ABSTRACT

IDENTIFYING PARADIGMS OF CONVERSION OPERATIVE

IN UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES OF THE TEXAS CONFERENCE

by

Kenneth Alan Munn

The purpose of this study was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversion. The project utilized open-ended, semi-structured questions to interview twenty persons who had experienced conversion within the previous two years, in new United Methodist Churches.

The research identified four paradigms for understanding conversion: (1) a *cognitive* paradigm, (2) an *experiential* paradigm, (3) a *volitional* paradigm, and (4) a *relational* paradigm. The project proceeded along two lines of inquiry asking first, "What direct precipitating factors led to the conversions?" and then asking, "Which of the four paradigms best explained the conversion?"

The study found the predominant precipitating factor in the conversions to be need-meeting ministries and crisis response practices of the local churches. The second most prominent precipitating factor in the conversions was the influence of immediate family members. The study also found the *volitional* paradigm to be the paradigm that best explained the majority of the conversions.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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Presented to the Faculty of

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Background

In the autumn of 1996, I graduated from Asbury Seminary and went to my first full-time appointment as the associate pastor of a United Methodist church of fifteen hundred members, located in suburban Houston, Texas. The following spring, I witnessed, for the first time in my life, someone convert to Christianity. The young man owned the coffee shop at the local shopping mall where I met with my youth leaders during the week. After several months of meeting there, I noticed that when we sat and discussed matters of faith, Hiram would busy himself cleaning the tables nearest to our little group so he could eavesdrop upon our conversation. Finally, after weeks of "lurking," he was compelled to interrupt us. He pulled up a chair, and we began a question and answer session that lasted for several hours.

Over the next few months, Hiram became a part of our weekly discussions in the coffee shop, often usurping the direction of the conversation, but always to the delight of my youth leaders. One Monday night, in the middle of the night, he called me at home, clearly oblivious of the late hour. He could not wait for me to arrive at the shop the next day. He had to tell me that very night that he had just asked Jesus to come into his heart.

When Hiram came to know Jesus Christ, I was not much help to him, and he did not come to my church. He sought out a church next to his apartment and eventually became a faithful member there. I remember being relieved that he had found soil in which to grow in his new faith, for I had feared he might come to my church. While I had witnessed his conversion, I did not understand it. My training in this area had been theoretical and sparse, completely inadequate for helping him in his spiritual journey. I

also knew that my church's culture would not have had a place for him because it did not have an awareness of the questions and struggles a new Christian would have.

As a "hired servant" to my congregation, my church leadership expected me to see my job as primarily maintaining the existing ministries of the church. My job expectations had not included time spent with Hiram because he was outside of our membership. The senior pastor received the same job expectations, as did the pastors who followed us into those positions. During the two years I served that charge, I experienced an otherwise healthy traditional church, where conversion ministries received lip service but no attention, resources, or support.

That year I began to pray, "Lord, please let me do something vital to help *advance* your Kingdom! Put me in a place where my gifts can be used for more than institutional maintenance. Lord, please use me to do something really *Big* for you!" I consistently prayed that prayer for the next seven years.

In March 2004, seven years of prayers culminated in an appointment to a United Methodist church on the growing northeast side of Houston. That appointment called for planting a church in a developing part of the city not yet served by any immediately adjacent church. My personal agenda was to build a church intentionally focused upon people who had not yet responded to the good news of the gospel. I wanted to meet more "Hirams" and this time to be an effective agent as God worked in their lives. After so many years spent asking God to place me on the "front lines" of ministry, this new church plant represented to me the very heart of the "Great Commission" to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And

surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20, NIV).

The Problem

The training I received and the experience of serving as a pastor in United Methodist churches since 1994 taught me how to maintain and administrate an established local church whose structure and programs entirely served to care for the existing believing community. Growing up in the traditional church and then serving as maintenance pastor for a decade of my adult life had left me without any clear understanding of the process of conversion. If I were to build a United Methodist church and, at the same time, nurture a culture that would be focused upon conversion, I would need a new viewpoint. I would have to understand the process of conversion, specifically through the eyes of people who had experienced conversion through the ministries of new United Methodist churches in the Houston area.

The mission statement of the United Methodist Church reads, "The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ" (Olson 87). Although the churches I served always verbally endorsed the mission statement, they had lost the ability to make conversion a priority. The statistical data for our annual conference confirmed the accuracy of my experience on a larger scale. For the most recent year published at the time this study began, 2002, the Texas Annual Conference reported that first-time professions of faith numbered approximately one-half of 1 percent of the total membership of our local churches. At the same time, more than 2½ times as many names were removed from the membership roles because members were inactive or unable to be located (Foster).

Identifying those who had come to believe in Jesus Christ through the United

Methodist church posed a difficulty for several reasons. First, in the literature on

conversion, the term carries significantly different implications depending upon the

religious and even denominational background in which the discussion takes place.

Second, to identify someone as a person *who has been converted* brings up the questions,

"What did they convert *from*?" and, "What did they convert *to*?" Sometimes those

conversions indicated relatively minor shifts, such as a shift from a "dead" practice of

faith within a single denomination to a more fulfilling expression within the same

tradition. Sometimes, however, the conversion indicated major, even global shifts from

one world religion to another. The word *conversion* itself does not inform the quality of

the event in any significant way, beyond the indication that a change has taken place in

the life of the person in question.

A third difficulty rises from the way data is reported within the United Methodist

denomination. The church has no institutionally consistent way of identifying and

tracking the number of conversions that take place. Estimating the number of conversions

that occur within United Methodist congregations becomes a matter of anecdotal

discovery rather than statistical research. The closest category within the annual reporting

structure is titled, "Received This Year by Profession of Christian Faith" (Foster N-2) but

is not accurate for assessing conversion because the category includes so many things

that are only peripherally related to conversion.

Though the heading is clear, it does not reflect what actually is included in the

figure. In practice, two groups are included in this number, which may make up most of

the reported figure but are not actually adult conversions. The persons included in that

reported number quite often believe themselves to have been Christian both before and

after the reporting. The first group represents people who take vows of membership in the

local church without expressing a previous church home. The reason no previous church

affiliation was declared may be simply that they were not asked about it. Since such

inquiry is seldom consistent from one church to another, especially among

denominations, the accuracy of the reported figure is unreliable.

The second group reported in this category includes participants in confirmation

classes. Many churches conduct confirmation classes annually for children in late

elementary and junior high school that have grown up in the church. The reporting

system does not distinguish these confirmed children from individuals experiencing a

conversion or significant change in self-identity. Further, the number of confirmed

individuals cannot simply be subtracted from the total because many churches count adult

sponsors along with the children when reporting the number of people in their

confirmation classes. These facts obscure any attempt to assess the denomination's actual

efficacy in conversion-related efforts beyond a case-by-case anecdotal inquiry.

A further challenge presents itself when examining the denomination's most

prominent and theological definition of conversion. When the United Methodist Church

speaks of conversion, it uses the word "justification":

> We believe God reaches out to the repentant believer in justifying grace
> with accepting and pardoning love. Wesleyan theology stresses that a
> decisive change in the human heart can and does occur under the
> prompting of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
>   In justification we are, through faith, forgiven our sin and restored to
> God's favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls
> forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration, by which we are
> made new creatures in Christ. (Olson 47)

This definition is not very helpful for the purposes of this study for two reasons. First, it

speaks theologically about what the church believes is happening *spiritually*, but it does

not connect justification with any tangible expression of how conversion plays out in people's lives. As this definition demonstrates, the church's "God Talk" speaks a language so far removed from the lives of real people that no one outside of the theologically trained community could understand what it means. This description of conversion contains no *real world referents*.

The Book of Discipline's definition of justification offers no significant help in defining conversion for a second reason, as well. The definition makes no mention of the *church* or the *community of faith* in any form. The glaring absence of community in the definition of conversion will become a theme in the exploration of the literature in Chapter 2. This definition of justification implies that the church does not see itself as a significant part of the process of conversion (Olson 47).

As with the definition of justification, the definition of baptism also presents challenges to *this* exploration of conversion. In the United Methodist context, the sacrament of baptism is the mechanism that "initiates us into a community of faith that prays for holiness; it calls us to life lived in faithfulness to God's gift" (Felton 23-4). The distinctive element in this sacrament is the gift of the Holy Spirit imparted as it was on the day of Pentecost to the baptized person. Baptism is, therefore, known as the "Sacrament of Initiation" (Staples 121). Because it is recognized primarily as the means of initiation into the community of believers, by the power of the imparted Holy Spirit, both infants and professing adults alike receive baptism. Within the United Methodist tradition, many come to membership as adults having received baptism as infants. In those cases, the church does not repeat baptism.

In the Methodist tradition, baptism can, but does not always, function as a rite of

passage to celebrate an experience of conversion. For infants and children, baptism is understood to be a means of grace and an acknowledgement of God's prevenient grace paving the way to bring him or her to faith in Jesus Christ at a later date. As such, baptism does not exclusively denote conscious change in self-identity. In practice, baptism of infants are often family celebrations not seen as a rite of passage at all. This practical disconnect between baptism and conversion complicates this study's ability to single out conversion for analysis.

Against this backdrop, a small number of recent church plants within the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church represent a new commitment to conversion ministry. These churches, all less than twenty years old, are bearing fruit, boasting multiple first-time professions of faith and have not slipped into a pattern of self-preservation and maintenance. Dale Galloway says, "Starting a new church is the most proven, most effective means for reaching people who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ" (Galloway with Bird 15). The motivation for engaging in this project was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church.

The Project

I have spent a good bit of time in my ministry reading articles by church specialists who propose various reasons why non-Christians do not participate in church. Herb Miller suggests that newcomers to the community and to the church will want to stay when they visit if they get what they are looking for when they walk in the doors. The church should provide for the needs of these people in four ways: (1) Newcomers are looking for a sense of inclusion where they can express and receive love; (2) newcomers

are looking for feelings of acceptance and self-esteem; (3) newcomers are looking for

responsibility that can give a sense of purpose, meaning, and positive self-identity; and

(4) newcomers are looking for spiritual growth opportunities (1).

Articles similar to Miller's often motivated me to try to change some aspect of my

congregation in order to please the *imagined* non-Christian people that might show up

and perhaps convert them to Christianity. The effort created strife within my

congregation as I proposed changing "the way we have always done things" without

being able to offer real hope that any benefits would be forthcoming. When I was able to

convince the church leadership to adopt a specific change, we often found ourselves

"developing strategies to reach a sector of the population, which, despite our best efforts,

will never attend church" (Rainer 20), much less convert.

Contrary to these kinds of studies, which are often based upon queries of

unchurched people, 80 to 90 percent of whom will never join an established church,

Thom S. Rainer suggests, "Why not ask questions of those who did make the transition

from the unchurched to the churched? Why not ask what influenced them to come to

church and perhaps to become Christians?" (20). The answers he receives are based upon

the perceptions of those individuals who had actually been successfully incorporated into

the church community, rather than on the preferences of those who simply expressed

their reasons for resisting God and the Church.

Following Rainer's strategy, I wanted to understand the process of conversion

from the viewpoint of those who had actually made the transition. I wanted to find

recently converted people from United Methodist churches in my area and hear their

stories in their own words. I wanted to sit with them face-to-face, and let their excitement

infect my own spirit with a new awareness. My hope was that the resulting picture of

conversion would allow me to lead my new congregation beyond the maintenance and

self-focused model of church I have so frequently experienced, and into the kind of

conversion-focused ministry our mission statement implies.

Context of the New Church Plant

The area of northeast Houston where the church plant was located reported nearly

15 percent growth in the previous five years, much of which had come from large master-

planned communities. The ethnic mix of the area is approximately 81 percent white,

while Blacks and Hispanics each comprise approximately 7 percent of the households.

About 73 percent of people in the area are married, 19 percent have never married, and 6

percent have divorced. Education levels of residents in the area are extremely high. Those

with some college experience, including bachelor degrees, make up 58 percent of the

population, compared to the national average of only 38 percent. Those with graduate and

professional degrees make up approximately 11 percent. The study of age groups in the

target area reported 37 percent of the people fall between the ages of 30-54 years old. The

second most prominent group are children, ages 0-17 years at 28 percent of the

population. Those over age 55 represented 19 percent of the population, and 18-29-year

olds-represent the smallest demographic at 16 percent of the population. Approximately

78 percent of the households report annual incomes of $75,000 or greater. This figure has

increased by 14 percent in the previous five years. Charitable giving from these

households has increased 27 percent over that same period (Percept Group 1-2).

One of the most important statistics listed in the study was the religious

preference indicator, which listed the percentage of households who where likely to

prefer any of eighteen religions or denominations. The study indicated that only 3.5

percent of the households in the area were interested in, but had no established preference

for, a particular religion or denomination. (1-2). This factor indicates the vast majority of

people in this community, while not necessarily practicing their faith, do carry enough of

a "churched memory" to identify themselves with a specific religion or denomination. If

conversion is to take place within this population, it will statistically happen to people

who are culturally Christianized and consider themselves Christian but have no genuine

awareness of God or Jesus Christ beyond this vague cultural identity.

Theological and Biblical Foundations

In the second of his standard sermons, John Wesley speaks to the same dynamic

of "cultural Christianity" in his day by quoting an Epicurean poet: "Oderunt peccare boni,

virtutis amore; Oberunt peccare mali, formidine poenae" (qtd. in Wesley, <u>Doctrinal

Stadards</u> 14), meaning, "Good men avoid sin from the love of virtue: Wicked men avoid

sin from a fear of punishment" but only the "altogether Christian" is motivated by the

true love of God and love of neighbor" (14). He goes on to be very clear about the results

of this kind of cultural Christianity, "[b]ut here let no man deceive his own soul.… They

remain still in their damnable estate, lacking the very true Christian faith" (16). Out of his

genuine love of God, Wesley delivers the harsh condemnation of Scripture upon the

cultural Christians he is speaking to, but from the same source, his genuine love of

neighbor brings him to plead with them to see the distinction and experience true

conversion.

Scripture has much to say on the subject of conversion, but very little of it is

overt. The New Testament uses the word *metanoeo,* or "turning," when talking about

conversion, and Jesus uses the concept metaphorically in his exhortation to the crowd in Matthew, chapter 12. Paul, in his epistles, creates whole theological categories around the images of "adoption" and "regeneration." The narratives of the book of Acts witness to the broader dynamics of conversion in the lives of real people. Each of these dimensions surrounding the concept of conversion in the biblical texts adds a new window through which to view those people Jesus calls "neighbor."

As I begin this study, I want to know how these neighbors of mine, whom I am called to love, are coming to faith. I want to know what is happening in their lives as they begin the process of turning of which the Scriptures speak. I want to understand the categories that form the foundations of their lives as they come to a new church plant. As I seek these answers, I know that hearing their stories will increase my own love for them. Understanding the paradigms by which they make sense of Christianity "from the outside" will surely focus the process of building a community of believers that can do more than just give lip service to the Great Commission.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist Churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversion. The motivation for engaging in this project was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church. The following research questions guided the study.

Research Question #1

What direct precipitating factor or factors led to the conversion?

Research Question #2

What paradigm for conversion seemed to be operative in the understanding of the individual?

Research Question #3

What paradigm for conversion best explained the event?

Research Question #1 was answered by means of personal interviews with new Christians from selected churches. Research Question #2 was answered by asking the participants being interviewed to rank the importance of four different paradigms in their conversion. Research Question #3 was answered by a review of the interviews by an independent panel of observers, familiar with the four paradigms.

Definition of Terms

Definitions for the primary terms in this study are as follows.

Conversion

Through the discipline of sociology, "conversion" can be defined as a change in self-identity that occurs in two dimensions. The first dimension is one of time. Self-identity can shift gradually over time and be relatively invisible and difficult to identify, or it can be sudden and instantaneous. The second dimension involves measuring the depth of change, from minor to extensive. A sudden change in an area of relatively minor importance would not be understood as radical conversion in the way that a sudden change in a major area of life would (Bankston, Forsyth, and Floyd, Jr. 282). For the purposes of this study, *conversion* is defined as a change in the self-identity of an individual, which is both sudden enough to be observed and identified and also extensive enough that the individual is able to say they were not Christian before the conversion.

Paradigm

In Chapter 2, following a survey of the biblical sources surrounding conversion, I explore the understanding of conversion found in the current literature. The current culture perceives radical change of self-identity through different and sometimes competing categories. For the purposes of this study, *paradigm* is defined as one of these catagories, or "lenses" through which the culture has come to understand conversion.

Methodology

In order to gain a picture of conversion from the viewpoint of new converts, I sought to interview new Christians about their conversions. I used a semi-structured, open-ended protocol for the interviews to allow them the most latitude in expressing themselves.

Participants

The twenty participants ranged in age from 15 to 52, averaging 35.6 years of age. Eleven of the twenty participants were female, while nine were male. Fourteen of the twenty participants were married, two were divorced, and four were single. Nineteen of the twenty participants were Caucasian, one was Malaysian, and all were from upper-middle-class environments, consistent with the demographics of the areas served by their churches.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

When soliciting the pastors to identify people in their churches for me to interview about their conversions, I asked specifically for individuals who "would not have considered themselves to be Christians two years ago." This definition implies both an extensive change in self-identity, as well as a definable time period through which the

change took place. Similarly during the interview, I asked the individuals simply to tell me "how they became Christian." The somewhat vague and general nature of the vocabulary used in the inquiry was necessary to allow the participants to tell their story from their own perspectives without raising questions in their minds about whether or not their conversions were valid for the purposes of my study, and thus, allowed them to utilize their own definitions of what conversion meant to them to them.

The interviews were recorded with both digital video and digital audio to ensure against technical malfunction. I structured a questionnaire to collect demographic information and then interviewed the participants using the following questions:

1. How did you become a Christian?

2. Please rank any of these four elements that are relevant, in order of their importance in your experience of becoming a Christian: convincing argument, emotional experience, personal decision, and relationships in community. To allow for any other answer, I included a fifth category labeled "other."

Delimitations and Generalizability

The motivation for engaging in this project was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church. The sample, therefore, consisted of five participants from each of four selected Houston Area United Methodist churches. The broadest reaches of suburban Houston were sought, and the choice of four different churches was decided upon, so that no single community's ethos would prevail in the sample.

In order to be able to generalize any results for use in my church and the broader United Methodist Church, I specifically selected participant churches whose

demographics were similar to those of the church plant location and whose ministries were deemed likely to be models for those of my church plant. The effective generalizability of this study may only extend to Caucasian, suburban, middle to upper-middle class communities who prefer a more contemporary style of worship.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 presents the biblical and theological foundations and a review of literature. Chapter 3 establishes the design of the research project. Chapter 4 reports the findings. Chapter 5 provides summary and interpretation and then suggests further avenues of study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Biblical Foundations

The purpose of this study was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversion. Understanding why churches at the local church level struggle with the meaning of conversion, requires listening in on the discussion among scholars at a national level who have also struggled to establish a clear definition of conversion. Throughout the ecumenical movement of the past century, the attempt to quantify conversion has stimulated great debate and reflection without achieving consensus. In 1967, a pivotal period in the denomination's history, the members of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church convened a joint commission on Education and Cultivation to hear papers presented on the subject of conversion. The presenters included a Roman Catholic sociologist, a United Church of Christ urban specialist, and two Methodist scholars (Cobb et al. 2).

John B. Cobb, Jr., from the School of Theology at Claremont, California, opened the discussion with the simplest definition: "By 'conversion' I understand any major change in a man's life orientation" (Cobb et al. 3). He and the three other presenters, in their papers, went on to note the absence of any single phenomenon that could be designated "conversion." Instead, they described a "cluster of related phenomena" loosely grouped under that heading, from the problem of secularism to atheism among the youth, and even the dangers of extreme fundamentalism in Christianity. The subject

of conversion maintained only a tenuous connection to some of these topics in the discussion, serving instead as a vehicle for discussing the author's current area of scholarship research. For Cobb, conversion was reduced to a "subjective experience," which sometimes produced an "objective response" (6). The other presenters did not attempt to articulate any clearer definitions of conversion.

To be fair to the scholars of the commission, an academic definition of conversion does not flow straight out of Scripture. Some concepts transcend individual and translatable words. Conversion fully represents such an idea for the writers of the New Testament. The definition of a single word or even a set of words does not adequately describe its use in the biblical languages. Further, much of the definition for conversion, from the Bible, must be discerned from the metaphorical uses, particularly through the words of Jesus.

I will begin the exploration of the biblical foundations of conversion by identifying the specific words in the Greek and Hebrew that ground the concept. I will then note that Jesus used the idea of conversion metaphorically, both in his appearances in the Gospels and in his appearances in the book of Revelation. I will then explore conversion in terms of the broader theological categories prevalent in Paul's epistles. Finally, I will survey several images of conversion as depicted in the conversion narratives of the book of Acts.

Word Study of "Conversion"

The Greek word most often associated with conversion is the verb *metanoeo,* a compound word: *meta—* ("with," "after," or "around") and *nous—* ("mind") (Kittel and Bromiley 976). A literal translation would be to "note after" or to "change one's mind"

(976). In classical Greek, the noun form means simply "later knowledge" and is rarely used (978). Associations with the ideas of "regret" and "remorse" are scarce, occurring specifically from recognition that the earlier view was foolish, improper, or evil. Even then, the word never denotes a profound change in life's direction but is limited to a specific act no longer approved (978-79).

The words *metanoeo* and *metanoia* begin to pick up the theological meanings of regret and remorse when they appear in the New Testament. The Synoptic Gospel writers use *metanoeo* and *metanoia* thirty-five times in their applications, drawing upon the cultic and ritual forms of penitence from the Old Testament even though no specific word for conversion exists in the Hebrew language (Kittel and Bromiley 984-85). The closest word for conversion in the Hebrew language was the word *shubh.* The prophetic writers used *shubh,* meaning to "turn back" or to "go in the opposite direction," in a euphemistic manner to convey the idea of a complete turning of the entire life toward God (Kinghorn 80).

Jesus' Metaphorical Imagery for Conversion

A word study on *metanoeo* quickly becomes a study of the metaphorical images used to describe conversion. A typical instance of Jesus' metaphorical use of the concept of conversion appears in his address to the crowds in Matthew 12.

The story witnesses to Jesus invoking the image of Jonah, preaching conversion to the Ninevites with these words: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented [*metanoesan*] at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here" (Matt. 12:41). Jesus here implies that his own authority, being greater than that of Jonah, should generate a greater or more

committed "turning" than it did in Jonah's day. The metaphor says, "They heard from the servant, but you hear from the master!" The way Jesus uses the word carries more weight than a simple definition of *metanoeo* would reveal. He has tapped into their culture by bringing an historical hero figure from their own past, along with his converting work, forward in time to the present moment, and foreshadowing things to come.

Looking forward into the future, the book of Revelation shows the image of Jesus using *metanoeo* in the messages to the seven churches, and each instance employs the sense of turning away from evil and toward God. Here, the concept of "repenting" or "turning" does not refer only to turning *away* from something but implies turning *toward* something, as well. As he speaks to the angel of the church in Ephesus, he reminds them from where they originally came. The change for which he is calling, is not just a *turning*. The required change is a *returning* to the purity that once was and must be again:

> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (Rev. 2:3-5)

Conversion, then, in Jesus' usage does not imply change for the sake of change but requires instead a specific focus toward which to turn. In this case, the church at Ephesus is called to turn *toward* her "first love" and to the things she did at first, invoking the imagery of the bridal chamber and the all-consuming devotion of a honeymoon couple.

The kind of "turning" implied in the word *metanoeo* calls a person not to just close the eyes to the destination but also demands the individual to focus on an alternate and higher goal. The destination cannot simply be left behind but must also be replaced with a new one. Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve-step recovery program acknowledges

this need to turn not just *away* from something, but to turn *toward* something as well. Step 3 calls for a turning *away* from one's own will, and *toward* "a Power greater than ourselves" (<u>Alcoholics Anonymous</u> 60).

Turning, as a metaphor implies a journey, with a beginning, a path, and a destination. Without those elements a journey becomes merely wandering, turning loses meaning and becomes change for change sake, or it becomes flight from something but without direction or purpose. In the United Methodist connectional system, pastors must annually make the decision about whether or not to request a move to another parish. One telling question that has helped me decide illustrates this metaphor of turning: "Am I seeking a change *toward* something, or just trying to get *away* from an unpleasant situation where I am?" If I am not moving *toward* the will of God, I need to reexamine the purity of my own motives.

Broader Theological Context

The context where "turning" or repentance appears often gives a frame through which to better understand the heart of God. Paul uses the term five times in the epistles, adding just such an important nuance. He speaks of repentance as something that God, in his kindness, initiates in persons through Godly sorrow:

> [Y]et now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Cor. 7:9-10)

In his discussion of repentance here, Paul alludes to a set of even deeper questions about the nature of repentance, which require more than a word study, or even a study of the euphemistic references to conversion. These questions open the door to broader

theological inquiry into the nature of salvation.

A complete understanding of conversion must come from more than an examination of a single word study and the context in which it appears. Conversion, as a concept, informs and is informed by the larger soteriological categories of *justification, adoption,* and *regeneration* (Kinghorn, Gospel of Grace 86-92).

Justification. Paul sees the efficacy of justification as linked to an inner conversion. "It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom. 10:10). Believing and confessing, then, are the essential ingredients of converting, which result in justification. Paul again affirms, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:13-14).

Hearing about and even knowing God is not enough. As Paul addresses these Gentile Christians in Rome, he says that they experience salvation, not by hearing the message but by the transformation that such hearing produces within them (Witherington 33). "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Repentance then depends on more than hearing and knowing. This *transformation* of justification is an essential part of conversion.

Adoption. Another image that informs the theology surrounding conversion involves the status and relationship of humanity to God. Adoption to the status of "children" of God implies a transformation that leads to and follows from conversion:

> But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full

> rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Gal. 4:4-7)

In discussing transformation and adoption, Paul is not clear about which is cause and which is effect, but as noted earlier in the Pauline uses of *metanoia,* inner transformation is not something about which the individual can boast. The agent of internal transformation is the Spirit of Christ, sent by God as a gift. The reward, receiving "the full rights of sons" and heirs, is preceded by and dependant upon the Spirit of God sent into hearts.

Regeneration. Regeneration is another powerful image linked to conversion:

> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature … since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col. 3:3-5, 9-10)

The renewal Paul speaks of here is an ongoing and continuous renewal of the self (present participle-*anakainoumenon,* "being renewed") through the spirit of Christ (Witherington 275-76). This observation lays grounds to understand conversion as more than a moment of decision but instead as a process that occurs over time. John R. W. Stott, in his examination of conversion in the context of twentieth century world missions, observes a distinction between regeneration and conversion. He says regeneration implies gradualness in the process of conversion. The experience is often unconscious where the initial decision of conversion was a conscious one (114). In the next section, I look at some of the narratives in the New Testament that present conversions, specifically looking for evidence of both conscious decision making and

transformation as a process.

Lukan Pictures of Conversion

The book of Acts records approximately seventeen specific references to conversion, using language such as, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:4). Speaking of baptism as an accompanying experience and not referring to conversion directly these stories report the context in which conversion occurred. The word "believed" also signals the experience of conversion in these narratives: "This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42), and "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

The writer of the book of Acts paints a picture that implies the culture and situation surrounding conversion in that context. Drawing upon historical scholarship, inferences can be made that bring the process of conversion into sharper focus.

The day of Pentecost. The first of these passages that opens a window to the larger picture surrounding conversion comes from the second chapter of Acts. Peter and the eleven had gathered in Jerusalem, shortly after the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit descended upon them. Peter then addressed a crowd who represented the entire Roman Empire but more importantly represented spiritual seekers from many lands. "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5).

In the first century, the Jewish celebration of Pentecost attracted many pagan "seekers," often called "God-fearers" to Jerusalem. These sympathizers constituted the pool from which converts to Judaism came "seeking" knowledge of God (Finn 96). The

call to repent that Peter gave in Acts 2 to the gathered sojourners would have been a natural and appropriate message for him to deliver. Within the religion of Israel, the image of the sojourner who converts to the worship of the one true God is a prominent prophetic motif for repentance (Freedman et al. 1131).

Those God-fearing seekers staying in Jerusalem were likely to be very open to a new and better way to understand their lives. The signs and wonders of hearing their own languages spoken to them was clearly the Holy Spirit's instrument to get their attention, and Acts reports that they gathered in amazement (Acts 2:7). Perhaps the message they heard contained elements that addressed the questions they brought with them to Jerusalem. As Peter pleaded with them to save themselves by making a commitment to this new understanding of God, the story says that the people responded accordingly.

An important addition to the concept of conversion emerges from this story, which will reemerge many times throughout the rest of the book: the power of community. Thoroughly implicit, and yet ever present, community seems necessary for conversion to take place. The passage concludes with the fact that they "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). The presumption can be made that the converts' respective faith communities remained intact and that they returned to them. Many of those communities may even have experienced transformation into the Church, and while not explicitly stated, these new converts surely went on to experience the ongoing dynamics of transformation.

Having told the story of conversion from the bird's-eye view of the balcony, he drops down to ground level to give a different perspective. At the individual level, the

story of the Ethiopian eunuch provides more first-person insight to the needs of seekers to a new way of living.

The Ethiopian eunuch. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, in the eighth chapter of Acts, provides a look into the personal struggles that lead a person to being receptive to the gospel message. Like the God fearers in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian is a seeker, examining Scripture he does not understand (Acts 8:31). The nature of his seeking is revealed to the reader through the passage from the prophet Isaiah that consumed the eunuch's attention:

> "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
> and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
> so he did not open his mouth.
> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
> Who can speak of his descendants?
> For his life was taken from the earth."
> The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking
> about, himself or someone else?" (Acts 8:32-34).

The implication here is that in the words of Isaiah the Ethiopian found a reference of someone else who shared his own fate. Personal crisis, or at least transition, seems to be one thread that weaves through these different conversion events. While the exact nature of his personal interest is not spelled out, the reader can glimpse his search.

A consistent element in these two conversion stories is the presence of a representative of the new message who can function as both witness and surrogate community. Phillip performs these functions for the Ethiopian. As witness he is able to build a bridge from the Ethiopian's point of openness and questioning to the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:35). As a temporary community, Phillip was able to provide a flesh and blood setting in which the eunuch could question and test the assumptions of this new way of looking at things.

Consistently, the narratives show the individuals marking the event of conversion with an outward sign of commitment. As in the story of Pentecost, the Ethiopian makes a commitment to this new way and inaugurates that commitment by seeking baptism.

The road to Damascus. Perhaps the most clearly described case of conversion in the Bible remains Saul's conversion. In that account, many of the elements associated with conversion come into focus. The writer establishes Saul's initial mind-set by referring back to the prior episode of the stoning of Stephen: "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). The reader gets to see Saul's *turning* from one way of seeing the world, to another:

> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him,
>   "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
>   "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.
>   "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. (Acts 9:3-5)

For three days, Saul was blind, taking neither food nor drink. This event opens a period of crisis for him as he struggled with this miraculous experience of blindness. The time of his searching followed a classic three-day pattern seen in many places in Scripture (Exod. 10:22; Josh. 1:11; Jon. 1:17; Matt. 12:40) and ended with Saul being baptized immediately.

Saul expressed his commitment in the classic manner of his day: in baptism. To a man of the ancient world, baptism was neither new nor strange. Baptism held a place in Judaism as one of the three requirements of conversion, along with circumcision and sacrifice. In fact, initiatory cleansing played a part in almost every religion in the culture and was "a deliberate action in which a man left one religion to enter another, in which he said farewell to one way of life and committed himself to another" (Barclay 51). Baptism

represented a clean break with the past.

Another element consistently associated with conversion is present in this passage: the introduction of a witness who presents the new way. The presence of Jesus interjected himself into Saul's experience as the ultimate advocate for a new way. God, in the meantime, was preparing Ananias as a representative of the Christian community. Through this new community, Saul would begin to live out his new identity as defender rather than persecutor of the people of the way.

This aspect of conversion, community, appears in nearly every one of the conversion narrative stories, but often it is simply an understood part of the telling. In Saul's conversion though, the impact that community must have played in his life is revealed. The ongoing effects of his radical conversion would plague him throughout the rest of the book of Acts. When he enters the synagogue for the first time following his conversion, the people were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?" (Acts 9:21). For Saul, the internal reality of his conversion manifested outward, real-world ramifications in his community of fellow believers as he came face-to-face with those who had formerly been the targets of his persecution. The corporate dimension of conversion, seen here but only subtly implicit in some of the stories, represents a profound factor in the transformation of peoples' lives.

Key themes surrounding the topic of conversion in the biblical context include more than metaphorical imagery of a journey. The spiritual act of turning away from one thing and then toward the will of God is a precursor to understanding the larger picture of what conversion entails. That larger picture affects persons at the core of their self-

identity. The concepts of justification, and then adoption, and finally regeneration, all speak to humanity's destiny to become children of God. The narratives contained in the book of Acts, display in vivid detail the elements surrounding conversion: crisis, searching, the role of advocates, and community. These ideas help to frame an examination of conversion in a more contemporary context.

A survey of contemporary literature identifies four paradigms for understanding conversion: (1) a *cognitive* paradigm emerges from the scientific community; (2) an *experiential* paradigm is presented in the narrative account of Wesley's Aldersgate experience; (3) a *volitional* paradigm grows out of the middle-class work ethic and moral development models of the last century; and, (4) a *relational* paradigm emerges from the studies of Christian conversion conducted in the last thirty years.

Cognitive Paradigm of Conversion: Kuhn

William J. Abraham says that one of modernity's gifts to intellectual thought, was to interject the developments and assumptions of natural science, first into particular religious doctrines and then into the whole field of religion in general (189). The impact was to compartmentalize intellectual thought into different disciplines, and in doing so modernity required religion to prove itself in each of those realms or die. In many cases, Abraham notes, evangelism was the casualty. This shift in thought has left the work of conversion either to fundamentalism or to the scientific categories that the secular world uses to make sense of its existence.

Conversion as a Paradigm Shift

A common term associated with the cognitive aspects of conversion is the term "paradigm shift." The popular usage of the idea finds its origin in The Structure of

Scientific Revolutions by Thomas S. Kuhn. In the book, Kuhn analyzes how new ideas move through the scientific community changing the way science sees the world. Kuhn defines a paradigm as any new idea, or set of ideas, that is both compelling enough to attract an enduring group of adherents away from a competing idea and open ended enough to make possible the reassessment of previously known problems (10). The shifting of paradigms within the community is the normal and usual developmental pattern of science (12).

Kuhn's work reaches well beyond the bounds of the scientific community and proves particularly helpful in this study of conversion at the individual level. In Chapter 1 I observed that the community aspect of conversion was largely absent from many discussions surrounding conversion. Kuhn is not an exception. Aside from a discussion of how advocates for alternate paradigms compete for dominance, Kuhn treats the entire scientific community as a single individual. His insightful observations about how new paradigms replace outdated ones reveal many parallels with the cognitive process of conversion that occurs within the thought world of an individual.

Conversion as a revolution of thought. Paradigm shifts occur in much the same way that political revolutions happen: "by a growing sense … that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which that paradigm itself had previously led the way" (Kuhn 92). From the previous survey of conversion narratives in the book of Acts, I observed that personal crisis or transition often preceded the event of conversion. Crisis occurs when the existing paradigm proves insufficient to assist the individual in dealing with critical questions in life. Kuhn says, "Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones" (68). Such failure in the

scientific community sets the community on a quest for answers. When a failure of the rules occurs in an individual, the Christian community calls these people "seekers."

The failure of an existing paradigm. The implication of Kuhn's observation is that conversion simply does not happen without crisis. The seeking scientific community, as with an individual, seeks a new paradigm that will allow for alternate predictions and explanations of the crisis (Kuhn 98). As an example, a person leading a normal existence with an agnostic paradigm might be perfectly content with their understanding of the world around them. Their paradigm is sufficient to makes sense of the world until they experience the death of a child. In the wake of that death, lingering questions exist about the fate of the child that demand answers not available in the initial paradigm.

The promise of a new paradigm. Kuhn makes two observations about new paradigms that apply to the individual as well as to the scientific community. First, a new paradigm promises a better way of functioning (18). For the agnostic person who has lost a child, their search for answers culminates in a chance encounter with a Christian who has also lost a child but has been better able to move beyond the experience. In this case, the new paradigm promises a more adequate way to make sense of the experience.

A second observation that Kuhn makes is that new paradigms generally assist the individual by explaining relatively few problems that are seen as *acute,* while often leaving other discontinuities unexamined (23). Those other problems may warrant addressing later, or not at all. In the case of the individual struggling with the loss of a child, many areas of the individual's life may not conform to the promising new paradigm of Christianity but the acute issue is the loss of the child and not the various other realms of existence.

Ongoing consequences of conversion. The story of Saul's conversion

demonstrates the ongoing consequences of his newfound faith. He must address old

enemies in new ways, and old friends now see him as a new threat. The apparent

messiness of shifting paradigms, however, serves a purpose in the scientific community

and may serve a similar purpose in individual conversion. Kuhn observes that few people

"realize how much mop-up work of this sort a paradigm leaves to be done or quite how

fascinating such work can prove.… Mopping-up operations are what engage most

scientists throughout their careers." (24). Measuring old assumptions against new

standards furthers progress in the scientific community.

For the individual experiencing conversion, a paradigm shift in one area of life

will also dictate a reexamination of other areas of life in light of the new paradigm. Paul

often speaks of Christians being conformed to the likeness of Christ, but in Ephesians, he

also describes how the process of internal change plays out in the community:

> It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be
> evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people
> for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all
> reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and
> become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
> (Eph. 4:11-13)

The mopping-up operations for the convert not only contribute to the growth of personal

holiness, but also serve to anchor the convert, through Christ-appointed gifts to build up

the community, which is the body of Christ. Again, Scripture points to a corporate

consequence of conversion.

A Cognitive Approach to Evangelism

An evangelistic adaptation of this idea of *conversion-by-cognitive-change,* or

paradigm shift, is the witnessing model of the "Roman Road" (All About GOD

Ministries). In its various forms, it is a collected set of verses from Paul's letter to the

Romans that maps out a logical plan for "salvation and eternal fellowship with God. Just

follow these steps" (All About GOD Ministries). The plan goes on to list seven individual

verses from the book of Romans that are intended to convince persons to surrender their

life to Christ. The underlying assumption implies that if they could just understand, then

they would surely surrender to the obvious.

In the end, Kuhn's model is an excellent set of observations that assists in the

analysis of conversion, but in itself the cognitive model is not complete. Conversion is

more than acquiescence to a set of ideas. Ultimately, a cognitive model is not able to

address the *experiential, volitional,* or *relational* components of conversion.

Experiential Paradigm of Conversion: Wesley

Building upon the cognitive model, an emotional definition of conversion would

combine an experiential "heart" component with intellectual insight. In a study of 870

persons who reported making faith decisions before the age of ten, over half of them

remembered the event as a "balanced or evenly mixed (emotion and insight) decision"

(Crandall 75). Just under a quarter of the persons interviewed reported their decision as

mostly insight, and just over a quarter reported it as mostly an emotional experience. The

clear result of this study is that "adults who remember their childhood faith decisions see

them as a mixture of insight and emotions" (76).

John Wesley's Experience of Conversion

The pattern of Wesley's life leading to his Aldersgate experience in May 1738

demonstrates this experiential definition with stark clarity. Stephen Tomkins, in his

biography of Wesley, describes several encounters with the German Moravians that

ushered the cognitive Anglican into this new realm of experience. The fact that Wesley's

personal crisis culminated in such a manner is not surprising. "There is a long Anglican

tradition which affirms Scripture, Tradition, and Reason as the three sources and criteria

for the Church's faith" (Newbigin 52). As young Wesley struggled with the assurance of

his salvation, he had no paradigm with which to include emotional content in his criteria.

This event may have status as the "birth pangs" of the fourth component of the Methodist

formulation for faith, a personal experience with the Holy Spirit. This fourfold

formulation for faith is commonly referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Wesley

believed that the very heart of a healthy and vital Christian faith was "revealed in

Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by

reason" (Olson 76-85).

In the wake of the crisis of his missionary failure in Georgia, according to his

published journal, Wesley had "lost all hope of his salvation" (Tomkins 57). He felt he

had been trusting in his own fruitless works but had no real faith. In February 1738, he

came to know yet another Moravian, missionary Peter Bohler. As their acquaintance

grew, Wesley sought out Bohler to discuss theology:

> It was Bohler who told Wesley that he had no saving faith: he believed
> intellectually, but still hoped to become righteous by virtue of his own
> deeds, lacking the true faith that comes in an instant, bringing rebirth and
> an utter certainty of salvation.
>   Wesley was confused and uncertain about this, but found Bohler's
> ideas compelling. He made a typically logical case for his position, but
> Bohler's response was merely, "My brother, my brother, that philosophy
> of yours must be purged away." (Tomkins 58)

Bohler had named the felt need in Wesley's faith life. He was "lacking the true faith that

comes in an instant, bringing rebirth and an utter certainty of salvation" (58).

That "philosophy" of his, as Bohler calls it, *was* purged away on Wednesday, 24

May 1738, when the emotional component finally found a home in Wesley's cognitive faith paradigm. The famous Aldersgate experience was a broadening, paradigm-shifting event for Wesley, where he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation" (Wesley, Works 103). Scholars contend however, over whether or not to call it a true conversion. This point bears exploring in a following section.

For the purposes of this study, Wesley's heartwarming experience is being offered as a model for understanding the role emotional experience plays in conversion. The isolation of this event is somewhat artificial and not fully representative of Wesley's entire conversion experience. His description, however, typifies how many have experienced God's grace in conversion.

An Experiential Approach to Evangelism

Because of his contact with the Moravians, Wesley's practices of itinerant preaching changed dramatically. He began to exhort so controversially about the need for spiritual rebirth that "he was repeatedly asked not to return" (Tomkins 57). Those changes cemented into place at his Aldersgate conversion. From that moment on, the power of experience took a markedly prominent role in his outreach to the urban poor.

George G. Hunter, III reflects that Wesley, based upon his own experience, developed a distinctive four-step method of evangelizing secular urban people. His first step was "to 'awaken' people to the knowledge of their lostness, to their need for God, to a desire to 'flee the wrath to come' and experience a new life" (How to Reach Secular People 82). Second, they were connected, when possible, to a Methodist class meeting where through *experience* they might come to believe (82). In a third step, the awakened

people "were coached to expect that they would in God's good time and way experience their justification" (82). Finally, having experienced justification, they received coaching to expect a second experience of God's grace: sanctification (83).

Similar to an illustration of awakening used by George Whitefield, Ted A. Campbell describes Wesley's conception of his goal in preaching: to bring the listener blindfolded to the edge of a cliff and then to remove the blindfold. The listener was to experience the reality that he or she stood only one step away from slipping off into eternal damnation. In a consistent way, Wesley seemed committed to replicating in the lives of other people, the same conversion he had experienced at Aldersgate (Hunter, How to Reach Secular People 83). Wesley's specific desire was to move people from a purely cognitive belief to one that integrated a dynamic experience of spiritual reality.

The controversy of Wesley's conversion. A considerable debate rages about the legitimacy of calling Wesley's experience at Aldersgate a conversion. The contention does not center on *how* or *if* the event itself happened but how to interpret the event and how Wesley himself interpreted it. The prolific nature of Wesley's journaling habits have left textual critics with too much material to allow for an easy and consistent picture (Maddox 134). In his journals, Wesley recorded frequent references to the significance of 1738 for his own faith and for Methodism, but at the same time those references are all quite vague and could have been referring to the beginning of his open-air preaching or even the first society meetings. To confuse the debate further, Wesley's understanding of conversion changed through his life, as evidenced by his descriptions of his conversion at different times in his personal journaling. Tracking those changes from where he started to where he finally arrived, remains a difficult task.

Shortly before his Aldersgate experience, speaking to Bohler, Wesley contemplated giving up preaching. In response to this confession, Bohler told him, "Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith" (qtd. in Tomkins 58). As a response to that admonition, Wesley went to the castle prison to minister to a condemned man. By his own admission, he had never offered salvation to someone at the point of death because he had never believed in the possibility of instantaneous conversion (58). Wesley's views moderate after Aldersgate, but 2½ decades later, he seems to have returned to a skeptical view about how quickly conversion occurs: "We do not know a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving, in one and the same moment, remission of sins, the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new, a clean heart" (24).

Conversion, but only a little bit. The secular disbelief in the possibility of real inner change exists today. Martin E. P. Seligman, leading spokesperson for the emerging movement of Positive Psychology, makes an allowance for change, but within certain limits. He observes that researchers tend to find sudden changes interesting and gradual changes uninteresting (273). In his understanding, the word conversion becomes a descriptor for *sudden* change. An analysis of change, however, that focuses upon only sudden changes, as in conversion, and leaves out more gradual changes would lack credibility. Human beings may have a "set range," from both environmental and genetic factors, that dictates their ability to change, and they do not move out of that window (49).

Seligman admits that change is possible within that set range, primarily by *volitional* exercises whereby a person *chooses* to operate in the upper part of their range.

Through self-awareness testing and practical exercises, Seligman allows for a certain amount of sudden change. Conversion by anecdotal evidence if not by definition implies radical change outside of any such a set range or window.

In short, Seligman introduces a third component of conversion: *volition.* Through this act of *willing* the self toward a goal, a person may experience conversion, at least the amount of conversion allowed within the individual's preset range. While his work reflects the view of a self-ascribed secular, agnostic Jew, the concept of conversion by *volition* is a large part of the modernist paradigm of the Christian church.

Volitional Paradigm of Conversion: Kohlberg

If conversion consists of more than a paradigm shift, the addition of an emotional component does not complete the definition. In the Gospels, Jesus consistently calls for an act of the will: "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). In this section, I describe how the cultural mind-set of the last half century has majored in this *conversion-by-decision*, and how such a focus impacts current perceptions of conversion.

Modernity Defined

Many recent books attempt to address the ideas inherent in emerging *postmodernism*. Those definitions often define postmodernism by what it is not, citing the values of the group that came before: *modernism*. Modernity began roughly with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and ended sometime in the late twentieth century (Stetzer 119). The two generations still living today advocating a set of values that can be called modernity are the "Builder" and the "Boomer" generations. These people came of age beginning in the 1950s and asserted their values upon the culture through the end of

the century (106). Ed Stetzer draws upon the work of Millard Erickson to encapsulate

some of the values represented by these two generations:

- naturalism (reality is restricted to what can be observed or proved),
- humanism (humanity is the pinnacle of the universe),
- the scientific method (knowledge is inherently good and is attainable),
- reductionism (humans are highly developed animals),
- progress (because knowledge is good, its acquisition will lead to progress),
- nature (evolution-not a Creator-is responsible for life and its development),
- certainty (because knowledge is objective, we can know things for certain),
- determinism (the belief that things happen because of fixed causes),
- individualism (the supremacy of each individual and their ability to discern truth), and
- anti-authoritarianism (each person is the final arbiter of truth). (118)

Robert E. Webber details the approach to evangelism that the traditional evangelical

community has developed out of this modernist mindset, and from that approach, an

understanding of the *volitional* conception of conversion can be inferred.

A Volitional Approach to Evangelism

Webber speaks of the volitional approach to conversion, from the modernist

paradigm, as "Decisionism" affirmed by the public act of raising the hand and walking

the aisle (225). In many traditional churches, the altar call at the end of the worship

service carries as much significance as do the Holy Sacraments. In this paradigm,

conversion is expected to be instantaneous, and the convert is expected to *take on faith*

that his or her sins are forgiven and everlasting salvation has been attained. "American

evangelical Protestantism has been guilty, in its past, of making conversion a momentary,

instantaneous phenomenon—come down to the altar, confess your sin, and you are

instantaneously 'saved'" (Willimon 228). A literal reading of Paul provides such a

formula, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart

that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). This crisp verse does

not include any reference to the redeemed community, and those who have reduced it to a

formula for salvation without acknowledging all Paul had to say about the community

have missed a vital ingredient.

Though verbally assented to, the importance of living out the redeemed life within

the community of faith is deemphasized at best. The culture has labeled conversion and

assimilation as two separate processes, and many churches believe that they do one well

but not the other. The idea of isolating conversion from assimilation into community

finds formulaic expression in the "Four Spiritual Laws" written by Bill Bright, Founder

of Campus Crusade for Christ, International. The four laws cite New Testament verses

similar to the "Roman Road" formula:

> LAW 1: God LOVES you, and offers a wonderful PLAN for your life.
> LAW 2: Man is SINFUL and SEPERATED from God. Therefore, he
> cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.
> LAW 3: Jesus Christ is God's ONLY provision for Man's sin. Through
> Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.
> LAW 4: We must individually RECEIVE Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord;
> then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

Bright articulates this three-part definition of conversion at the end of law four:

> Just to agree *intellectually* [emphasis mine] that Jesus Christ is the Son of
> God and that He died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it
> enough to have an *emotional experience* [emphasis mine]. We receive
> Jesus Christ by faith, as an *act of will* [emphasis mine].

This paradigm represents the deepest expression of the value of individualism in the

complete commitment to the *volitional* nature of conversion as the four laws culminate

with one of the various forms of the "Sinners Prayer":

> *Lord Jesus, I need you. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I*
> *open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank*
> *You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the*

> *throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.*
> **Does this prayer express the desire of your heart?**
> If it does, pray this prayer right now, and Christ will come into your life,
> just as He promised.

In the best light, saying these words as if they were a formula seems dangerously close to

works righteousness. At its worst, the "sinners prayer" is an attempt to manipulate God

into doing his saving work. Further, reducing faith in God to a recited verse runs counter

to Paul's representation that salvation comes as the unearned gift of the Father: "For it is

by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift

of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Difficulties with the Volitional Paradigm of Conversion

Perhaps more than any other description of salvation, American evangelical

Protestantism speaks of having a *personal relationship with Jesus Christ*. A search of the

Internet revealed over sixty-three thousand hits for that specific phrase. This phrase is the

primary definition of salvation in the United Methodist Church's new evangelistic

curriculum, Beginnings (Langford and Ralls 104). Describing conversion/salvation as a

personal relationship makes three claims about the nature of being a Christian: (1)

Personal relationship with Jesus Christ implies a *cognitive* surrender to the ideals of

Christianity, moving from a worldly directed life or "self-directed life" to a "Christ-

directed life" (Bright); (2) the phrase implies an *emotional/experiential* dimension as

well; and, (3) seeking after a *personal relationship with Jesus Christ* calls the person to

move from external worldly motivations for his or her actions to internal, *volitionally*

Christ like motivations for those actions.

The metaphor of faith as a *personal relationship,* however, breaks down in its

complete absence of meaningful articulation of the role of community in the process of

conversion, for any living articulation of Christian faith includes the shared life of the

community of other believers. Further, a stark parallel exists between this threefold

definition of conversion, and Lawrence Kohlberg's description of the final stages of

moral development.

      Conversion and moral development theory. Kohlberg's research in moral

development has shaped the field of psychological study for almost half a century, and

perhaps the evangelical Christian community as well, paralleling the period of modernity

I have been analyzing. In his theory, "moral stages are grouped into three major levels:

preconventional level, conventional level, and postconventional level" (172). In her

application of Kohlberg's work to the Christian Community, Catherine M. Stonehouse

articulates the important jump from the conventional level to the postconventional level.

She says that in the shift from the middle level to the highest level of moral development,

the stimulus to "right action" (conversion, for the sake of this argument) moves from the

"desire to please important persons and perform one's duty to society" to acting "upon

the moral principles to which one is committed" (36).

      This shift of motivation from the *external* expectations of the community to the

internal commitment to moral Christian principle seems to approximate the criteria for

conversion for many people, captured in the word picture of having a personal

relationship with Jesus Christ. As an example, the practical question arises in the local

church of when to consider a youth old enough for believer's baptism or confirmation

through profession of faith. They might be asked if they *understand* what baptism means,

(seeking the *cognative* component). They might be asked if they are doing this for the

right reasons (seeking an appropriate amount of *emotional* engagement). They might then

be probed to see if they are mature enough to stand by the vows they will make (assessing their ability to make a *volitional* commitment without back-sliding). The final litmus test will center around the question of whether or not they are doing this out of peer pressure (measuring *external*, as opposed to *internal* pressures). The Roman Road concludes with: "Are you ready to accept God's gift of salvation now? If so, *believe* [emphasis mine] in what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross, *repent* [emphasis mine] of your sins, and *commit* [emphasis mine] the rest of your life to Him" (All About GOD Ministries).

The fallacy of the moral development model. If the Christian community has adopted, in any small way, the moral development model as its paradigm for conversion, then a major problem arises. In Kohlberg's study, only 13 percent of the people studied ever achieved the highest level of moral development, and all who did were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-two. Further, all the subjects who demonstrated the shift from externally-motivated action to internal and principle motivated action had experienced some graduate level education (458). In short, any equating of conversion with Kohlberg's third level of moral development implies that some people are simply incapable of true conversion.

Relational Paradigm of Conversion: Gelpi

In the following discussion, I am not suggesting that the *volitional* paradigm has not been successful. I believe it has been extremely successful communicating the gospel to modernist people. I suspect, though, that the success of the this paradigm was covertly tied to the inclusion of people into real and lasting community. Just as I observed in the conversion narratives of the book of Acts, community was a critical, even if it was the

invisible factor.

Webber paints a picture of conversion that actually takes into account the importance of community. He calls the church to a more biblical understanding of conversion this way:

> Conversion touches the heart and mind and includes a new ethical direction and a new communal dimension.…By entering into the community of faith, which embodies what it means to be a Christ community, a person is grasped by the embodied faith and brought to conversion, membership and a new life "within" the body. (133)

Community is implied if not observed in nearly every one of the seventeen conversion narratives in the book of Acts. Paul uses the body of Christ imagery to communicate the importance of the community. Webber is attempting to make the acknowledgement of community an overt part of the conversation.

Christianity as a Social Religion

Rather than taking the concept of community as an optional component in conversion, as in the *volitional* paradigm, community may very well be the prime element. Clearly the *heart*, the *mind,* and the *will* are all involved in conversion, but perhaps *community* represents the "glue" that holds those things together for a person:

> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth … remember that at that time you were *separate* [emphasis mine] from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." (Eph. 2:11-13)

Community is the setting in which heart, mind, and will are made new in Christ Jesus. Wesley called Christianity a "Social Religion" (Kinghorn, <u>Sermon on the Mount</u> 107). In Sermon 24, Discourse 4, he observes, "[T]he virtues of kindness, gentleness, and patience … cannot possibly exist without associating with other people" (108).

Donald M. Joy, drawing upon a report by Dr. E. Mansell Pattison that analyzes healthy relational networks, suggests that a person must maintain between twenty and thirty significant relationships in their life in order to be healthy. These relationships are marked by regular contact, high investment, strong emotional connection, and are mutually reciprocal and symmetrical (12). These relationships will come from immediate family, extended relatives, friendships, and associates from work, clubs recreation, church, etc. Individuals with impoverished relational systems, those containing less than ten to twelve persons can exhibit signs of depression and distortions in their perceptions of the world around them (13). Joy's assertion would suggest that community must be considered an essential ingredient in conversion.

A Relational Approach to Conversion

The work of Donald L. Gelpi takes into account the primary role of community in conversion. Over the past thirty years, Gelpi has done a systematic study of conversion from the internal and personal perspective while at the same time acknowledging the reality that radical change within an individual can and does take place. By 1984 he had identified at least seven different dynamics and counter-dynamics within the conversion process (Firstborn of Many 1: 11). In 1998, Gelpi codified those seven stages of conversion into a reflective process for the Right of Christian Initiation of Adults within the Roman Catholic Church. His concern is primarily with the teaching of Roman Catholic doctrine to converts within his own tradition, but his analysis of conversion has applications for those outside his tradition as well.

Understanding Gelpi's seven stages of the process of conversion begins with his definition of conversion. In 2001, Gelpi released a three-volume systematic theology,

calling it a <u>The Firstorn of Many: A Christology for Converting Christians</u>. In that work, he speaks of conversion in a general sense, as "the decision to pass from irresponsible to responsible behavior in some realm of human experience" (<u>3:</u> 561). He further distinguishes *initial* conversion from *ongoing* conversion. Initial conversion is "one's first assumption of adult responsibility in some realm of experience"(561). Ongoing conversion would be "living out the consequences of initial conversion" (561).

Gelpi tracks these initial and ongoing changes by observing these identifiable stages: (1) Conversion always occurs in a social context, which necessarily colors the conversation experience; (2) conversion usually involves some kind of personal crisis or transition; (3) personal crisis sets the potential convert on a religious quest; (4) in the course of that quest, he or she usually encounters the advocate of a particular religious tradition; (5) the advocate then introduces the potential convert to a religious community with which the potential convert interacts; (6) eventually, interaction bears fruit in religious commitment; and, (7) the seventh and final stage of conversion deals with the consequences of the religious commitment he or she has made (11). These seven stages, drawn from Gelpi's observations over the years, validate the *cognitive,* the *experientian,* and the *volitional* definitions of conversion while acknowledging the important place that community must play in the process.

This model also leaves room for the observer to see the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the process of conversion. The Holy Spirit often becomes the prompter of that internal change. Kuhn's vocabulary of paradigm shifts from the scientific community can really assist in unpacking Gelpi's seven stages.

Stage 1: original paradigm. Gelpi begins with the social context of the

individual experiencing conversion. His description presents conversion as a paradigm shift. This first stage acknowledges a paradigm, or a set of parameters, by which an individual has been making sense of the world. If this paradigm is fully capable and sufficient for making sense of life, conversion will not be necessary, and hence, no conversion will take place (Kuhn 92). Gelpi notes that paradigms are not replaceable at will. A new paradigm must supplant the old paradigm for the process to occur. This process of replacing the paradigm begins in the second stage.

Stage 2: personal crisis or transition. When the existing paradigm proves insufficient to assist the individual in dealing with critical questions, a personal crisis or transition occurs. This crisis, however, need not be overt but may be experienced in the realm of thought alone, in personal relationships, or in emotional and spiritual categories. Further, the crisis will not necessarily result in an abandonment of the existing paradigm in favor of a new one (Kuhn 97). Kuhn, in his analysis of paradigm shifts within the scientific community, observes two possible solutions to such a crisis. The first seeks a sufficient answer to the crisis through new experimentation but within the existing paradigm. Only when the existing paradigm fails is the second solution available: seeking answers beyond the original paradigm by the abandonment of that paradigm in lieu of another (97).

Personal crisis or transition seems to be a prerequisite for proceeding to the next stage in the conversion process. Through studies similar to Gelpi's work, Lewis R. Rambo concludes that no mater how slight or severe, crisis sets up the next stage of conversion: "In any case, a crisis, from whatever quarter it springs, will more than likely stimulate activity to relieve the discomfort, resolve the discord, remove the sense of

tension. For many, this activity can be identified as a quest" (55).

Stage 3: quest. If the insufficiency of the existing paradigm to meet the needs of the individual is profound enough to compel change, a quest ensues for answers to life's questions. At this seeking stage, an openness to new ideas and a window of receptivity to a possible new paradigm grows" (Gelpi, <u>Conversion Experience</u> 14).

 Stage 4: an advocate. In cases of successful conversion, an advocate for a new paradigm enters the scene, someone who espouses a new set of parameters by which the world around can be evaluated. The advocate need not be an individual but can be "metaphorically" experienced in an ideology, or even "spiritually" experienced in the case of religious conversion. In any case, the advocate is the embodiment of a new paradigm (Gelpi, <u>Conversion Experience</u> 15).

Stage 5: community. An advocate for the new paradigm can only propose the new set of rules. In this next stage, the new paradigm must be "tried on for size" within a community. The individual is seeking a replacement for the dysfunctional paradigm from stage 1, so the proposed new paradigm must prove its functionality in the context of this new community. Occasionally this community will be the same community from stage 1 (Gelpi, <u>Conversion Experience</u> 1).

Stage 6: commitment. At some point, if the new paradigm seems sufficient, it supplants the former paradigm and a commitment to the new life is made by the individual. If a single point of conversion exists, it occurs at this stage, but the turning is not the entire story. William Barclay makes this point with an analogy: If a train that must go from London to Glasgow is facing the wrong direction on the track, the train will proceed to a turntable and turn around, but afterwards, it still has a 450-mile journey

before it reaches the destination adumbrated in the turning (70). A danger exists in placing too much importance upon the point of turning when that "turning" is artificially divorced from the other stages of conversion.

Stage 7: consequences. The conflict created by the incomplete rejection of the prior paradigm is what Gelpi refers to when he defines *ongoing* conversion as "living out the consequences of initial conversion" (Firstborn of Many 3: 561). If all seven stages taken together describe a "macro" conversion, then this final stage would describe the "micro" conversions that must take place as the unexamined areas of life are continually encountered in the light of the new paradigm. In some cases, this stage may be more profoundly difficult than the initial conversion, which occurred in stage 6. The initial conversion may create family and community entanglements for years to come (18).

Focus of This Study: Identifying Operative Paradigms of Conversion

An adequate definition of conversion must include a cognitive component, an emotional component, a volitional component, and a relational component. Those first three dimensions express God's saving activity only when framed in the fourth component: the presence of community. Gelpi's model helps bring all four components together so that they may be seen working in concert, presenting conversion as a series of events within a larger context. As I proceeded to the interview stage of this dissertation, my major concern was to hear the stories of those interviewed, with a specific ear for how they themselves framed their experiences in the light of those four paradigms.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The training I received and the experience of serving as a pastor in the United Methodist Church since 1994 has taught me how to maintain and administrate an established local church whose structure and programs primarily serve to care for the existing believing community. A minority of United Methodist churches within the Texas Conference do, however, focus significant energy beyond the care of members to the conversion of non-Christians. These churches tend to be younger communities, established within the past fifteen years, who intentionally focus upon conversion ministries. My appointment to plant a new United Methodist church, called FaithQuest United Methodist Church, in growing, northeast Houston provided me the opportunity and the obligation to learn a new methodology for doing ministry that would include the conversion of non-Christian people.

Rainer suggests that there is a population who have been largely ignored in the researching of unchurched people. That untapped group of people represent the "formerly unchurched" (20). Since most studies examine the views of people who are not churched, he approaches his study from the viewpoint of those who have successfully made the transition from unchurched to churched.

Adopting Rainer's methodology in my own context, I interviewed twenty new Christians from four of these conversion-focused United Methodist churches in the Houston area. Personal interviews allowed me to identify the circumstances that

surrounded and precipitated their conversion and how they processed and made sense of these critical changes in their lives.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversion. The following research questions guided the study.

Research Question #1

What direct precipitating factor or factors led to the conversion?

Research Question #2

What paradigm for conversion seemed to be operative in the understanding of the individual?

Research Question #3

What paradigm for conversion best explained the event?

Subjects

Persons were solicited for interviews based upon four specific criteria: (1) Individuals attended a church in the greater Houston area that was less than fifteen years old, thus representing enculturation and biases similar to the population of served by FaithQuest; (2) individuals were reported, by their pastor, as having experienced a conversion within the two years immediately preceding the interview; (3) Individuals had experienced, expressed or celebrated their conversion within the United Methodist community faith in which they still resided; and, (4) None of the individuals interviewed were from the same household.

These criteria were chosen in order to fulfill the motivation for engaging in this project, which was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church. The first criterion was used in order to select the churches from which the participants were chosen. The following criteria established who would be selected for interviews.

The twenty participants ranged in age from 15 to 52, with sixteen of the twenty being over the age of 30. Eleven of the twenty participants were female, while nine were male. Fourteen of the twenty participants were married, two were divorced, and four were single. The majority of the participants were Caucasian, and from upper-middle-class environments, matching the demographics of the areas their churches served.

Design of the Study

Twenty persons were interviewed, five individuals from each of four churches, based upon the above criteria. Twenty interviews represented a large enough number to assure the information gathered would be indicative of the communities the churches served. The selection of five persons from four different churches established enough diversity to ensure no single community's ethos prevailed in the analysis of the resulting data.

The churches from which the interview participants were chosen were selected because they were able to report at least five conversions from different households. This qualifier was necessary in order to avoid having successive interviews from the same family, in cases where multiple conversions occurred in the same household. The churches were identified through several sources: (1) my own knowledge of pastors and

churches in the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, (2)

consultation with officials and district superintendents within the conference, (3)

statistical data from the annual conference journal, and (4) networking conversations with

fellow pastors and colleagues.

Pastoral Referrals

I contacted the pastors of identified churches by phone call or by a personal visit,

and solicited their assistance for the project. I then sent a follow-up letter to the pastors

who consented to assist in the project (see Appendix A). The letter included the list of the

specific criteria for selecting persons for interviews as well as a self-addressed, stamped

envelope for returning the names to me. Following receipt of names and contact

information, I sent a thank-you letter (see Appendix B) acknowledging the assistance,

and promised to share with them the findings of the study. Interviews took place, when

possible, at the worship locations of the selected churches. Because of building

availability and scheduling, two of the twenty interviews took place in an alternative

location selected by the participants. One was conducted in the participant's place of

business, and one was held in an area coffee shop. Dates and times for the interviews

were arranged by telephone calls.

Connecting with Participants

Once identified by their pastor, I called participants on the phone (see Appendix

C). The conversation included the following: (1) I introduced myself and the purpose of

the study; (2) I explained that their pastor had referred them for participation in this

study; (3) I asked if they would be willing to participate; (4) I scheduled a time and

location to conduct the interview; and, (5) I promised to send a letter confirming time and

location of the interview. Following the phone conversation, I sent the letter (see

Appendix D), which also thanked them in advance for their participation in the study.

Following the interview I sent a final letter thanking them for their participation in the

study (see Appendix E).

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between February and August 2006, and each

interview lasted between fifteen and twenty-five minutes. I recorded each interview by

both audiotape and digital video.

Setting

Interviews took place, when possible, in the regular worship location of the

individual's faith community, on either weekday evenings or Sunday afternoons. I also

tried to schedule the interviews within two weeks of initial contact.

Greeting

After introducing myself and meeting the participant, I thanked them for agreeing

to the interview and made the following statement:

> You will notice that the interview today is being recorded. This is simply
> to free me from having to write down your responses, so I can concentrate
> on what you are saying. These tapes will only be used by me, and those
> who assist me with data analysis. Any use of the interview will protect
> your anonymity. I also thank you, in advance, for sharing your story.

I also promised to answer any questions they might have after the interview was

completed.

Instrumentation

Before the interview began, the participants received a short questionnaire (see

Appendix F) collecting the following data: name, address, age, religious background if

any, baptized as an adult or as an infant, marital status, whether spouse is a Christian and for how long, and if parents are Christian and for how long. The questionnaire also contained a statement of consent whereby the participants indicated their willingness to participate in the study (see Appendix F).

Interview Questions

When the participants arrived and the recording equipment was turned on, I used the following interview protocol (see Appendix G): (1) I introduced myself; (2) I thanked them for their participation; (3) I explained the purpose of the study and that any recordings would be confidential and would protect their anonymity; (4) I collected their demographic information and consent to be interviewed; and, (5) I proceeded with the interview questions.

Interview question #1. "How did you become a Christian?" If that question did not prompt them to begin a narrative retelling of their conversion, then follow-up questions were used such as, "What was your life like before you became Christian?" and, "What brought you to this place?" If the participants were off topic, I attempted to focus them with statements such as, "Your pastor indicated that you had an experience. Can you tell me about that?" or, "Your pastor said that two years ago you would not have considered yourself Christian. What happened to change that?" Once the participant was telling his or her story, I asked value-neutral questions to keep the person on track, such as, "Could you tell me more about that?" (Stoddard 89).

Interview question #2. I concluded the interview with an opportunity for the participants to "self-code" their conversion experience, according to the operational

definitions of the four paradigms. This "self-coding" provided a valuable comparison during the later analysis of the data.

In order to eliminate bias from any perceived order in the paradigms, I printed the four operational definitions below on individual cards (see Appendix H). I handed the cards to the participant, giving the following instruction: "Please rank any of these four elements that are relevant, in order of their importance in your experience of becoming a Christian."

1) Convincing Argument

2) Emotional Experience

3) Personal Decision

4) Relationships in Community

I recorded the participants' self-coding on the back of their demographic questionnaire, for later comparison in my analysis of the interviews. In order to receive any unanticipated perceptions from the participants, the set of cards containing the operational definitions of the four paradigms also included a fifth card marked "Other." In the cases where this choice was selected, I recorded the information but treated the first operational definition in their ranking as if it had been the selection of greatest relevance. I concluded the interviews by thanking the participants for their willingness to participate.

Data Analysis

After the twenty interviews were completed, the digital video was transferred to computer files and burned to compact discs for viewing. The twenty interviews provided approximately three hours and fifty minutes of video, with the average interview lasting

from ten to twenty minutes. Because the desired data represented latent content, beneath the surface of the participants' personal narratives, inter-rater reliability was selected as the most appropriate method for analyzing the coded data from the interviews.

Establishing Specific Indicators

Having established four *paradigms* of conversion from the literature review, and utilizing the four *operational definitions* of those paradigms, a set of *specific indicators* were chosen for each paradigm based on tangible expressions that could be easily observed. The observance of those *specific indicators* would indicate when a paradigm could be said to be in operation in the understanding of the participant. Inter-rater reliability was used to identify those *specific indicators* in each interview and also to assess which paradigm was the most influential in the conversion event.

During the viewing of interviews, the observers were asked to listen for any reference to a specific moment when the participant indicated a change had taken place, using words such as, "That was when I knew" or, "I look back to that moment." Regarding that moment, when identifiable in their stories, the following *specific indicators* were established as indicative of each of the four paradigms: (1) If a specific argument, logical stumbling block, or an apologetic issue seemed to be resolved or if the participant essentially "talked themselves past the problem," then a cognitive paradigm was indicated; (2) if the participants described a moment where a feeling "washed over them" or they described themselves as a passive receiver of the experience, reminiscent of Wesley's heart being "strangely warmed," then an emotional paradigm was indicated; (3) if the participants felt compelled to take a specific action such as pray the sinners prayer, come forward in a worship service, be baptized, or if they made references to the

"Roman Road" or the "Four Spiritual Laws," or if they simply stated that they decided to "do it," then a volitional paradigm was indicated; and, (4) if a specific person or group of people were given credit for the event, or if they gave credit to characteristics of community such as, warm, friendly, inviting, non-judgmental, accepting and open, etc., then a relational paradigm was indicated (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Operational Definitions and Specific Indicators

Paradigm	Operational Definition	Specific Indicators
Cognitive paradigm	Convincing argument	specific argument, logical or apologetic issue, or "talked themselves past the problem"
Emotional paradigm	Emotional experience	described a feeling that "washed over them" or themselves as a passive receiver of an experience
Volitional paradigm	Personal decision	"the sinners" prayer, come forward, be baptized, "Roman Road" or the "Four Spiritual Laws
Relational paradigm	Relationships in community	person or community described as warm, friendly, inviting, nonjudgmental, accepting, open, etc.

Observer Training

An observation instrument was created listing the same *operative definitions* that the participants received during the interviews. The instrument provided space to allow the observers to take notes during viewing, and to "bubble" the appropriate paradigm as they identified *specific indicators* (see Appendix J).

Observer training followed protocols established by Matthew Lombard, Jennifer Snyder-Duch, and Cheryl Campanella Bracken at Temple University in Philadelphia. They describe the process this way:

> Assess reliability informally during coder training. Following instrument design and preliminary coder training, assess reliability informally with a small number of units which ideally are not part of the full sample (or census) of units to be coded, and refine the instrument and coding instructions until the informal assessment suggests an adequate level of agreement. (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Campanella Bracken)

Observers were asked to fill out a demographic sheet gathering the same information as the information solicited from the participants (see Appendix I). This collection was done in order to assess any reliability problems that might have arisen during coding. No such problems were identified. Approximately one hour was spent training the observers. The sequence of training followed the pattern established by Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Campanella Bracken:

1. The four paradigms identified in the literature review of Chapter 2 were explained, operative definitions of the four paradigms were explained, and specific indicators were discussed (see Table 3.1).

2. When the observers understood the content of the four paradigms, operational definitions, and specific indicators, the group progressed to viewing the first of two training interviews.

3. The observers scored their observations on the instrument (see Appendix J).

4. Observations were shared and justifications for selecting one paradigm over the others were compared and contrasted, specific indicators were discussed and refined.

5. The process was repeated with the second practice interview.

Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken suggest, "If at all possible, when selecting the original sample for the study select a separate representative sample for use in coder training and pilot testing of reliability" (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Campanella Bracken). Accordingly, the two interviews used for training purposes were not part of the sample but were conducted with all the other interviews using identical parameters and practices. The two interviews were not included in the final sample because they represented a second interview from the same household and therefore fell outside the parameters for desired interviews. The participants in these two cases did not know that their interviews would not be used in the final sample, thus guaranteeing a representative sample for training purposes. The actual level of inter-rater reliability for the two practice interviews was calculated at .875.

Coding Observations

Immediately following the one-hour training, the observers proceeded with viewing the interviews. All training and coding took place in one session. The coding took approximately six hours, and all four observers were present for the entire session. Sequence of coding followed this pattern: (1) the interview was viewed; (2) the observers scored their observations on the instrument; (3) the process was repeated with the next interview until all interviews had been coded; and, (4) the data was collected with reliability being assessed at a later time.

Compiling the Data and Establishing Reliability

The data was collected by hand using four observers, and verified through inter-rater reliability. According to William Wiersma of the University of Toledo, the internal validity of qualitative research relies upon logical analysis of the results, as the researcher

develops the description of the phenomenon under study (211). Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken allow for coefficients of .70 to assess reliability in some exploratory studies (4). Four observers were employed to identify one of four paradigms for each interview in a sample of twenty interviews. This coding generated a field of eighty selections from 320 possible. Allowing for differences in observations and the number of observers making those observations, the appropriate minimum acceptable level of reliability was established at .75. The actual level of reliability was calculated at .79.

Chapter 4 reports on the demographics of the participants who were interviewed, and also looks at the results of the interviews and the gathered data, organized under headings corresponding to the three research questions. In Chapter 5, eight specific findings warrant further exploration. From Research Question #1, the direct precipitating factors that led to the conversions are examined. From Research Questions #2 and #3, the subjective and objective viewpoints of the observers are examined as well as the four paradigms for conversion. Finally serendipitous findings highlight the receptivity of different religious backgrounds to the gospel message being offered through the medium of the United Methodist Church.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversion. The motivation for engaging in this project was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church.

The following research questions guided the study: (1) What direct precipitating factor or factors led to the conversion? (2) What paradigm for conversion seemed to be operative in the understanding of the individual? (3) What paradigm for conversion best explained the event?

Profile of Participants

Participants were solicited for interviews based upon four specific criteria: (1) Individuals attended a church in the greater Houston area that was less than fifteen years old, thus representing enculturation and biases similar to the population represented by FaithQuest; (2) individuals were reported, by their pastor, to have experiencing a conversion within the two years immediately preceding the interview; (3) individuals had experienced, expressed, or celebrated their conversion within the United Methodist community of faith in which they still resided; and, (4) none of the individuals interviewed were from the same household.

The twenty participants ranged in age from 15 to 52, averaging 35.6 years of age. Eleven of the twenty participants were female, while nine were male. Fourteen of the twenty participants were married, two were divorced, and four were single (see Table 4.1). Nineteen of the twenty participants were Caucasian, one was Malaysian, and all

were from upper-middle-class environments, consistent with the demographics of the

areas served by their churches.

Table 4.1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status
Participant #1	F	34	Married
Participant #2	M	46	Married
Participant #3	F	38	Married
Participant #4	F	52	Married
Participant #5	M	48	Divorced
Participant #6	M	33	Married
Participant #7	F	25	Married
Participant #8	M	37	Married
Participant #9	F	39	Divorced
Participant #10	F	49	Married
Participant #11	F	39	Married
Participant #12	M	38	Married
Participant #13	F	38	Married
Participant #14	F	18	Single
Participant #15	M	35	Single
Participant #16	M	38	Married
Participant #17	F	37	Married
Participant #18	F	37	Married
Participant #19	M	15	Single
Participant #20	M	16	Single

* divisions reference data collection by individual churches

When asked to report their religious background, if any, six of the participants reported none. Six participants reported a Roman Catholic background. Five participants reported a Methodist background. Four other denominations were reported only one time each: Baptist, Mormon, Nazarene, and Lutheran. One participant reported her religious background as Muslim (see Table 4.2).

When asked to report information about their Baptism, ten participants responded that they had received Baptism as adults. Nine participants reported having been baptized as an infant or as a child. Three participants reported having been baptized more than once, and the two youngest participants had not yet received baptism (see Table 4.2). When asked to report the religious identity of their families, nine of twenty participants indicated that both their spouses and their parents was Christians. Six participants reported that their parents were Christians, but not their spouses. Four participants reported that their spouses were Christians, but not their parents. The previously Muslim participant reported that neither her former spouse, nor her parents were Christians (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Participant Religious History

Participant	Religious Background	Baptized as	Is Family Christian?
Participant #1	Methodist	Adult	Spouse/parents
Participant #2	Roman Catholic/ Methodist	Infant	Spouse/parents
Participant #3	Roman Catholic	Infant	Spouse only
Participant #4	Roman Catholic	Child	Spouse/parents
Participant #5	Roman Catholic/ Mormon	Infant (RC)/ Adult (LDS)	Parents only
Participant #6	Roman Catholic	Infant	Spouse only
Participant #7	Methodist	Infant/Adult	Spouse/parents
Participant #8	None	Infant	Spouse/parents
Participant #9	Muslim	Adult	None
Participant #10	Nazarene/Methodist	Adult	Parents only
Participant #11	Methodist	Adult	Spouse only
Participant #12	None	Adult	Spouse only
Participant #13	Baptist	Child	Spouse/parents
Participant #14	None	Infant	Parents only
Participant #15	Roman Catholic	Adult/Adult	Parents only
Participant #16	None	Infant	Spouse/mother
Participant #17	None	Adult	Spouse/parents
Participant #18	Lutheran	Adult	Spouse/parents
Participant #19	Christian	Never	Parents only
Participant #20	None	Never	Mother only

Research Question Findings

Research Question #1 was answered by means of personal interviews with new

Christians from selected churches. Research Question #2 was answered by asking the

participants being interviewed to rank the importance of four different paradigms in their

conversion. Research Question #3 was answered by a review of the interviews by an

independent panel of observers, familiar with the four paradigms.

Research Question #1 Findings

Five factors repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews as precipitating factors

in the conversion experiences. In twelve of the twenty cases, participants credited the

church with a specific program, service, event, or characteristic as being a precipitating

factor in their conversions. In seven of the twenty cases, participants reported situations

that involved substantial transition, if not crisis, in their personal lives. In six of twenty

cases, participants credited their conversions to situations involving their children. In five

of the twenty cases, participants had relocated their families to a new city and social

environment in advance of their conversion. In four of the twenty cases, participants

reported a spouse had preceded them in becoming Christian and played an important role

in their conversions (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3. Research Question #1 Findings

Participant	Precipitating Factor or Factors That Led to Conversion
Participant #1	divorce, then death of father (crisis)
Participant #2	relocated and experienced community (children, church, relocation)
Participant #3	led by husband (spouse)
Participant #4	Alpha course answered critical God questions (church)
Participant #5	death of a friend (crisis)
Participant #6	depression and deteriorating marriage (crisis, spouse, church)
Participant #7	six deaths in decade, husband has near death experience (crisis)
Participant #8	birth of first child (children)
Participant #9	a Christian friends love in the midst of divorce (crisis)
Participant #10	felt a need to expose children to church (children, church, relocation)
Participant #11	led by husband and mother-in-law (spouse)
Participant #12	wife's conversion (crisis, spouse)
Participant #13	moved to new neighborhood, invited by neighbors (church, relocation)
Participant #14	experience at a youth event (church)
Participant #15	life at a dead end, isolation (crisis, church, relocation)
Participant #16	birth of children (children, church, relocation)
Participant #17	adoption of daughter (children, church)
Participant #18	having children baptized (children, church)
Participant #19	experience at a youth event (church)
Participant #20	experience at a youth event (church)

Research Question #2 Findings

At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to reflect upon their conversion and categorize the experience according to the operational definitions of four paradigms for conversion: *cognitive, emotional, volitional, or relational*. The distribution of answers did not follow an obvious pattern with respect to

the participant's home church. Eight of the twenty participants characterized their experience as a "personal decision." Seven of the twenty participants characterized their conversion as primarily an "emotional experience." Three of the twenty participants attributed their conversion to a "convincing argument." Two participants credited "relationships in community" as being the most influential element in their conversion (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Research Question #2 Findings

Participant	Participants Self-Coding
Participant #1	Emotional experience
Participant #2	Convincing argument
Participant #3	Convincing argument
Participant #4	Convincing argument
Participant #5	Personal decision
Participant #6	Emotional experience
Participant #7	Personal decision
Participant #8	Personal decision
Participant #9	Emotional experience
Participant #10	Personal decision
Participant #11	Emotional experience
Participant #12	Personal decision
Participant #13	Personal decision
Participant #14	Personal decision
Participant #15	Relationships in community
Participant #16	Relationships in community
Participant #17	Emotional experience
Participant #18	Emotional experience

| Participant #19 | Emotional experience |
| Participant #20 | Personal decision |

Research Question #3 Findings

Utilizing inter-rater reliability for coding data by four observers and allowing for differences in observations, the appropriate minimum acceptable level of reliability was established at .75. After processing the answers, the actual level of reliability was found to be .79 (see Appendix K). As in the findings of Research Question #2, the distribution of answers did not follow an obvious pattern. In twelve of the twenty interviews, or 60 percent of the time, the observer's identified operative paradigm differed from the participant's self-coding (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Comparing Findings from Research Questions #2 and #3

	Research Question #2	Research Question #3
Participant	Participant's Self-Coding	Observers' Coding
Participant #1	Emotional experience	Convincing argument
Participant #2	Convincing argument	Emotional experience
Participant #3	Convincing argument	Personal decision
Participant #4	Convincing argument	Convincing argument
Participant #5	Personal decision	Emotional experience
Participant #6	Emotional experience	Personal decision
Participant #7	Personal decision	Personal decision
Participant #8	Personal decision	Personal decision/Emotional experience
Participant #9	Emotional experience	Relationships in community
Participant #10	Personal decision	Personal decision/Relationships in community
Participant #11	Emotional experience	Relationships in community
Participant #12	Personal decision	Personal decision
Participant #13	Personal decision	Personal decision/Convincing argument
Participant #14	Personal decision	Emotional experience
Participant #15	Relationships in community	Personal decision
Participant #16	Relationships in community	Relationships in community
Participant #17	Emotional experience	Personal decision
Participant #18	Emotional experience	Personal decision/ Relationships in community
Participant #19	Emotional experience	Personal decision
Participant #20	Personal decision	Personal decision

Summary of Major Findings

Eight specific findings warrant further exploration in Chapter 5. From Research Question #1, regarding the direct precipitating factors that led to the conversions, the role that the church plays in conversion will be examined, as well as the role that family plays

in conversion. From Research Questions #2 and #3, the subjective viewpoints of the

participants will be contrasted with the objective viewpoints of the observers. Those

viewpoints will then be compared using each of the four paradigms for conversion.

Finally serendipitous findings will highlight the receptivity of different religious

backgrounds to the gospel message being offered through the medium of the United

Methodist Church.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Background

As a young associate pastor a full decade ago, I witnessed my first conversion. That moment filled me with both awe and trepidation at the same time. I was awed that God was working so profoundly in the life of a young coffee shop owner named Hiram, and that my youth leaders and I had been given a wonderful opportunity to watch the Spirit of God become real in his life. I was even blessed to play a small (if uncredited) part in the experience that unfolded. At the same time though, the awe was tempered by trepidation at the thought that he might want to come to my church. I knew instinctively that he would not be well received and would not receive the support and encouragement he needed as a new Christian.

My fear was also mixed with a little shame, for I knew that I came from the same mind-set as the historic, member-focused church I served. My understanding of the process of conversion was sparse and theoretical. I knew *about* conversions. I had heard stories of people involved in drugs and abuse, violence and illegal activity, and who had somehow found Jesus and become like me but had not actually seen a conversion for myself, only the evidence of it.

The Problem

My life experience had not prepared me to walk along beside Hiram through his conversion. Unfortunately, neither did my church or my seminary training. Gratefully, Hiram found a church near his home and did not visit mine. My church's culture would not have had a place for him. As a community we were a loving church, but we were largely unaware of the questions and struggles a new Christian would have.

That year, I began to pray, "Lord please let me do something vital to help advance your kingdom!" I wanted to see conversions happen in my own ministry. Over time that prayer also became a prayer for my denomination, for renewal, for vitality, and for a change of focus within our tradition.

The Project

Against this backdrop, a small number of recent church plants within the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church represent a new commitment to conversion ministry. These churches are measuring, preparing for, and, therefore, witnessing multiple conversions. Such churches represent a new vitality for the denomination. In March 2004, I was given the opportunity to plant a new United Methodist Church in the Houston area. This charge represented for me, the opportunity to build a church focused upon the Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Researching conversion, I was able to visit and experience these new churches that are bearing fruit in this way. The purpose of this study was to identify paradigms of conversion operative in United Methodist churches of the Texas Annual Conference and how the participants themselves understood their own conversions. My motivation for engaging in this project was to develop an understanding of conversion that would inform the practice of ministry within my local setting, as well as the larger United Methodist Church.

The following research questions guided the study: (1) What direct precipitating

factor or factors led to the conversion? (2) What paradigm for conversion seemed to be operative in the understanding of the individual? (3) What paradigm for conversion best explained the event?

Research Question #1 was answered by means of personal interviews with new Christians from selected churches. Research Question #2 was answered by asking the participants being interviewed to rank the importance of four different paradigms in their conversion. Research Question #3 was answered by a review of the interviews by an independent panel of observers, familiar with four paradigms.

Major Findings from Research Questions

Research Question #1 provided an opportunity to identify any elements that had played a part in the conversion events of the participants. Two major themes emerged from the interviews as direct precipitating factors in the lives of the participants. The first direct factor was the varied ways in which their churches responded to their needs.

The Role of the Church in Conversion

In several of the United Methodist churches where I have served, when an altar call was offered at the end of a worship service, the crowd's response was often nothing more than an uncomfortable shifting in the seats. If such overt opportunities to respond to God were offered too frequently, the established membership then voiced resistance, calling that kind of thing "too Baptist," emotionally manipulative, or even unnecessary. From frustration, I learned to acquiesce to their demands to stop making them uncomfortable. I am now ashamed of my own leadership. As James says about prayer, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (Jas. 4:2). Perhaps churches do not experience conversions because they do not offer opportunities to respond.

Need-meeting ministries. While conducting interviews of new Christians from these Houston Area churches, twelve of the twenty participants credited the church with a specific program, service, event, or characteristic as being a precipitating factor in their conversions (see Table 4.3, p. 66). Participants from three of the four churches indicated that the Alpha Course (Gumbel 4) had been significant in their experience. Participants from two of the four churches also credited some kind of addiction recovery program for their conversion. All three of the teenage participants experienced their conversions while attending church sponsored youth events.

All these participants had in common an unfulfilled need that the church stepped up to address with targeted need-meeting ministries. The individuals whom I interviewed had identifiable needs: some for answers (as provided by Alpha), some for healing and freedom (as provided through the addiction recovery programs), some for simple and clear presentation of Christianity, and perhaps an uncoerced opportunity to respond to God in a tangible way (as was provided by the youth events).

From Kuhn's analysis of how change occurs, these articulated needs can be seen as a failure of the participants' existing framework to provide adequate answers for the questions posed by their life circumstance (68). This failure of the existing rules in their lives opened them to search for better answers. This active seeking seemed to be the prelude for conversion in each of these twelve individuals, and the church provided a safe setting in which their needs could be explored as well as filled.

Based upon these observations, many of the people who visit churches are experiencing some kind of "framework failure" that has brought them in search of resolution. Because these needs are often unvoiced and invisible, the individuals visit a

church a few times and move on. A church's normal response to visitors such as a phone call or a letter may not be serving the need these individuals have. A phone call might fill the need a person may have to be noticed but would be inadequate to address the various needs I saw represented in these participants.

Crisis response. Seven of the twenty participants reported situations that could be described as an overt or substantial crisis in their personal lives and another five of the twenty participants reported that they had relocated their families to a new city and social environment in advance of their conversion (see Table 4.3, p. 66). If a common thread ran through all twelve of the individuals, it had to do with their relational networks. While only two of the participants were dealing with the death of someone close to them, the rest of these participants had experienced a threat or loss to their relational network through events such as divorce, change, relocation, or isolation from others. In these cases, the church had not responded directly to the individuals' needs by way of programs; instead, these individuals in relational crisis were approached by other Christians who, in turn, offered up their church communities as a possible remedies or solution.

Joy, in analyzing what he calls "toxic loneliness" in individuals, suggests that human beings need between twelve and twenty significant relationships in their lives in order to remain healthy. This natural and inborn hunger for intimacy, significance, and community are really expressions of a built-in hunger for God (16).

After two years of anecdotal observation while planting a new church, most of the families who visit our church are in the first eighteen months of residency in the neighborhood. While not all of them would describe their worlds as being in crisis, they

are almost always responsive to opportunities to relate to new people. Beyond that first year and a half, these families are much more set into a comfortable routine and take a significant amount of enticing to engage them on a Sunday morning.

Based upon the large numbers of persons in this study who had been desperately close to the minimum number of relationships required to remain healthy, people in this environment are living relationally impoverished lives, even while residing in one of the most densely populated parts of the country. Isolated persons may be prime candidates for the touch of authentic Christian relationships from which conversion may naturally flow.

The Role of the Family in Conversion

From the review of literature, I was expecting to encounter substantial crisis in nearly all the participants. While both Gelpi and Rambo suggest that some form of crisis usually precedes conversion (Rambo 44), approximately one-third of the participants did not demonstrate evidence of any crisis. Instead, those individuals seemed to be living perpetually with a sort of low-level discontinuity that had never risen to the level of crisis requiring an active response. The tipping point for the conversion of many of those individuals appeared to involve situations revolving around their families.

Children. Six of twenty participants credited their conversions to situations involving their children (see Table 4.3, p. 66). Hunter, in a Beeson Pastor 2003 class lecture, observed that people experiencing important life transitions are more receptive to conversion than people in more stable periods of their lives ("Post-Baptismal Follow-Up"). Some of those windows of receptivity may be puberty, marriage, college, and the birth of a first child.

Through the perceived needs of their children, these participants opened themselves to a new willingness to encounter God. Three of the six participants expressed the need to have their children baptized, even if they did not fully understand what baptism meant theologically. Through the education process with their pastors, they came to understand their own need and requested to be baptized with their children. The other three participants connected with their church through programs that drew their older children in the church community. Through that contact with the church, they opened the door to change.

Spouses and siblings. Four of the twenty participants reported that their spouses had preceded them in becoming Christians and that they had played important roles in their conversions (see Table 4.3, p. 66). Two other participants who were single similarly reported a sibling had preceded them in becoming Christian. In the case of non-married participants, the siblings may have played the same part in their conversions as the spouses had in the conversions of the married participants.

Anecdotally, while not properly part of the sample, the power of these family influences was demonstrated while setting up the interviews with the pastors. A precondition for these interviews required that only one participant from a household be included in the sample. The reason for this restriction was simply to broaden the perspectives gained from the sample as much as possible; however, six times during the selection process, I was asked by pastors to interview multiple family members who had experienced conversion in succession. Four of the instances involved a husband and wife, and two of the instances involved siblings. (In two of those instances I honored the request and used the non-qualified interview as training for the observers.)

An exploration of the extent of this familial influence may shed light upon the instances in Scripture that seem to imply that whole families converted together, such as, "Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he and all his household believed" (John 4:53). Everett Ferguson describes this familial unity in the typical Roman family of biblical times. This unity is referred to as the *genius* or the "life principle" of the family. This spirit of the Roman family received great reverence and was believed to be embodied in the living male head of the family (159). Such an understanding of the family may have been a first-century description of the same dynamic I witnessed when multiple family members in the same household wanted to be interviewed for this study. Based upon the observation of so many individuals experiencing conversion through the influence of family, such collective, family-wide experiences might be a factor in virtually all of the conversion experiences, even though the individualistic culture does not pay close attention to relational networks.

Contrasting Subjective and Objective Views of the Conversions

Research Question # 2 and Research Question #3 approached the same material from two different perspectives. Research Question #2, "What paradigm for conversion seemed to be operative in the understanding of the individual?" approached the conversion event from the perspective of the individual. Research Question #3 approached the same conversion event from the more objective viewpoint of an observer by asking, "What paradigm for conversion best explained the event?"

The intentional decision to shine two different spotlights on the event of conversion was twofold. First, I wanted to gain some understanding of how self-aware

individuals were of their own motivations for becoming Christian. In twelve of the twenty interviews, or 60 percent of the time, the participants identified a different operative paradigm than the observers (see Table 4.5, p. 69). From this observation, two dynamics may have affected the reporting. First, the participants may have had trouble analyzing their own motivations for their conversions. Second, they may have been motivated to convert by factors that were not conveyed through their narrative retelling. Based upon the methodology employed, which involved a semi-structured, opened-ended format, the participants were able to share everything they felt relevant to the story, but perhaps they were less aware of their own motivations than the observers. Therefore, in analyzing the individual paradigms credited for the conversions, weight should be given to the observers perspectives over the participants perspectives.

The second reason for viewing the conversion events from both subjective and objective viewpoints was that it gave two opportunities to observe a pattern I expected to find but did not actually materialize. The parameters of the study called for five participants from four different churches. This requirement was adopted with an expectation that a consistent paradigm might be observed among the participants in a single church, (revealed through one or both perspectives), thereby allowing for interpretations of what a specific church was doing to facilitate conversion *by that consistently observed paradigm.* In the end, no such consistency was observed among different churches, from either perspective.

Based upon this lack of consistency of paradigms observed from any single church, the conversion events probably did not occur in response to something the *churches* were doing, but were occurring more in response to conditions in the lives of

the *participants themselves*. This observation bears relevance for the broader church, especially when asked this way: "Were the churches doing something to *produce* conversion, or were they only in the *harvesting* business?" The answer to this question may lie in the concept of prevenient grace. God is already in every person's life in numerous ways long before the church speaks the word of truth to them. The church is never first and is never alone in witnessing. Dennis F. Kinlaw calls this dynamic of prevenient grace, the "law of the second witness" (81). The church's role is to read the mind of the Spirit, try to discern how God is working in their lives, and then to assist them in pursuing the divine pattern for their lives.

Campbell's perception of Wesley's goal in preaching would indicate that conversion *can* be prompted or produced. He describes Wesley attempting, through the act of preaching, to bring the listener "blindfolded to the edge of a cliff and then to remove the blindfold." The listener was expected to experience the reality that he or she stood only one step away from slipping off into eternal damnation, thereby converting. During these twenty interviews, only three cases appeared to follow this pattern. They occurred in the youngest of the participants, all teenagers, who had experienced their conversions during youth-oriented worship events that were not held in their home churches. From this observation, conversion may occur either way, but the churches through which I obtained the sample all tended to *harvest* rather than *incite* conversion experiences.

The observation that churches were likely responding to conversions that were naturally occurring in the population, rather than using a specific method to incite conversions to take place, informs analysis of the individual paradigms. This educated

assumption suggests that in analyzing the conversions through the lenses of the four paradigms, weight should be given not only to the observers' perspectives over the participants' perspectives, but also weight should be given to what was happening *in the participants* over what was happening in the churches. Then, later in this chapter, specific recommendations for ministry will be offered in response to what was occurring within the participants' lives as they were experiencing conversion, as well as what the church is prepared to offer to individuals that will assist them in moving toward conversion.

Comparison of Four Paradigms

As observers listened to what was happening in the lives of the participants, several important observations, stood out. Each of the paradigms presented unique challenges for the church.

Volitional paradigm. While eight of the twenty participants themselves characterized their experience as a "personal decision" (see Table 4.4, p. 67), the observers identified the volitional paradigm as being operative in twelve out of twenty interviews. This difference in perception would indicate that a part of the culture of Christianity ingrained in the participants included an understanding that a person must do something in order to be saved. The sample of individuals selected for this study consistently represented a Caucasian, middle-class, and suburban mind-set. This apparent preference for *volitional* conversion could arise out of the predominant preference for motivated self-action in today's culture. At this socioeconomic level, a popular notion of "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps" exists. An equally common belief that the Bible says, "God helps those who help themselves." Clearly, a volitional paradigm seems suited to fit the culture being examined in this study. Whatever the cause, the

understanding of some of the participants seemed to include a preprogrammed idea that

the deal was not sealed until they walked the aisle of a church, prayed the sinner's prayer,

or were baptized.

The participants, themselves, were not always aware when they were operating

from this belief; thus, in self-coding their experiences, they chose another paradigm as

being operative. Participant #3 expressed herself this way:

> In the last four years of my life, I've just been really lost, not feeling very
> whole, something was missing, and I wasn't quite sure what it was. And
> about a year ago, I started figuring out what it was, and I knew it was God,
> and I just wasn't sure [pause] I knew what I had to do, I just wasn't ready
> to do it!"

She then referenced the painting, <u>Christ at Heart's Door</u> by Warner Sallman, in which

Jesus is pictured knocking at a door with no doorknob:

> One of the persons says, "Where is the door handle? You missed it." and
> the painter is like, "No, the door handle is on the inside because you have
> to open it up." And then I really made that connection about my salvation,
> and just realizing that that was God, or Jesus, knocking at the door for a
> very long time in my life. So I finally opened it up, and it was such a
> relief.

When asked to clarify her figurative language, she said that she prayed the sinner's

prayer and then "got in front of the church" and joined. While the observers identified

many of the specific indicators for the Volitional paradigm, such as the participants felt

need to do something, the participant herself, credited her conversion to a convincing

argument.

Observing such a powerful influence of the volitional requirement upon a

participant, was both disturbing and encouraging at the same time. God's prevenient

grace seems to have appropriated this volitional model as a framework for individuals to

walk toward him, and that is encouraging. At the same time, the prevalence of the

volitional paradigm is disturbing because it reduces the experience down to a utilitarian

simplicity that approaches a *works-righteousness*, implying simply, "do this, and God's

got to let you in!" Such an image runs counter to Paul's representation that salvation

comes as the unearned gift of the Father: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through

faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one

can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). A fine line exists between humanity's work of surrender, and the

saving work of Christ for humanity.

At the same time, however, this tendency toward a formula for salvation was also

encouraging. These individuals understood in their own mind that they had made the

decision to follow Christ and had spoken it (or done it) and that they were now converted.

Ultimately, in spite of all its "theological sloppiness," based upon the number of

participants who were operating from the volitional paradigm, this lens may offer the

most effective approach for walking with someone through conversion. After all, Paul

also articulated the basic formula for salvation:

> If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart
> that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your
> heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you
> confess and are saved. (Rom. 10:9-10)

Paul seemed to be aware that some people will not come to Christ without the path being

made clear and simple for them.

Relational paradigm. While only two participants credited "relationships in

community" as being the most influential element in their conversion (see Table 4.4, p.

67), observers identified five out of twenty instances where relationships and the

community of the church were the operative factor. Again, this observation indicates that

relationships, while important in the process, remain part of the setting rather than the "agent of change" in the mind of many converts. While Gelpi's analysis that crisis was a necessary part of conversion was not borne out in this study, his analysis of role that advocates and the community play in conversion was consistent with this project's findings. Gelpi says that when people are in the seeking stage, they will often encounter an agent or advocate for a new way of making sense of life. That advocate becomes a guide for seekers as they enter together into a community of people who live by this new set of ideas. In that community, seekers are given the opportunity to "test-drive" a new identity and the rules surrounding it (16).

These five participants' personal stories all described experiencing first an advocate and then a "new kind of place" different than any they had ever experienced before. From the descriptions of agents and the communities in which these participants were immersed, relative spiritual and relational health within a church community may be a mandatory prerequisite to ministering to individuals who will convert by means of a relational paradigm.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Kohlberg's highest level moral development described individuals as being motivated by internal moral principles rather than by the pressures of the external community in which they live. Because not everyone is capable of achieving this highest level of moral development, conversion cannot be equated with that alone. For those individuals who, by their development, will always rely upon the community around them for "stimulus to right action," God has provided a community that can be trusted to that task. When the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Church, God created a safety net for the conversion of *all persons*. In a very real sense, most people cannot become

Christians, or *stay* Christians, without the Church of Jesus Christ.

Cognitive paradigm. While three of the twenty participants attributed their conversion to a convincing argument (see Table 4.4, p. 67), observers noted only two seemed to come to their conversion through that path. In both cases, the individuals would probably have converted long before they did except for a specific and named issue that just did not make sense. That stumbling block for both individuals was articulated the same way: "If I can't see it, how can I believe in it?" In both cases, converting was not an option until they came to the awareness that they were not going to figure it out so they would have to just move on. An interesting observation was that no one in the sample was converted by formal apologetics or by any logical case for believing in Jesus Christ.

The discipline of apologetics has been seen as a way to present the Christian faith to those outside the community. Ronald J. Allen, Professor of Preaching at Christian Theological Seminary, suggests that apologetic preaching may do more to help strengthen the faith identity of individuals already inside the Christian community (46). While preaching can perform both tasks, the preaching in the churches of the participants in this study appear to be weighted toward building up believers rather than converting the world. Paul instructs Timothy in the use of Scripture saying, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If Paul's words are to be taken as basic instructions for Christian apologists, the target of these uses of Scripture seems to be the Christian community rather than outsiders. Based upon how few participants seemed to be responding to God through a cognitive

paradigm, logical appeals to faith may be the least effective means of shepherding

individuals through conversion, in this environment.

Emotional paradigm. While seven of the twenty participants characterized their

own conversion as primarily an "emotional experience" (see Table 4.4, p. 67), once the

observers accounted for those who appeared to be responding to *volitional, relational,*

and *cognitive* paradigms only four of the interviews were identified as being primarily

emotional in nature. In those four cases, the primary picture painted by the participants

would conform to Paul's description in Romans, "The Spirit himself testifies with our

spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:16).

From the literature review, especially from the Gelpi's description of the seven

stages of conversion, I had expected that the emotional paradigm would be connected in

some way to the crisis stage of conversion. No strong evidence of assumption was

observed. Less than half of the participants that identified with the emotional paradigm

were in crisis. Further, more than half of the participants in crisis actually identified with

other paradigms.

Surprisingly, all four of the participants who were deemed by the observers to be

operating from an emotional paradigm presented themselves in the interviews as being

very dispassionate and cognitive individuals. This difference in emotional expression

may well be accounted for by noting that the emotions of the experience were not at all

the same as the emotions expressed in the *reporting* of the experience. Participant #14

described her experience at a youth event:

> I do remember [the speaker] talking about the gospel and the relationship
> aspect. He asked who would like to give their lives over to Christ, and for
> some reason I was crying, and I couldn't figure it out, and I was like, "I
> do" … then we were taken off to another room and I was talking to this

> lady and I couldn't stop crying, and I was like "I don't know what's happening." I kind of just wanted to be out of there. I was kind of freaked out.

After that she noticed that her life had changed. She reported that her motivations and desires had changed, and looking back, she was able to identify that experience as the place where the change had occurred.

For each of the four participants, the "out of place" emotions involved, as in this participant's case, seem to have served as an authenticating factor that they had become Christian. The term "shadow side" has popularly been used to describe the less developed and less used aspects of a person's nature. From anecdotal observation of the various personalities of the individuals interviewed, God seemed to use the shadow side of participants' natures to authenticate that their experience was something beyond themselves.

No indication was noted, in these four cases, of any of the *volitional* paradigm. They simply *knew* a change had occured. While Participant #14 did go to another room when directed, the observers did not assess that she was responding to anything other than the instructions to do so. In all four instances where the emotional paradigm was identified, the most likely explanation may be that emotionally driven conversions are personality specific, shadow side, experiences.

Integrated Paradigms via the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Having dissected the interviews of twenty participants in terms of the operative paradigms in their conversions, I report a growing awareness that isolating a single paradigm is somewhat artificial. In many of the conversion stories, evidence of more than one paradigm was observed. At the conclusion of this analysis, the four paradigms seem

to bear a strikingly resemblance to the United Methodist Church's formulation, popularly referred to as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral."

Wesley believed that the very heart of a healthy and vital Christian faith was "revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason" (qtd. in Olson 77). In much the same way, conversion is a multidimensional event, established by a volitional submission to Scripture and the God revealed therein, enveloped in the relationships and communal traditions of the community of faith, authenticated by a personal experience of being accepted by God, and confirmed by understanding the cognitive pieces that compose a person's faith (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Four Paradigms compared to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Paradigm	Wesleyan Quadrilateral	Commonalities
Volitional paradigm	Scripture	Marked by the volitional act of surrender to Scripture and to the God revealed therein
Relational paradigm	Tradition	Marked by immersion into the relationships and communal traditions that define the community
Emotional paradigm	Experience	Marked by the personal experience of being accepted by God
Cognitive paradigm	Reason	Marked by the authentication through understanding the cognitive pieces of faith

Gelpi and Rambo both note that the ongoing ramifications of conversion are often the most traumatic part of the process of conversion and sometimes take quite a long time

to complete because it involves tying all the loose ends of life up into a single consistent whole (Gelpi, <u>Conversion Experience</u> 18). In the same way, perhaps a well-established conversion, in the end, incorporates all four of the paradigms into a radical self-identity shift.

Taking the analogous connection with Wesley's formulation one important step further, the *volitional* paradigm might play the most important role among the four paradigms. In much the same way the Methodist formulation declares a primacy to Scripture in the quadrilateral, so the *volitional* paradigm may play the same role in conversion. Believing alone (as in the *cognitive* paradigm) is not enough because, as James says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-and shudder" (Jas. 2:19). Being a general part of a Christianized community (as in the *relational* paradigm) is not enough in itself, as evidenced by the number of people who consider themselves Christian but who have no awareness of God. Even the emotional experience of supernatural things (as in the *emotional* paradigm), if not submitted to Scripture, tradition, and reason can be misinterpreted. Perhaps the *cognitive*, *relational*, and *emotional* paradigms finally only find their full "activation" in a volitional submission to Christ. Just as Wesley's formulation demands *continual* submission of reason, tradition, and experience to the authority of Scripture, so may continued relationship with Christ demand *continual* submission of relationships in community, convincing arguments, and emotional experiences to the personal decision to continue walking with Christ.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were observed in course of this study.

Artificial Bifurcation

This study viewed four paradigms for conversion as discreet and stand-alone pieces. This treatment was done for the convenience of doing the research and belies the reality that the paradigms are interrelated. All the participants in this study interacted with each of the four of the paradigms to some extent.

Interviewing Youth

In most cases the instrument used to collect demographic data, coupled with the methodology for the personal interviews was sufficient to gain clear pictures of the participants' conversion stories. In the case of the youngest three participants their ability to tell their story was not as matured as in the other participants. Interviews with those participants were extremely brief and to the point, and probing questions did not yield significantly more data. In two of those three instances, after the interviews were concluded and we were free to chat, the participants revealed information that would have been influential in the evaluation process. For instance, after one interview the participant remarked, "Oh yea, that was right around the time when I was arrested for drug possession!" That fact would surely have added a dimension to the evaluation of the interview by the trained observers. If I were to do this study again, I would specifically design my probative questions with "scatterbrained" youth in mind.

Volitional Paradigm as a Cultural Phenomenon

The volitional paradigm seems to have presented coding problems. Expecting a much higher overall rate of reliability in the findings from Research Question #3, I examined the coding of each interview, one by one (see Appendix K). In focusing upon the accuracy of the coding of each individual interview, I had an expectation of observer

agreement in at least three of four observations, or 75 percent agreement among the observers. In seven of the twenty interviews, or 35 percent of the time, the observations were unanimous, and in sixteen of the twenty interviews, or 80 percent of the time, a 75 percent level of agreement, or higher was achieved.

In four problematic interviews, however, the agreement among observers dropped to 50 percent, resulting in a split decision. Upon further examination, in every contested observation, the decision was split evenly between two paradigms. In each of these cases, the same single indicator, *personal decision*, was the focus of the disagreement. Having evaluated and now understanding the extent of the volitional paradigm in the unconverted population, I understand why this posed the problem it did. These participants seemed to be automatically or subconsciously responding to a *volitional* formula for becoming a Christian. If I were to repeat this study, I would refine both the *operational definition* for the participants, and I would establish more refined *specific indicators* for the *volitional* paradigm.

Participant Consistency

In my instructions to pastors, there existed some room for various interpretations of who would constitute a new convert. Several times, participants had been selected by their pastors based upon the fact that they had recently experienced baptism, rather than whether they had experienced conversion. Brief conversations were required to qualify them for the interview. Twice participants said things that disqualified themselves from the study. Their interviews were not part of the sample. If I were to repeat this study, I would bypass the pastor's perceptions alltogether, and establish a way to qualify the participants myself.

Serendipitous Observations

Three unexpected observations presented themselves that speak to the questions: "What demographic subset of people in this Christianized culture are responding to this expression of the United Methodist Church? Who makes up the major mission field our conversion efforts?"

Religious Background's Large Role in the Conversions

While six of the participants claimed no religious background in the demographic questionnaire, five of those six reported that one or both of their parents had been Christian for many years. Virtually none of the participants in the sample came to the experience without a previous faith background, even if they did not claim its influence when asked to write it down.

Anecdotally, at FaithQuest, we have discovered that the self-identity of persons walking down the street is that they are Christians, at least culturally, even if they do not have a vital living awareness of God. The mission adopted at FaithQuest has focused upon "activating dormant Christians" because that is how people see themselves in this environment. Once introduced to a living expression of Christ, the Holy Spirit takes over, and they are "activated" in their faith and moved from knowing *about* God to *knowing* him through his Son and the church.

The religious backgrounds with which these participants came to the table allowed them to receive what was being offered. In a very practical way, this demonstrates what Wesley referred to as prevenient grace. Wesley taught that human existence is "enveloped by the wooing activity of God, who enlightens everyone coming into the world with some knowledge of himself-a knowledge that allures and disquiets"

(Staples 84). The participants' prior religious experience, however incomplete it may have been, was often enough both to allure and disquiet their existence and bring them to a place where God's Holy Spirit could work through exposure to the Christian community. From this observation my image of the "target audience" of the conversion efforts of the church has changed. Instead of seeing these people as Christians, and being frustrated at their "lazy Christianity," I now appreciate the gift this Christianized culture has provided by bringing these people halfway to Christ. If the church can learn to monopolize upon it then its ministries will be more fruitful.

Baptist Influence Underrepresented

Based upon recent U. S. Census Bureau information, in the area of Houston served by FaithQuest, 31.1 percent of the households are likely to identify themselves as Baptists. This figure is almost twice the national average. Catholics represent the second largest demographic at 18.0 percent of the population, in front of Methodists at 11.9 percent (Percept Group, Ministry Area Profile 2004 15). Assuming similar demographics for the greater Houston area, specifically around the churches selected for this study and based upon their similarity to the area served by FaithQuest, these numbers should be reflected in the sample of this study. While 31.1 percent of area respondents claimed Baptist as their religious preference, only one in twenty participants in this study reported any Baptist influence.

From this observation, and acknowledging the influence that prior religious background played, some basic theological distinctions appear to be at work, filtering those with a prior Baptist influence away from the United Methodist Church and specifically from the conversion-focused ministries of the sample churches.

Roman Catholic Influence Underreported

While six of the twenty participants listed Roman Catholic as their religious background, more than any other denomination listed, two others also reported Roman Catholic influences during the interviews but did not record them on the demographic data sheet. Compared to the roughly one-fifth of the population who identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, nearly half of the subjects interviewed were from that tradition. From this observation, the same theological distinctions that are filtering those with a prior Baptist background away from the conversion efforts of the United Methodist Church may be responsible for making the United Methodist expression of Christianity appealing to those from a Roman Catholic background.

Anecdotally, FaithQuest has gathered so many expatriate Roman Catholics that weekly celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion has been instituted. Our church also made the decision not to declare membership. Instead we use the phrase "partners with Christ, in ministering to our community" to describe our membership. This decision was an intentional offering to this Roman Catholic contingent that struggled with the "guilt" of leaving their original denomination to become members in another, even though many of them had not practiced their faith as Roman Catholics for many years, if ever.

Initially I had assumed that my own affinity for church history and the Roman Catholic Church accounted for this trend at FaithQuest. The findings of this study, however, suggest a denominational affinity might be responsible for the attraction of certain backgrounds, possibly grounded in its historical roots.

These three serendipitous observations concerning the target audience of the

churches ministries may well inform the decision about who the church looks to for new models of ministry. In the next section I make specific recommendations for ministry based not only on my observations from the interviews but also from who is apparently listening among the Christianized culture.

<div align="center">

Specific Recommendations for Ministry

</div>

Considering first, the ministries of my church, FaithQuest United Methodist Church, and then other United Methodist communities in the Houston area who hunger to witness conversions, and finally, kingdom minded Christian who would like to see Christ exalted in the lives of the people, I make the following recommendations:

Championing Need-Meeting Ministries

Because twelve of twenty participants (sixty percent) credited church programs as providing the opportunities for their conversion, I am concentrating on the Alpha course, recovery ministries, youth and discipleship retreats, and relationship-building opportunities. I am doing them with the expectation that they will provide fuel for conversion.

Celebrating Conversion

Twenty out of twenty (100 percent) of the individuals in this study looked to the church for opportunities to celebrate their conversion, no matter what precipitating factors happened to be occurring in their lives. The local church should strive to be more consistent, more creative, and more frequent in providing opportunities for individuals to express and to celebrate their conversions. Windows of opportunity are always opening in the lives of people the church touches. Knowing this, the local church should not only continue to provide such programs but should also be overtly intentional about

punctuating each experience with an opportunity to respond to God.

Training "First Contact" Ministers to Spot Pre-Christians

Because relocation provides such a fertile period in the life of a family, the church's outreach into the community should include connecting new families to the goods, services, and social networks available in the area. Further, Christians who are participating in those outreach efforts should be trained to ask questions and assess the readiness of new persons to respond to the gospel message.

Targeting Parents through Children's Programs

Conventional wisdom suggests the older a person is, the less likely they are to ever convert. This idea was not borne out in my study. If the notion has accuracy, then the exception to the rule may involve the vicarious return to childhood parents experience through the eyes of their children as they grow. Churches that provide opportunities for children's ministries without intentionally partnering those ministries with corresponding connections for adults, might be missing rare and brief "windows of opportunity" when adults are ready to approach God. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

Children's programs such as Vacation Bible School need to be designed with a parental component that recognizes parents' openness to conversion when their children are in the process of learning new things about God. That parental component should directly lead to an opportunity to experience and celebrate conversion.

Developing a Plan for Whole Families to Convert

Hunter describes how a church might take advantage of the "domino effect" through a family system caused by the conversion of one member. He suggests four

steps: (1) after someone is baptized or joins the church, setting up a training event in the new convert's home; inviting friends, family, and neighbors to attend; (2) meeting one night a week for a prescribed number of weeks to teach the content of Christianity to this community; strategically bringing one or two laypersons along to these meetings; (3) during these sessions, teaching, learning, praying, and listening. Have the new convert make a list of friends and relatives they have in their life; adding to the list each week with the nominal intention of pray for them; and, (4) on the last night of the training, working through the list, asking, "Which of these are not Christian, but might be opened to listening? Which of those identified persons might the new convert have some influence with?"; coming up with a plan to ask them to come to church; finally sending the laypersons with the new convert to visit that person ("Post-Baptismal Follow-Up").

Utilizing the Established Tools of the Volitional Paradigm

I expected the *volitional* paradigm to be prevalent among those with a Baptist religious history. I did not expect it to be the dominant paradigm among pre-converts from the varied backgrounds reflected in this sample. I will admit to personal biases against the *volitional* paradigm that were fostered by my theological training, but unfortunately without the benefit of being informed by real-world experience with conversion. Because this understanding is clearly a prevailing part of the "Christianized culture" and a starting place for so many who are ripe for the harvest, I lay down those biases and will seek ways for the church to more embrace the volitional paradigm.

Developing His and Hers Ministries

In light of the influence that spouses wield in their partners' conversions, the church should encourage and work with unequally yoked spouses. Peter encourages

wives, "[B]e submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives" (1 Pet. 3:1). Peter seemed to know this dynamic as well. Ecumenical church renewal programs such as the Walk to Emmaus have long known the importance of treating married couples as partners in spiritual growth. The weekend retreat experiences, while segregated by gender, are offered alternated for each group so that couples can have similar opportunities within a small window of time. Many churches also pair up men's and women's programs on their ministry calendars, such as Promise Keepers Conference for men, and Women of Faith for their wives.

Directions for Further Study

As a result of the research, new questions arose out of my study that may require future research. These research questions fall into four areas of study.

The Role of Preaching in Conversion

The study did not adequately answer the role preaching actually plays in conversion. It did not seem be a direct precipitating factor in the conversions I studied. Two possibilities exist for why preaching did not play an identifiable role, either these particular pastors do not preach for conversion, or perhaps preaching does not naturally perform that function. One would have to find and study churches where many were being converted through the preaching event and then examine the conversion stories of the converts to find if preaching was the most influential factor, or if the worship experience was simply a convenient moment for them to respond to a conversion caused by another factor.

Conversion and Family Systems

Because the study parameters dictated only one participant per household, the opportunity was eliminated to study the spread of the gospel through family groups and households, via spouses, siblings, children, and parents. The greatest avenue of conversion may have been inadvertently defined out of the sample.

Conversion and Personality Types

From my observations with the *emotional* paradigm, I suspect that personalities play a large part in the path by which people experience conversion. I would like to know how to target certain personality types for receptivity.

Theological Affinity and Conversion

From the observation that the United Methodist Church plays very well with people with prior experience with the Roman Catholic Church, and not at all with people from a Baptist background, I would like to isolate those distinctions and learn more about how conversion happens at the theological level.

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Postscript

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During one of my final visits to Wilmore to work on this dissertation, I visited a local church in Lexington. After the service I was approached by one of the members of that church and asked about my faith. I was inadvertently a recipient of a conversion-focused ministry. Following the service, members walk upstream in the throng of exiting worshipers looking for those who are straggling, lost in thought, or who seem to be open to approach. The young man who approached me asked how I was doing and if he could pray with me about anything. If I had been a seeker, he was prepared to engage me in an exploration of that topic, at least as far as I would have been willing to go. I thought,

"What a wonderful awareness these people have, of the needs of the unconvinced among us! And they probably didn't have to write a dissertation to figure it out!"

We went out into the foyer to find a quiet place to talk, and I discovered that he did not consider himself to have been Christian just six months before. I smiled and began to interview him as if I were still gathering data for this dissertation. He was so ecstatic at the opportunity to tell me his story. I delighted in listening, for I now knew how to interpret his story.

APPENDIX A

Pastor Follow-Up Letter

Date

Rev. Pastor
Church
Address
City State Zip

Dear Pastor,

I want to thank you for consenting to help me with my dissertation research. The title of the dissertation is, "IDENTIFYING PARADIGMS OF CONVERSION OPERATIVE IN UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES OF THE TEXAS CONFERENCE. "

The project involves interviewing thirty new Christians from six "conversion-focused" United Methodist churches in the Houston area. My goal is to identify the experiences that precipitated their conversion, and how each person processed and made sense of this critical change in their life. I am asking you to identify **five individuals** in your church who meet the criteria below, and obtain an initial, verbal consent to be interviewed. Once identified, I will follow-up on your conversation with a phone call and a letter, establishing a time for the interview.

For the purposes of this study, the persons selected for interviews must meet these specific criteria:

- Each individual became a Christian within the two years immediately preceding the interview.

- Each individual experienced, expressed or celebrated their conversion within the United Methodist community of faith in which they still reside.

- None of the individuals to be interviewed may come from the same household.

I would also like to request that I be allowed to conduct the interviews in your regular place of worship, if possible. My goal is to conduct the interviews as soon as possible after you speak to them. I have enclosed a self-addressed and stamped envelope so you may return to me the name, address, phone number, and e-mail address of the selected participants.

Again, thank you for helping with this project. I look forward to sharing with you any nonconfidential information I obtain during the interviews, as well as the overall results of the study.

Sincerely,

Kenn Munn

APPENDIX B

Pastor Thank-You Letter

Date

Rev. Pastor
Church
Address
City State Zip

Dear Pastor,

Thank you so much for your help connecting me to these individuals. I can't wait to hear their stories. In the next day or so, I will follow up your conversation with a phone call and a letter, establishing a time for the interview. Thank you, too, for allowing me to conduct the interviews in your regular place of worship. I really think this will make for a more open and comfortable experience for the participants.

I celebrate, with you, the fruitfulness of your ministries and I look forward to sharing with you the results of the study. May God continue to bless the work of your hands and the desires of your heart.

Sincerely,

Kenn Munn

APPENDIX C

Participant Phone Contact Protocol

1. I introduced myself:
   - Kenn Munn
   - Pastor of a Methodist Church in Humble, called FaithQuest

2. I explained how they were referred for participation in this study:
   - Has your pastor asked you if you would be willing to take part in a research project about how you became Christian?

3. Explain the purpose of the study:
   - The purpose of the study is to learn how people become Christians. I want to do that by simply letting you tell your story. I would record that and then a team of researchers would then review it.
   - It will be strictly confidential, and no one outside the team will see it without your permission.
   - The interview will take about 15 to 25 minutes.

4. Gain consent for the interview:
   - Would you be willing to participate?

5. Schedule a time and location to conduct the interview:
   - Would you be available on _____, at your Church?

6. I promised to send confirmation of time and location for the interview:
   - Thank you
   - I will send you a letter confirming time and location.
   - Verify Address

APPENDIX D

Participant Confirmation Letter

Date

Participant Name
Church
Address
City State Zip

Dear Participant Name,

  I want to thank you for consenting to help me with my dissertation research. The title of the dissertation is, "IDENTIFYING PARADIGMS OF CONVERSION OPERATIVE IN UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES OF THE TEXAS CONFERENCE."

  The project involves interviewing new Christians from United Methodist churches in the Houston area. As I mentioned in our phone conversation, the interviews will be recorded on video and audiotape. This is simply to free me from having to write down your responses, so I can concentrate on what you are saying. These tapes will only be used by me, and those who assist me with data analysis. Any use of the interview will protect your anonymity. I also thank you, in advance, for sharing your story.

  Your pastor has allowed us to conduct the interview **in (Location), on (Day and Date), at (Time).** I anticipate the interview will last between 15 and 25 minutes.

  Again, thank you for helping with this project. I look forward to hearing how God has been at work in your life, and I celebrate with you His great love. I'll see you on (Day).

Sincerely,

Kenn Munn

APPENDIX E

Participant Thank-You Letter

Date

Participant Name
Church
Address
City State Zip

Dear Participant Name,

I want to thank you for sharing your faith walk with me. It has been a very growing experience for me to hear how God is doing such great things in your life and the lives of the others I interviewed.

The expected completion of the project is May 2006. I will be compiling the data collected from thirty interviews into an article on how people are coming to faith in United Methodist churches today. If you would like to see that article, please e-mail me at KennMunn@aol.com and let me know you would like a copy. I will add you to my list.

Again, thank you for allowing me to share in your story. I celebrate, with you, the fruitfulness of your Christian faith experience, and I pray that God will continue to bless the work of your hands and the desires of your heart.

Sincerely,

Kenn Munn

APPENDIX F

Demographic Sheet with Consent Statement

Before our interview, please provide the following information. Please know that all the information will be strictly confidential:

- Participant Number: _____
- Gender: _____
- Current age: _____
- Age when you became a Christian: _____
- Religious background if any: _____
- Baptized as an adult or as an infant (circle one):
  Never Baptized   As an Infant   As an Adult
- Have you ever been rebaptized? _____
  - How many times? _____
- Marital status (circle one):
  Single   Married   Divorced   Widowed
  - Is your spouse a Christian? _____
  - For how long? _____
- Are parents Christian? _____
  - For how long? _____

Consent to Participate in the Study:

"I am willingly participating in this interview in order to assist in research pertaining to becoming a Christian. I understand that the interview will be recorded, and agree to be audio and videotaped. I understand that any use of the interview data will protect my anonymity, and will not be used for any other purpose without my expressed permission."

Signature: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocols

1. I introduced myself:
   - Kenn Munn
   - Pastor of a Methodist Church in Humble, called FaithQuest

2. Thank them for participation in this study:
   > "You will notice that the interview today is being recorded. This is simply to free me from having to write down your responses, so I can concentrate on what you are saying. These tapes will only be used by me, and those who assist me with data analysis. Any use of the interview will protect your anonymity. I also thank you, in advance, for sharing your story."

3. Explain the purpose of the study:
   - The purpose of the study is to learn how people become Christians. I want to do that by simply letting you tell your story. I would record that and then a team of researchers would then review it.
   - It will be strictly confidential, and no one outside the team will see it without your permission.
   - The interview will take about 15 to 25 minutes.

4. Questionnaire:
   - Please provide us with this data.
   - Please sign this consent to be recorded.
   - I will be setting up the equipment while you are doing that.

5. Interview Question #1: "How did you become a Christian?"
   - (Prompt Question) "What was your life like before you became Christian?"
   - (Prompt Question) "What brought you to this place?"
   - (Prompt Question) "Could you tell me more about that?"

6. Interview Question #2: "Please rank any of these four elements that are relevant, in order of their importance in your experience of becoming a Christian."
   - Give them the five cards
   - If "Other" was selected, clarify what that means.
   - Record self-scoring on the back of the demographic sheet.

7. Close the interview:
   - Thank you for your participation.
   - Could I pray with you?

APPENDIX H

Self-Coding Cards

Convincing Argument

Emotional Experience

Personal Decision

Relationships in Community

Other _____

APPENDIX I

Inter-Rater Demographic Sheet

Before coding, please provide the following information. Please know all information will be strictly confidential:

- Observer Number: _____
- Gender: _____
- Current age: _____
- Age when you became a Christian: _____
- Religious background if any: _____
- Baptized as an adult or as an infant (circle one):
  Never Baptized   As an Infant   As an Adult
- Have you ever been rebaptized? _____
  - How many times? _____
- Marital status (circle one):
  Single   Married   Divorced   Widowed
  - Is your spouse a Christian? _____
  - For how long? _____
- Are parents Christian? _____
  - For how long? _____

Name: _____   Address:_____

Phone: _____   Town & Zip_____

Contemporary Paradigms for Conversion

In Chapter 2, I explore four cumulative paradigms of conversion that are all somewhat interrelated: (1) A <u>cognitive</u> understanding defines conversion as an awakening to a new understanding of truth or knowledge. This arises, at least in part, from the Enlightenment period of history, and from the scientific community. (2) An <u>experiential</u> understanding of conversion has grown from the account of Wesley's experience at Aldersgate, and defines conversion as more than a cognitive shift, but includes an emotional and experiential component as well. (3) A <u>volitional</u> understanding rises from the modernist paradigm and places the largest emphasis upon a personal decision. Finally, (4) a <u>communal</u> understanding of conversion is presented that takes into account the power of community.

APPENDIX J

Inter-Rater Coding Sheet

Participant	Observer # _____ Coding
Test Participant #1	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Test Participant #2	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____
Participant #__	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Community ○ Other _____

APPENDIX K

Inter-Rater Coded Data

	Research Question #2	Research Question #3			
Participant	**Participant Self-Coding**	**Observer #1 Coding**	**Observer #2 Coding**	**Observer #3 Coding**	**Observer #4 Coding**
Test Part. #1	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.
Test Part. #2	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ● Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.
Participant #1	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.
Participant #2	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ● Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	● Convincing Argument ○ Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.	○ Convincing Argument ● Emotional Experience ○ Personal Decision ○ Relationships in Comm.

Participant #3

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
Col 1	●	○	○	○
Col 2	○	○	●	○
Col 3	○	○	○	●
Col 4	○	○	●	○
Col 5	○	○	○	●
Col 6	○	○	●	○

Participant #4

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
Col 1	●	○	○	○
Col 2	○	○	●	○
Col 3	●	○	○	○
Col 4	●	○	○	○
Col 5	●	○	○	○
Col 6	●	○	○	○

Participant #5

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
Col 1	○	○	●	○
Col 2	○	●	○	○
Col 3	○	●	○	○
Col 4	○	●	○	○
Col 5	○	●	○	○
Col 6	○	●	○	○

Participant #6

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
Col 1	○	●	○	○
Col 2	○	○	●	○
Col 3	○	○	●	○
Col 4	○	○	●	○
Col 5	○	○	●	○
Col 6	○	●	○	○

Participant #7

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
Col 1	○	○	●	○
Col 2	○	○	●	○
Col 3	○	○	●	○
Col 4	○	○	●	○
Col 5	○	○	●	○
Col 6	○	○	●	○

Participant #8

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
1	○	○	●	○
2	○	○	●	○
3	○	○	●	○
4	○	○	○	●
5	○	○	●	○
6	○	○	●	○

Participant #9

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
1	○	●	○	○
2	○	○	●	○
3	○	○	○	●
4	○	○	○	●
5	○	○	○	●
6	○	○	○	●

Participant #10

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
1	○	○	●	○
2	○	○	●	○
3	○	○	●	○
4	○	○	○	●
5	○	○	○	●
6	○	○	○	●

Participant #11

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
1	○	●	○	○
2	○	●	○	○
3	○	○	○	●
4	○	○	○	●
5	○	○	○	●
6	○	○	○	●

Participant #12

	Convincing Argument	Emotional Experience	Personal Decision	Relationships in Comm.
1	○	○	●	○
2	○	○	●	○
3	○	○	●	○
4	○	○	○	●
5	○	○	●	○
6	○	○	○	●

Participant #13

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Convincing Argument	○	○	●	●	●	○
Emotional Experience	○	○	○	○	○	○
Personal Decision	●	●	○	○	○	●
Relationships in Comm.	○	○	○	○	○	○

Participant #14

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Convincing Argument	○	○	○	○	○	○
Emotional Experience	○	○	●	●	●	●
Personal Decision	●	●	○	x	○	○
Relationships in Comm.	○	○	○	○	○	○

Participant #15

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Convincing Argument	○	○	○	○	○	○
Emotional Experience	○	○	○	○	○	○
Personal Decision	○	●	●	●	●	●
Relationships in Comm.	●	○	○	○	○	○

Participant #16

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Convincing Argument	○	○	○	○	○	○
Emotional Experience	○	○	○	○	○	○
Personal Decision	○	●	○	●	○	●
Relationships in Comm.	●	○	●	○	●	○

Participant #17

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Convincing Argument	○	○	○	○	○	○
Emotional Experience	●	○	○	○	○	○
Personal Decision	○	●	○	●	●	●
Relationships in Comm.	○	○	●	○	○	○

Participant #18

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ● Emotional Experience
- ○ Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ○ Personal Decision
- ● Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ○ Personal Decision
- ● Relationships in Comm.

Participant #19

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ● Emotional Experience
- ○ Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ● Emotional Experience
- ○ Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

Participant #20

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

- ○ Convincing Argument
- ○ Emotional Experience
- ● Personal Decision
- ○ Relationships in Comm.

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