways that you could get involved with the research.

- Firstly, I would appreciate being able to spend some time just talking to you about your thoughts on some of these things. This wouldn't take more than an hour, and we can make sure it was at a time that would suit you. We would meet up in the youth centre and another adult will always be in the building. I'll be recording the audio of the conversation and then typing it up, but no-one else will ever hear the tape and your name and any other identifiable information will be changed so people won't know it's you. As I have mentioned before, you would also be welcome

to invent a pseudonym (fake name) for yourself that I can use in my writing – or I can invent one for you.

- Secondly, I am interested in how young Christians in the group use and interact with social media, and so I have set up profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. So one option for helping my research would be in allowing me to follow you on some of these sites. In consenting to me following you on these sites you wouldn't have to do anything more than what you usually do, and again any information that is used would be completely 'pseudonymised'.

- Finally, if you are not comfortable with any of these options then just keep coming along to youth group and if you want to, we can have informal chats about my research and I might ask you the occasional question, but there really is no pressure.

Participating in any (or all!) of these aspects is completely voluntary, and you are able to withdraw at any time you want – even after it has been completed. There will not be any consequences for you if you do decide to withdraw. If you are interested, but unsure whether you would like to participate, I would love to talk with you about any questions or queries you might have.

All the responses and data I collect in the course of my research will be completely secure and private. Computer data and notes will be stored in password protected folders, and names will be changed on all transcripts of interviews and notes of social media usage. I will ensure that I will not include any information that might identify any responses as yours, and all audio recordings will be deleted upon completion of my research. Your responses will also be pseudonymised in any books, articles, or chapters that may emerge from the research, as well as the PhD thesis itself.

While it is not the purpose of the research to discuss such issues, it is possible that during the course of our conversation you may disclose information that raises concerns around your well-being. In accordance with the Diocese of London Safeguarding Policy, if any issues arise that I believe indicate a serious concern with your well-being then I shall pass this on to the appropriate safeguarding lead within the church.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any more questions about the research or any ways in which you might want to get involved. My email address is rmb50@kent.ac.uk. If at any point you have a complaint about my research, or a query which you are not

comfortable bringing up with me directly, please contact the [**Research Ethics and Governance Officer**].

Thank you again,

Rob Barward-Symmons

Young Adults

Rob Barward-Symmons – *The Formation of the Young Evangelical Subject*

Dear

Thank you for showing interest in my research. My work is looking into how young people come to understand and express themselves as 'evangelicals', and I am particularly interested in the role that youth groups might play in this. While the current members of the youth group at St Aidan's are my primary research participants, it would be great to hear from previous members such as yourself. I am interested to hear of your experiences with the group, and your reflections on faith matters in the year(s) since you left.

As you know, my name is Rob Barward-Symmons and I am a PhD student at the University of Kent in the department of Theology and Religious Studies. My research has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the University of Kent Research Ethics board have approved the project. The leaders at St Aidan's have also approved my presence and the project as a whole.

The research hopes to understand more about the religious identities of young people in this generation, and how both church communities and external influences such as the media might play a role in how you come to understand and express yourself in this way. The purpose of the research is not only to better understand the members of this church, but young Christians (and young people more generally) across the country. My hope is that through participating in my research you might also get a better understanding of yourself too.

If this does sound interesting to you then there are a few different ways that you could get involved with the research.

- Firstly, I would appreciate being able to spend some time just talking to you about your thoughts on some of these things. This wouldn't take more than an hour, and we can make sure it was at a time that would suit you. I'll be recording the audio of the conversation and then typing it up, but no-one else will ever hear the tape and your name and any other identifiable information will be changed so people won't know it's you. You would also be welcome to invent a pseudonym (fake name) for yourself that I can use in my writing – or I can create one for you.

- Secondly, I am interested in how young Christians use and interact with social media, and so I have set up profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. So one option for helping my research would be in allowing me to follow you on some of these sites. In consenting to me following you on these sites you wouldn't have to do anything more than what you usually do, and again any information that is used would be completely 'pseudonymised'.

- Finally, if you are not comfortable with any of these options then just keep coming along to youth group and if you want to, we can have informal chats about my research and I might ask you the occasional question, but there really is no pressure.

Participating in any (or all) of these aspects is completely voluntary, and you are able to withdraw at any time you want – even after it has been completed. There will not be any consequences for you if you do decide to withdraw. If you are interested, but unsure whether you would like to participate, I would love to talk with you about any questions or queries you might have.

All the responses and data I collect in the course of my research will be completely secure and private. Computer data and notes will be stored in password protected folders, and names will be changed on all transcripts of interviews and notes of social media usage. I will ensure that I will not include any information that might identify any responses as yours, and all audio recordings will be deleted upon completion of my research. Your responses will also be pseudonymised in any books, articles, or chapters that may emerge from the research, as well as the PhD thesis itself.

While it is not the purpose of the research to discuss such issues, it is possible that during the course of our conversation you may disclose information that raises concerns around your well-being. In accordance with the Diocese of London Safeguarding Policy, if any issues arise that I believe indicate a serious concern with your well-being then I shall pass this on to the appropriate safeguarding lead within the church.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any more questions about the research or any ways in which you might want to get involved. My email address is rmb50@kent.ac.uk. If at any point you have a complaint about my research, or a query which you are not comfortable bringing up with me directly, please contact the [**Research Ethics and Governance Officer**].

Thank you again,

Rob Barward-Symmons

Church Leaders

Rob Barward-Symmons – *The Formation of the Young Evangelical Subject*

Dear

Thank you for showing interest in my research. My work is looking into how young people come to understand and express themselves as 'evangelicals', and I am particularly interested in the role that youth groups might play in this. While the current members of the youth group at St Aidan's are my primary research participants, I am also interested in hearing the perspectives of church leaders such as yourself.

As you know, my name is Rob Barward-Symmons and I am a PhD student at the University of Kent in the department of Theology and Religious Studies. My research has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the University of Kent Research Ethics board have approved the project. The leaders at St Aidan's have also approved my presence and the project as a whole.

The research hopes to understand more about the religious identities of young people in this generation, and how both church communities and external influences such as the media might play a role in how young people come to understand and express themselves in this way. The purpose of the research is not only to better understand the members of this church, but young Christians (and young people more generally) across the country. My hope is that through participating in my research you might also get a better understanding of yourself and your role in the church too.

If this does sound interesting to you then I would appreciate being able to spend some time just talking to you about your thoughts on some of these things. This wouldn't take more than an hour, and we can make sure it was at a time and location that would suit you. I'll be recording the audio of the conversation and then typing it up, but no-one else will ever hear the tape and your name and any other identifiable information will be changed so people won't know it's you. You would also be welcome to invent a pseudonym (fake name) for yourself that I can use in my writing – or I can create one for you. The church will also be given a pseudonym,

Participating is completely voluntary, and you are able to withdraw at any time you want – even after it has been completed. There will not be any consequences for you if you do

decide to withdraw. If you are interested, but unsure whether you would like to participate, I would love to talk with you about any questions or queries you might have.

All the responses and data I collect in the course of my research will be completely secure and private. Computer data and notes will be stored in password protected folders, and names will be changed on all transcripts of interviews and notes of social media usage. I will ensure that I will not include any information that might identify any responses as yours, and all audio recordings will be deleted upon completion of my research. Your responses will also be pseudonymised in any books, articles, or chapters that may emerge from the research, as well as the PhD thesis itself.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any more questions about the research or any ways in which you might want to get involved. My email address is rmb50@kent.ac.uk. If at any point you have a complaint about my research, or a query which you are not comfortable bringing up with me directly, please contact the [**Research Ethics and Governance Officer**].

Thank you again,

Rob Barward-Symmons

Parents of Interviewees Aged Under 16

Rob Barward-Symmons – *The Formation of the Young Evangelical Subject*

Dear

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. My name is Rob Barward-Symmons and I am a PhD student at the University of Kent in the department of Theology and Religious Studies. My research has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the University of Kent Research Ethics board have approved the project. The leaders at St Aidan's have also approved my presence and the project as a whole, and I am fully DBS checked. Since October 2017 I have been attending the youth group and related events offering my assistance as an experienced youth worker, working alongside David in delivering the sessions on a weekly basis. I have discussed my research with the group on a number of occasions and have also run two sessions exploring some of their ideas on the topic.

My research is looking into how young people might come to understand and express themselves as 'evangelicals', and I am particularly interested in the role that the St Aidan's youth group might play in this. The research hopes to understand more about the religious identities of young people like your child, and how both church communities and external influences such as the media might play a role in how they come to understand and express themselves in this way. The purpose of the research is not only to better understand the members of this church, but young Christians (and young people more generally) across the country. My hope is that through participating in my research your child might also get a better understanding of themselves and their own identity and belief.

One of the most important features of my research is incorporating the voices and experiences of young people themselves – something that is often missed in academic literature in this area. As a result, I am hoping to speak to as many of the young people as possible in the course of my research in sit down interviews. While those over the age of 16 are able to give personal consent for these interviews, for those aged 14 and 15 the informed consent of parents/guardians is required, and as your child has shown interest in participating I would greatly appreciate your co-operation.

The interviews would not take more than an hour and would take place at a time that works best for your child. It will take place in the St Aidan's youth centre, and another adult will always be in the building. The interview audio will be recorded and then typed up by myself,

and no-one other than myself shall hear the recordings. All names and identifiable information will be removed, and the young people will be given the opportunity to create their own pseudonym – if they do not wish to do this then I will create one for them. All responses will also be pseudonymised in any books, articles, or chapters that may emerge from the research, as well as the PhD thesis itself.

Participation is completely voluntary, and your child is able to withdraw at any time they want – even after the interview has been completed. There will not be any consequences for them if they do decide to withdraw. If you or your child are interested, but unsure whether they would like to participate, I would love to talk with you or you child about any questions or queries you might have.

If you are happy for your child to participate, please complete and sign the consent form (given along with this letter) and return to your child to bring to the interview.

All the responses and data I collect in the course of my research will be completely secure and private. Computer data and notes will be stored in password protected folders, and names will be changed on all transcripts of interviews and notes of social media usage. I will ensure that I will not include any information that might identify any responses, and all audio recordings will be deleted upon completion of my research.

While it is not the purpose of the research to discuss such issues, it is possible that during the course of our conversation your child may disclose information that raises concerns around their well-being. In accordance with the Diocese of London Safeguarding Policy, if any issues arise that I believe indicate a serious concern with their well-being then I shall pass this on to the appropriate safeguarding lead within the church.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any more questions about the research or any ways in which you might want to get involved. My email address is rmb50@kent.ac.uk. If at any point you have a complaint about my research, or a query which you are not comfortable bringing up with me directly, please contact the [**Research Ethics and Governance Officer**].

Thank you again,

Rob Barward-Symmons

Appendix 2: Consent Forms

Participants

Title of project: Subjectivity in Young Evangelicalism

Name of investigator: Rob Barward-Symmons

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet dated… for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. For any questions or queries in this regard, contact Rob on rmb50@kent.ac.uk ☐

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I understand that any direct quotes used in the research will be anonymised and any identifiable information removed. ☐

4. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature

Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

Parents of Interviewees Aged Under 16

Title of project: The Formation of the Young Evangelical Subject

Name of investigator: Rob Barward-Symmons

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

5. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet dated… for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

6. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. For any questions or queries in this regard, contact Rob on rmb50@kent.ac.uk ☐

7. I understand that my child's responses will be anonymised before analysis. I understand that any direct quotes used in the research will be anonymised and any identifiable information removed. ☐

8. I agree for my child to take part in the above research project. ☐

____

Name of participant

______________________________	______________________________	______________________________
Name of parent/guardian	Date	Signature
______________________________	______________________________	______________________________
Lead researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 3: Interview Schedules

Young People

1. Tell me about how you started coming to St Aidan's
    a. What do you think was the most important factor for you coming here?
    b. What were your first impressions, do you remember?
    c. Have they changed much?
    d. How has the group changed over the time that you've been involved?
2. What was your experience of Christianity before PM? In church contexts or outside
    a. Would you describe yourself as a Christian?
        i. How did you become a Christian?
    b. Has your time at St Aidan's changed your perspective on Christianity at all?
    c. Can you describe the other churches that you went to before St Aidan's?
        i. Is there anything you miss about your old church?
3. How significant are your family in your understanding of faith?
    a. What about your friends?
    b. What about church leaders, like David?
4. Which elements do you appreciate most in PM, relative to other or adult churches?
    a. Which aspects do you find most difficult?
    b. Do you think the move to Solar House will have much impact on your experience of PM?
    c. Is there anything the 'adult' church could learn from PM? Or things you've seen in 'adult' churches that you think PM should bring in?
5. Outside of the weekly group time, describe to me the impact that Christianity has on your life – if at all
    a. Do your friends know that you are a Christian/attend a church event? Do you know whether any or most of your friends come from a faith background?

b. Has this ever caused any tensions or misunderstandings?
c. Do you find it easy to talk to your friends about religious issues? Which things do you talk about most?
    i. Do you find it easier to talk about faith stuff here than at school? What are the main differences?
    ii. What kinds of things will you talk about here that you might not at school? And vice versa

6. Do you have any regular practices that help you develop or consider your spirituality/faith – like quiet times, reading the Bible, praying, listening to worship music or podcasts, reading books or blogs, watching videos, art, discussions etc? Describe
    a. Considering this, what do you think are the most significant influences on your view of Christianity outside of PM?
7. What do you think of how culture/the media/wider society perceives Christianity?
    a. Do you think this influences how your friends see your faith?
    b. Are there any Christians you know of in wider culture who you admire? Why?
8. Do you ever encounter things on social media that makes you reflect on spiritual or ethical matters, in a positive or negative way? Describe
9. Do you think you'll look for a different church or Christian group after you leave PM?
    a. What would you look for in an ideal church environment?
    b. If available, would you want to go to something similar to PM? Why? What differences would you look for?

Young Adults

1. Tell me about how you started coming to St Aidan's
    a. What do you think was the most important factor for you coming here?
    b. How did the group changed over the time that you've been involved?
2. What was your experience of Christianity before PM? In church contexts or outside
    a. Would you describe yourself as a Christian at the moment?
        i. How did you become a Christian?
        ii. Did that shift while you were going to St Aidan's? Has it changed much since?
    b. Did your time at St Aidan's changed your perspective on Christianity at all?
    c. Can you describe the other churches that you went to before St Aidan's?
        i. Is there anything you miss about your old church?
3. Have you had any involvement with Christian groups since leaving PM?
    a. Could you describe the groups?
    b. What are the main differences? Which aspects do you think they could learn from PM/what do you miss most?
4. How significant are your family in your understanding of faith?
    a. What about your friends?
    b. What about church leaders, like David?
5. Outside of the weekly group time, describe to me the impact that Christianity has on your life – if at all
    a. Do your friends know that you are a Christian/attend a church event? Do you know whether any or most of your friends come from a faith background?
    b. Has this ever caused any tensions or misunderstandings?
    c. Do you find it easy to talk to your friends about religious issues? Which things do you talk about most?
    d. Have you found it different being a Christian at University compared to school? How?
6. Do you have any regular practices that help you develop or consider your spirituality/faith – like quiet times, reading the Bible, praying, listening to

worship music or podcasts, reading books or blogs, watching videos, art, discussions etc? Describe

   a. Considering this, what do you think are the most significant influences on your view of Christianity outside of PM?

7. What do you think of how culture/the media/wider society perceives Christianity?
   a. Do you think this influences how your friends see your faith?
   b. Do you think there is a particular University perception or expectation that you didn't find before?
   c. Are there any Christians you know of in wider culture who you admire? Why?
8. Do you ever encounter things on social media that makes you reflect on spiritual or ethical matters, in a positive or negative way? Describe
9. Do you think you'll look for a different church or Christian group after you leave PM?
   a. What would you look for in an ideal church environment?
   b. If available, would you want to go to something similar to PM? Why? What differences would you look for?

David

1. What for you are the priorities of the group?
2. What is the primary purpose of youth ministry?
    a. How does this differ to adult ministry?
3. What role do you think youth ministry can play relative to other influences?
4. Do you have an idea for where you want the young people to be by the time they leave the group?
    a. How do you think about getting them to this place?
    b. How does this differ to their starting point?
5. Why is it important to do youth/children's work separate from the main congregation?
    a. For you, what does/should this separation entail?
    b. How important is the distinctive youth space?
6. What does it mean for a young person to be a Christian in today's society?
    a. What about for St Aidan's young people in particular?
    b. You often talk about being an "ambassador" – what does this mean for you?
7. There are some distinctive aspects to the youth time – what is the thinking behind this?
    a. How valuable is the development of a community, and do you think it differs to the adult context?
    b. Why discussions over the traditional sermon?
    c. Do you think the young people see themselves as a part of the same community?
8. How important is confirmation and adult baptism in your youth work?