Bringing Women into a Broad Space:

Spiritual direction with women from conservative religious contexts

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.
ABSTRACT

The disadvantage that women experience in patriarchal religious communities is well documented and it affects the self-validation of their personal spiritual experiences. The patriarchal domination of women’s spirituality in conservative contexts has disempowered women’s faith-experience through limiting their ways of knowing God to those that involve a masculinised paradigm. Such limitations stifle the validation of women’s self-actuated faith. This thesis has undertaken a study with Australian women who have experienced a conservative religious background and has explored the benefits they have found in accessing spiritual direction. A framework for feminine spirituality has then been developed out of the research.

For women, speaking about personal experience is limited by the style of language and conceptualisation in conservatism, and by the sanctioned mode of being female and the roles deemed suitable for women in the congregation. Limitations from the collective shadow of a conservative faith-group prevent women speaking openly about their authentic spiritual experiences. Conversation, this thesis will assert, is a feminine mode of validation and the quality of the conversation space is an important aspect of validation. Using a feminist narrative research methodology, an investigation into the benefits of engaging in one-to-one conversations with a spiritual director has been designed to look at the potential outcomes for women, particularly with regard to validating a personal feminine spirituality.

The biblical metaphor of a “broad space” has been used as a framework for raising awareness about aspects of the spiritual direction conversation space that limit and aid the exploration of authentic spiritual experience. Issues considered in this thesis include the limitations of conservative shadow effects, inherited female role models, the process of spiritual direction and the personality attributes of the spiritual director. Narrative selections of interview transcripts are used verbatim to indicate the influence of these attributes on the personal faith journey of the women participants. It will be shown that their comments help clarify how shadow constraints and cultural subtexts interfere with the potential for deep personal self-validation by a directee. A summary section then looks at the reported benefits of engaging in spiritual direction. Finally, a rationale has been developed for speaking about feminine spirituality as it was revealed in the women’s narratives.
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Introduction

The contemporary emphasis on individualization in postmodern Western society, marked by freedom of choice and individual autonomy\(^1\), has consequently created the liberty for every woman in such a society to embrace faith uniquely according to her own life experience. Changes in both the theories of spirituality and of identity offer ways to sketch the shifting trends that impact upon how a 21\(^{st}\) century person structures their life strategies in relation to their existential context. However, the continued dominance of the patriarchy in religious culture limits the language and ideas about women’s spiritual realities to a gender specific discourse created from a male perspective. For many women who belong to conservative faith communities influenced by this patriarchal discourse, the sociological reality of how faith-life is lived is counter to the freedoms that are encouraged in the wider community.

Feminist theology has had a role in examining the foundations of conservative, stereotypical attitudes that ascribe the role of women within the patriarchal system. Feminist approaches to discussions about faith and spirituality have helped to broaden the understanding of the place of a feminine identity based upon experiential selfhood rather than a stereotypical proscription that limits the freedom to choose how to engage one’s spiritual experiences. A conservative faith context\(^2\) is bounded by statements of faith that proscribe the limits of

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\(^1\) Individualisation refers to a societal tendency in recent decades for the individual to expect choice in most aspects of their lives: “In contemporary Western society, individual choice refers not only to consumption, it has become an important part of the public discourse as well as social science language used to analyse many fields of people’s lives. The freedom to choose is the marker of the free, autonomous individual, and it is an important ingredient in the notion of agency.” Brannen, J. and A. Nilsen (2005). “Individualisation, Choice and Structure: A discussion of current trends in sociological analysis.” The Sociological Review 53(3): 412-428.

\(^2\) The conservative paradigm describes a wide variety of phenomenologically complex forms that have a generally agreed set of sociological characteristics and psychological outcomes. In Chapter 1 “Implications of Conservatism,” the discussion outlines a conservative community of believers as those bounded by agreed tenets that circumscribe
acceptability for members of the community, both theologically and behaviourally. Key aspects of *personhood-in-relation* for women in a conservative faith community, both in relation to others and to a sense of the Ultimate, are fashioned into a compliant mode of being female that obeys the norms required to effect acceptance and affirmation. As conservatism is patriarchally based, this mode of being female is based on ways of being that are often not synergistic with a natural engagement with transcendent experienced by women. Within the underlying paradigm of a patriarchal conservative milieu, it is difficult to provide a place for women to express their spiritual experience in ways that helps them to make sense of their experience and to validate it as a way of embedding soul truth.

I have engaged this study from the perspective of a practicing spiritual director who has also been a member of a conservative faith community. During my practice, I have encountered women in spiritual direction who struggle with self-validation and who doubt the acceptability of their faith. These women have come to spiritual direction because of a desire to become more fully who they are in God and fight the demons of self-doubt and worthlessness.

The study refers to some key ideas of Nicola Slee as she has written about women’s faith development. (Slee 2004) Her research considered the faith experience of women and the means by which they constructed their faith. I wanted to take the descriptors of women’s engagement with faith experience that Slee developed and use them to observe the way orthodox beliefs and values of the group, and which are adhered to by behavioural attitudes that circumscribe the limits of acceptability. See p.16

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3Reference to God or euphemisms for God will be capitalised throughout to refer to an inferred divine identity, unless used in a quotation from cited literature. The original form in the quote will then be retained.
4The term transcendent will be used as defined by Piedmont: A “transcendent perspective is one in which a person sees a fundamental unity underlying the diverse strivings of nature and finds a bonding with others that cannot be severed, not even by death.” It has implications for a more holistic and interconnected view of life experience. Using this generalised approach will keep the breadth of meaning open to what individuals may infer when speaking about spiritual experience. Piedmont, R. L. (1999). "Does Spirituality Represent the Sixth Factor of Personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model." *Journal of Personality* 67(6): 985-1013. p.988
5Soul truth is referred to as the deep inner knowing that contributes to the fabric of a person’s perception of their identity.
6The term spiritual director will follow Conn’s description in this study. She states, the term spiritual director “has traditionally been given to a person gifted with the ability to help others notice and respond to the Spirit’s direction.” Conn, J. W. (1999). “Spiritual Formation.” *Theology Today* 56(1): 86-97.
women speak about the environment of spiritual direction. Some women attend spiritual
direction outside of their usual conservative faith community and there are likely to be
different conventions for speaking about faith in that environment. It is proposed that these
descriptors should be evident in the way women speak of their spiritual experience when
given space to speak openly. The study will investigate the validity of such a proposition by
examining perceived outcomes of accessing a spiritual direction space and will specifically
observe any indicators of a change in empowerment and the liberation of a feminine
spirituality in the women’s narratives. A key determination in designing the study was the
belief that allowing women to speak their own story is inherently affirming and is important
for women to feel they have been heard.

A significant aspect of the research is to ground the use of the terms ‘feminine engagement’
and ‘feminine spirituality’ as a mode of interacting with reality that has recognisable
characteristics. The term ‘feminine’ used in ‘feminine spirituality’ will indicate specific
modalities that are used to interact with spiritual experience and have distinctive and
recognisable attributes. This is a different use of the word ‘feminine’ from the term used
sociologically to limit or categorise individuals with a female body. In this thesis, ‘feminine
modalities’ describe particular psychological capacities used to engage reality and this idea will
be expanded in later sections.

This approach creates a linguistic conundrum with regard to using the word ‘feminine’
throughout much of this thesis. The naming of different modalities for engaging reality as
‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ arises from what is observed as preferential ways of epistematic
engagement in male and female persons. Therefore, the term ‘feminine’ in ‘feminine
engagement’ and ‘feminine spirituality’ is retained to describe a style of modality regularly
observed in women’s responses but which refers to psychological and epistemic processes
rather than observable behaviours found only in women. It is acknowledged that this is a
specific use of these terms that may not represent other femininst positions.
Such a viewpoint is based upon a Jungian approach to the nature of the individual psyche. Jung argues for the human psyche being constituted by both masculine and feminine aspects, each impacting the behavioural preferences of the individual. He explains the differences between these aspects as due to the psychology of females being founded upon the principle of Eros and the psychology of males on the principle of Logos. He notes, “The concept of Eros could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of Logos as objective interest.” (Jung 1982,65) Jung continues to describe his observations of male and female social interaction by deliberately contrasting the differences between the feminine characteristic of relatedness-based responses with a logic-based masculine response to the experience. (67)

This basic differential between psychic expression in men and women has played a key part in developing the model of feminine spirituality being suggested in this thesis. It requires a particular nuance of the term in order to avoid language that assumes reference to only women’s experience or to prevent the discussion taking an oppositional stance between what belongs to men and what belongs to women. From a Jungian perspective, each capacity is available in both males and females.

Using this approach, the investigation will focus on the characteristics of feminine engagement with spiritual experience that have previously been dismissed or denied as a basis for speaking about faith. It will investigate if there are any benefits of a spiritual direction space for enabling the validation of women’s faith experiences that have not been affirmed in former conservative religious contexts. The information that is received will be examined to observe evidence for the development of a feminine spirituality in women that is not normally sanctioned in a conservative faith context.

In a time of freedom for women to choose life, regardless of the potential fulfilment of their ambitions, it would seem that religious freedom is still defined by societal and cultural forms. Over the past twenty years, feminist social commentators have challenged some of the foundational theories and research methods that underpin cultural norms. They have
challenged the normative bases of equality and domination (MacKinnon 1987), male-based psychological theories of moral development (Gilligan 1987), and the elemental assertion of religions that divinises a male god. (Christ 2006) Social commentators posit that those who actually theorise gender have constructed their theories using a masculine perspective. (Alexander and Mohanty 2000) The dominant theories about gender have been largely constructed within a patriarchal context and have not allowed feminine ways of engagement to influence the mode of being female that has been created as the conservative norm. A masculine mode of engagement has been the predominant platform used to ascribe the female gender in conservative faith contexts and has been a significant cause of the dismissal or diminishment of women by the more dominant cultural forces. The recent gender-related theories of preferred modes of processing have created a rationale for acknowledging that women may take a different epistemological approach to validating spiritual experience. (Given 2008,332)

This discussion is limited to the Christian faith tradition, but does not encompass all forms of the tradition. The focus is on conservative Protestant Christian religious contexts where feminine religious freedoms are subject to a convergence of theories of gender, sociology and theology within the ecclesial forms of Christian congregations. A particular notion of being female has been scripted by some conservative Christian writers who have constructed an acceptable form of female participation based upon certain interpretations of Jesus’ interaction with women of his day. Religious conservatism has legitimized a woman’s place in congregational relationships by patronisingly masquerading the liberation of women behind scriptures referring to Jesus’ interaction with selected women in the Bible (Fiorenza 1998) or admirable female role models (Fuchs 2003) without any acknowledgement of the contemporary sociological and gender constructs of Jesus’ time that may or may not be related to the 21st century woman. This is not to deny the grounding of spiritual experience in a biblical perspective; this study remains committed to biblical spirituality in which personal
transcendent experiences may be referenced against biblical exemplars. (Schneiders 2002,134)

Rather, it is a way of acknowledging that feminist theologians have taken a stand against the traditional patriarchally-based interpretations of biblical narratives and the use of women’s experiences to achieve patriarchal goals. They have shone a light upon the experience of women in their historical context and Schneiders notes that any attempt to understand those lived experiences reveals that different spiritualities are evident in the Bible because of the variety of circumstances in which God has been intuited. It is the personal nature of spiritual experience in its context which is most illuminative.

With this understanding underpinning the study, the focus is on the lived experience within the existential reality of the believer. To take the referents for the construction of femaleness from unconsciously normalized biblical texts that are interpreted from a patriarchal standpoint is to denude the Bible of its variety of experience, and thus its richness, as well as failing to recognise the individual contribution of the women for who they are. Concepts about the category of femaleness that are based on biblical exemplars take their first referent as the ancient lived experience of the woman, not the anachronistic theoretical construct used to characterize how the woman might have experienced being female.

One outcome of stereotypically-based characterizations of women is an overshadowing or muting of the internalized ability to respond to a call to selfhood that has the capacity to self-validate personal transcendent experiences. Several aspects are affected by this muting of individual capacity and the alienation of an individual’s soul-image from an intimate sense of being fully grounded in God in one’s own right. One significant outcome is the displacement of a personalised faith built upon intimate experiences of the mystery of God by the inability to counter the theologically and sociologically predetermined norms that have evolved for women of faith. The challenge remains for women to reclaim a normative perception of their feminine spirituality that has been shaped by their own spiritual experiences, allowing a re-
visioning of a holistic relationship with God which may differ from the accepted forms of their religious culture.

The author’s impetus for the study arose from being deeply moved by Psalm 18:19 as a metaphor for the process of a spiritual direction encounter:

He brought me out into a broad place;
he delivered me,
because he delighted in me.
(Psalm 18:19 NRSV)

The writer of the psalm seems to echo the author’s anecdotal evidence of what may be possible in the open space of spiritual direction: a broad and spacious place of hospitality for a deep soul encounter with God. The metaphor provides a framework for describing the faith journey – God drawing the faithful into a broad place free of fear or retribution; re-engaging personal spiritual experiences; validation and embedding of own truth about those spiritual experiences that affect changes in identity and faith agency as a result. It is proposed that such a process is transformative and is couched in a relationship of loving Divine attentiveness.

Validating a truly feminine spirituality in women questions how the internal locus of authority is authenticated as the ground of a relationship with God. Consequently, it challenges how women extract themselves from the culturally established belief structures that have prefigured the landscape for exercising their faith. For such validation to be effective, the external environment needs to offer space to vocalise personal transcendent experiences, preferably in the company of someone who can hold the openness of the process and who has a perception of the internal struggle to be empowered to speak out. The stories of women who have experienced such an open space are used here to explore the benefits of spiritual direction for women from conservative faith backgrounds.
Chapter 1

Implications of Conservatism

When beginning the investigation into the benefits of spiritual direction for women who have experienced conservative faith fellowships, a confusion of issues around gender and spirituality required that some definition be given to the elements of the argument that are deemed relevant to this study. For many in less conservative faith communities, the inclusion of women in ecclesial roles and the participation of women in leadership roles may seem to have settled the issue of gender conflict in faith communities. For other sections of the faith community this is not the case. Regardless of the level of inclusion of women in some communities, the effect of the patriarchal paradigm not only limits participation in authority but also continues to either define or dismiss feminine spirituality and the female mode of engagement in faith.

The following threads are explored in this chapter:

- the sociological and psychological issues impinging upon the freedom of a feminine engagement to express itself in conservative religious groups
- collective shadow issues that limit the openness of a space for female spiritual experiences to be heard
- the evidential validation of deepening personal feminine spirituality as a result of the spiritual direction experience for women
- a consideration of personality theory that grounds transcendent experience.

The objective of this study is to hear if there is a benefit in accessing a spiritual direction space where a woman’s fundamental relationship with the Divine can be re-engaged and, thereby,
embedded in the inner soul space that grounds ownership of personal faith. Spiritual direction has grown as a ministry available to all people in recent decades, not just as a formation process for the religious and clergy. Glass (2009) notes,

> We are witnessing the quiet growth of the ministry of Spiritual Direction, a ministry which begins with the person and his or her fundamental relationship with the transcendent, the relationship where each of us holds the questions of faith, of meaning and of values.

This study will investigate if this experience has benefits that were not readily available to the participants in their conservative faith settings.

Accordingly, this chapter will map out four areas which are significant to this study. Firstly, a definition of *conservatism* needs to be attempted to clarify some of the differences in meaning between traditions within the Christian faith. Secondly, some of the characteristics of a conservative faith fellowship are considered that delineate what is meant by a bounded place affecting women’s faith experience. Thirdly, psychological and sociological issues that impinge upon the development of personal spirituality will be explored, and lastly, a brief comment on the rising opportunities of contemporary spirituality.

**Conservatism**

The conservative paradigm describes a wide variety of phenomenologically complex forms that have a generally agreed set of sociological characteristics and psychological outcomes. It is difficult to delineate the range of social constructs that fall into the idea of ‘conservative.’ The recent development of strident forms of fundamentalism, described by Vassilis (2011) as “a dogmatic and intolerant way of being religious” (44), necessitates the distinction of the term *conservatism* from the term *fundamentalism*, two forms of religious allegiance formerly spoken of as a single paradigm. (Feather 1979) The generic sense of ‘conservatism’ may include a fundamentalist flavour, however a distinction between forms can be made based on
the degree to which a belief in the essentialist nature of the group tenets is enforced and the fervour with which the integrity of the definitional boundaries are maintained. A significant marker that provides a convenient separation between forms is their attitude to the surrounding society. A fundamentalist approach outwardly manifests itself as taking a basically oppositional stance toward society compared with the ability to work within society in a more even tempered conservatism. Lawrence sees fundamentalism as a sociological category because it is an ideology, rather than a theology, that is the result of a conflict with modernism. (Lawrence 1989) Similarly, Antoun (2001,2) considers the fundamentalism of this century to be broadly concerned with a cognitive and emotional protest at secularisation. He notes particular themes that are common to the sociology of fundamentalism:

The quest for purity, the search of authenticity, totalism and activism, the necessity of certainty (scripturalism), selective modernization, and the centering of the mythic past in the present.

The affective response to fundamentalism in Antoun’s view is found in the outrage and protest at the ideology of modernism and the increasingly permissive secular society. Altemeyer and Hunsberger refine the description of fundamentalism by listing its essential elements:

The belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. (Watson, Sawyers et al. 2003,315)

O’Brien describes the attributes of a ‘sect’ in similar terms – tendency toward exclusivity, having a monopoly on truth and “demand strong allegiance and exercise discipline over erring members” (O’Brien 2008,327) and Marty and Appleby note that fundamentalists are careful to put energy into what reinforces their identity so that they “keep their movement together, build defences around their boundaries and keep others at a distance.” (Marty and Appleby 1991,ix) The sectarian nature of some fundamentalist movements is a more extremist form of
antisocial stance than other prosocial\textsuperscript{7} conservatisms, believing that it is a spiritual fight against modernity (Marty 1960) and those who assault the boundaries of their theological position.

The descriptions above contain some baseline statements that will be used to establish the meaning of conservatism used in this study. In contrast to those who match the description of a fundamentalist movement, Marty describes more moderate conservatives as having “moderated their exclusive ideas about the world, softened their membership requirements, and have accepted other denominations as relative equals.” (127) These compromises reflect the softening of the oppositional attitude toward the outside world that is characteristic of a fundamentalist stance.

Using the Altemeyer and Hunsberger definition of fundamentalism, words like ‘essential truth’ and ‘unchangeable practice’ are also characteristic markers of most conservatisms and make the definitional boundaries more blurred. But issues like a pervading sense of truth threatened by evil forces or the belief that there is an obvious, intrinsic uniqueness of one particular set of religious beliefs are not as significant, nor do they create an imperative for conservative members to ‘vigorously fight’ to uphold their position. The final statement of the definition, that adherents have a ‘special relationship with the deity,’ raises a core issue in relation to this study. At a personal level, there is an exclusivist element in claiming a special relationship with God that implies an experience which others do not share. It belies something about the perceived, or presumed, nature of God. At the corporate level of fundamentalism, validation of this special relationship with God and how well an adherent qualifies to claim such a position is related to who assumes authority in the group and the fervour the leader instils to overcome the ‘evil.’ It is the authority figure who takes the guiding role in maintaining imperatives and the presence of a dominant, often charismatic, leader is characteristic of

\textsuperscript{7} The term prosocial is used as a description of an attitudinal stance toward society. Prosocial groups are able to engage in some measure with the activities of the community around them, regardless of their motive for doing so.
fundamentalism but not necessarily of conservatism. (Marty 1960; Emerson and Hartman 2006)

More moderate conservative groups do not necessarily share the authoritarianism imposed by a central figure that the fundamentalist stance commonly exhibits. The emphasis in the more moderate setting is upon the agreed tenets that circumscribe orthodox beliefs and values rather than the authority of a central figure through whom belief is imposed. There is a tension between the external and internal cultures in both styles of faith fellowship but the degree to which this tension fashions the internalised scripting is markedly different. In general, Woodberry and Smith (1998) believe conservative Protestant Christians “emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, believe in the importance of converting others to their faith, have a strong view of biblical authority, and believe that salvation is through Christ alone.” (36) This change of language shifts the focus from overt compliance and allegiance to the authority figure to an internalized commitment to perceived truth, regardless of the externalized conditions under which it is practiced.

The term of conservative faith is, therefore, more difficult to define and covers a wider range of possible variations. The word ‘conservative’ represents a style of faith community in which the rules of the community are based on a clear understanding of a belief system and inferred consequent behaviour, often in a rigid, hierarchical structure. (Grenz 2002) The internalising of the faith norms, as distinct from compliance with an external authority, means that adherents may risk greater psychological and behavioural implications of non-compliance.

In the last sixty years the re-vitalisation of evangelicalism has carved a particular niche within conservative religious culture in which the authority is wielded through the doctrinal statements of faith supported by an uncompromising use of scripture, often from a literalist standpoint. Bendroth notes that the term ‘evangelical’ is “slightly more plastic in its meaning . . . distinguished by its adherence to the Bible as the standard for belief and practice,
its emphasis on personal conversion, and its missionary fervour.” (Bendroth 2001,48) A core
issue for an evangelical is the belief in salvation and redemption in the theology of the cross –
adhering to this doctrine has created a form of demarcation from society by using assent as a
criterion of inclusion; only an individual decision to follow Jesus will suffice for salvation. To
win souls for Christ became the faith community mission. In the majority of cases,
evangelicalism would be considered conservative, with only the more separatist movements
that practice aggressive forms of evangelization labelled as fundamentalist. (Marty and
Appleby 1991)

This study sought participants who were or had been adherents or members of conservative
churches in Australia. The conservative churches represented would be considered
mainstream, prosocial churches, from an evangelical or Reform tradition or influence. The
general sense of the word conservative used throughout this study would refer to Woodbery
and Smith’s description of conservative Protestants who uphold an emphasis on a personal
relationship with Jesus Christ. They believe in the importance of converting others to their
faith, having a strong view of biblical authority and believe that salvation is through Christ
alone. They represent an indistinct group of social forms. None would be considered a
fundamentalist tradition in the sense of the description given above. Because participants
were not asked to state their faith community’s beliefs, a generalised description has been
adopted to represent the basic values of those traditional denominations represented in the
study.

It is within these parameters that the effect of female participation in conservative fellowships
is being used as the backdrop for an alternate experience of faith validation through spiritual
direction.
Bounded Space

Within conservatism, a prevailing sense of bounded space that implies acceptability within the group comes through complying with the doctrinal stance taken by the group. The idea of a bounded space that confines thought to a specific intellectual construct and thereby determines what is approved to be included in the paradigm is common. One feminist commentator notes her own response to realising that the confines were no longer useful: “When I found that liberation meant confinement to an ever-narrowing circle of acceptable thought and behaviour, I did not renounce liberation, but I decided at least to draw my own circle.” (Madsen 2000,332) Recognising what comprises the ‘circle’ that limits freedom is what is meant by looking at a bounded space. An ‘ever-narrowing circle of acceptable thought’ has a significant effect upon women who wish to participate fully in a conservative faith context.

Definitional boundaries of religious groups have historically led to the distinction between what one perceives to be Christian and what is not, and doctrinal standards have become a way in which a group affirms itself as “the only faithful guardians of true orthodoxy.” (Grenz 2002,309) Grenz’s evaluation of the use of boundaries in defining religious groups notes neo-evangelicalism’s tendency to suggest the implication of a common essential nature of the membership, that which keeps members separate from the realm of heresy. Therefore, to be Christian implies exhibiting this nature, one that demonstrably upholds the core tenets and supports the scriptural interpretations underpinning them – there will be phenomenological characteristics of those who are within the bounds of membership.

Historically, the demarcation was signalled by external social factors such as dress or consumption. O’Brien comments, “Such external markers made it easier to determine who was ‘sanctified’ and who was not.” (O’Brien 2008,332) A more recent shift of emphasis has been away from outward appearance as an indicator of holiness in many conservative congregations and toward less overt behavioural and compliance indicators related to belief.
The subtlety of the group behaviour toward those who are deemed to be outside the bounds of the membership is experienced as group shadow behaviour. It creates an emotional hierarchy that is developed to establish and affirm the normality of those within the group, and the less-than-acceptable status of those outside. Demoulin, Saroglou et al. suggest the term *infra-human* when speaking about the dehumanisation that regularly occurs between social groups. They suggest it refers “to the extent to which people reserve uniquely human characteristics for themselves and their ingroup and attribute those uniquely human characteristics to a lesser extent to outgroups.” (Demoulin, Saroglou et al. 2008, 236) Such an emotional hierarchy sets distinctive boundaries for those inside the group, in which one’s behaviour and language signifies compliance, and psychologically influences the sense of belonging and acceptability.

Boundaries that are created through such shadow behaviours have both negative and positive connotations. Members of a conservative evangelical or Reform tradition who participate in a bounded group will be committed to the individual characteristics that are perceived as living a sanctified life: moral uprightness and holiness in character, attributes that contribute positively to the wider community. It is not intended that this study should brand all membership of bounded communities as having a negative impact on adherents. For Calvin and the Reformers, renewal of moral integrity in a society was crucial. (Murdock 2004) Later evolutions of the Reform movement and the early heart of evangelicalism carried this push for renewal: conversion of heart toward God and conversion of others. (Grenz 2002, 310) The social contribution of conservative members by being morally upright, law-abiding citizens clearly demonstrates the positive effect of the imperatives to live a Christ-like life.

However, the negative and more destructive aspect of a bounded sense of conservatism is the idealism set before members that implies that the only sufficient mode of being Christian is a life lived in presumed knowledge of the doctrinal and scriptural stance proposed by the group. It is a life lived out through the acceptable norms of the group. This gives an authority to the
group shadow effect because many of the conditions for acceptance are based upon unspoken behaviours appropriated through innuendo.\(^8\) The leadership holds the vision of the ideal and those leaders are conferred with authority by the membership and exert a great influence on the shape of the shadow behaviours. The strong significance of a biblical basis to the vision means leaders are often those with the greatest knowledge and intellectual acuity about scripture and doctrine. Grenz (2002) argues that early evangelicalism acknowledged the “deeply-felt awareness of their own limitations in seeing clearly and knowing the truth completely.” (310) Yet, it is the behavioural expression of the imperative to live the ideal Christian life that creates the sociological difficulties for members, not the acknowledged limitations.

A descriptive approach to defining conservatism does not take into account the effects of a conservative environment upon women when the system is patriarchally based. In the terms conservatism and evangelicalism above, the definitions assume that all members are considered equal. Many conservative denominations affirm a ministry of all believers as a core value, implying equal responsibility in serving the faith. (Assel 2010) This also implies an equal opportunity to have their striving toward the ideal affirmed, and the likelihood of achieving full acceptance of identity and personhood based solely upon the desire to live out the conversion of heart. However, patriarchy predetermines the conservative paradigm as a male-dominant assertion of innate, scripturally based, pre-eminence over women\(^9\), such that equal access to full acceptability in the group is always limited. No matter what the definitional stance, a patriarchal overtone skews the social and psychological factors of membership toward the

\(\text{Jung defines the shadow as “everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly” (Jung 1968) The description of the individual experience of shadow has an application to collective forms. Group behaviour that is governed by the agreed norms also affects those who belong to the group. There will be further discussion of the collective shadow in Chapter3.}\)

\(\text{\(^5\) Usually based upon Paul’s assertion in 1 Timothy:13-14 (NIV) "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." A similar ‘innate’ inferiority is found in the Koran: "Muslims consider it self-evident truth that women are not equal to men . . . according to the Koran, men are qawwamun (generally translated as ‘rulers’ or ‘managers’) in relation to women." Hassan, R. (2001). “Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic feminist perspective.” The Muslim World 91(1/2): 55-70.}\)
male. As Bendroth comments, “it might almost be better to call conservative Protestantism ‘promale’ rather than ‘antifemale.’” (Bendroth 2001,52) The resulting impact upon women is a lack of value and an unspoken differential in status. There is a different sense of being in a bounded space for female members of a conservative community than there is for male members, and one of the differences resides in the unconscious underpinnings of the internal culture.

The bounded space that circumscribes women’s participation in conservative environments contains elements that are often noted as core descriptors of conservatism – submission, aggressiveness and conventionality. (Watson, Sawyers et al. 2003,316) It follows that in a context grounded on biblical imperatives about the lesser place of women, submissiveness defines being female and submissive females are rewarded if conventionality is sustained. Female submission to normative behaviours is influenced by the shadow effect of being unacceptable if errant in the opinion of the authority. Prosociality toward those who uphold the norms is a learnt trait that ensures one can remain within the group. (Vassilis 2011) Vassilis (2011,46) notes several authors’ characteristics of prosociality that exemplify the person who is concerned with sustaining a good standing in the group:

- a positive self-perception need overrides altruistic motivation
- reputational concerns and coalitional objectives have high significance
- a commitment to maintaining order through specific belief structures

Reputational concern is the importance religious people attribute to how positively they are perceived by others (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008), and Vassilis believes it is a key mechanism explaining prosociality toward people whose opinion counts or who are to be trusted. (Vassilis 2011,56) It is this sense of needing to maintain a prosocial attitude to preserve self-presentation that describes one of the boundaries of behaviour in a conservative group. For women, this attitude is a constant backdrop because of their predetermined standing in a patriarchal situation.
Maintaining self-perception involves the two traits of submission and compliance and these have impacted feminine spirituality and the way women are constrained to exhibit appropriate spiritual engagement. Sharp refers to *symbolic entrapment* that directs behaviour because “symbolic boundaries crucially define important and salient social identities.” (Sharp 2009) It would seem that in the conservative arena women are subject to symbolic entrapment based upon sexism or aspects of being female that do not find any legitimate avenue of expression.

One outcome of the entrapment experienced by women in a bounded space is the fear to speak openly about personal spiritual experience. There is an unconscious fear of damaging the self-perception being created by the persona and, consequently, affecting their acceptability and affirmation as a group member. The fear is noticed as an unwillingness or wariness to share one’s inner faith journey with another within the conservative culture. It is a different quality to being able to speak openly in a manner that supports the ethos and norms of the culture, and knowing the difference is part of the learnt collective shadow. An inherited resonance within congregations influenced by the Reform movement, one that originated in the rebellion against a manipulative and corrupt ecclesia, is a fierce independence that has evolved as a culturally normalized inappropriateness to reveal one’s relationship with God. The use of the word ‘reveal’ rather than ‘discuss’ is intentional. Members of a conservative congregation may contest that they were unwilling to discuss their relationship with God. Such an idea would be rejected because discussion is elemental to a conservative approach - discussing beliefs and re-circumscribing the agreed territory maintains the boundaries of the agreed stance. However, a different idea is nuanced when focusing on the freedom to reveal something of one’s inner self. It implies secrecy that keeps inner experience safe from critique that could challenge acceptability. To reveal one’s personal spiritual experience needs an arena of trust and courage to engage the intimate inner spiritual world.

The outcome of a fear to reveal personal spiritual experience is to keep silent and not share the foundational experiences of faith. Historically, for medieval women to be self-assertive
attracted the threat of being accused of heresy. (Hughes 1997,376) Medieval mystics like Teresa of Avila or those in the Beguine movement experienced considerable clerical opposition to their public ministries, even when their audience was largely female, because they made their spiritual experience known. (Jantzen 1995) They lived in a dualistic situation of self-assertion and self-abnegation, teaching and silence. It seems to resonate with the acknowledged role of fear in keeping members of an organization silent (Fiorenza 1998,31), where “fear encourages avoidance behaviour, a narrowed perceptual and cognitive focus on perceived threats.” (Kish-Gephart, Detert et al. 2009,164) Within conservative faith environments, revealing intimate expressions of one’s relationship with the Divine invokes wariness around faith-statements that lay open the possibility of examination – the secretive defence is to keep silent. Avoidance behaviour often includes overt agreement with approved faith-statements, even though personal experience remains unexamined and unspoken.

Verbalising faith statements by using language that will be heard is a way to gain approval. Discussion of ideas or thoughts on intellectual propositions, or the correctness or otherwise of theological frameworks, is condoned by the patriarchy for it represents one of the symbolic boundaries of faith sharing. But to reveal one’s thoughts implies giving access to a profoundly private place in which one is exceedingly vulnerable. This is particularly true where there is a fear of having one’s inner, private world exposed as harbouring ‘incorrect’ thoughts and, therefore, somehow not truly right with God. Feather believes that “the conservative individual tends to avoid both stimulus and response uncertainty” and this is seen in both “the verbal attitudes that are expressed as well as in other aspects of behaviour.”(Feather 1979,1618) For women, who are already suspect because of their gender, verbalising personal faith experiences requires using the approved masculinised constructions.

There are several aspects being proposed that support the idea of conservative faith fellowships as a bounded space for women with consequent limitations on how a woman may engage her personal spiritual experiences:
• The faith statements of a group circumscribe what it means to be a Christian and give grounds for behaviour that supports shaping members into that mode.
• A patriarchal system of control fundamentally skews the value of female participation and influences the liberty a woman has to speak her personal story.
• There is a fear to reveal intimate spiritual experiences publically. Speaking about personal experience risks being measured against the norms and beliefs of the group and having those experiences judged to be less than acceptable.

Each of these aspects creates constraints on women that limit the freedom to validate personal spiritual engagement with the Divine.

Psychological and Sociological Issues

Compromising one’s own truths in order to conform to exterior norms incurs potential soul violence that may be more damaging to the interior spiritual landscape than overt rebellion. The fear of soul identity being wounded by disapproval or rejection runs deep. The need for a healthy soul identity, including the affirmation that God loves and accepts the believer, resides in the hidden interior world of personal spirituality. In psychological terms, the willingness to reveal one’s inmost thoughts and feelings depends upon resilience to the potential for destruction from those scripts that have the greatest authority over one’s unconscious self-worth. (Crocker and Wolfe 2001; Erskine 2010)

It is difficult for women to find places where the transcendent experiences that underpin their faith can be shared without fear of rejection. The denial of spontaneous feminine feelings and intuition contributes to the collective assumption about the low value of women’s transcendent experience. Jeremy Taylor (1998,19) uses examples of myths and dreams in different cultures to note the ways in which the value of the ‘psychologically feminine’ is dependent upon the social norms established for gender roles. Taylor notes,
where women are considered property, and have relatively little autonomy, there is also a collective tendency to ritualize the expression of strong emotion and to deny the relevance and importance of spontaneous feminine feelings and intuitions.

A cultural denial of the validity of such experience, because of its association with an inferior, and therefore, less credible position in the society, has created an equivalent cultural tendency for women to remain silent about deeply held transcendent experience.

The fear of disclosure by women in a conservative fellowship is one aspect of the ‘paralysis’ referred to by Nicola Slee: “Paralysis, in its many forms, signifies the crises which women face in a patriarchal culture in coming to an ownership of their lives as meaningful, spirit-inspired and intentional.”(Slee 2000,10) Marsden notes that Mary Daly refers to aphasia, amnesia and apraxia as the paralyzing results for women who are barred from thinking and speaking of their experience and of their “dumb despair of being forbidden to know one's powers.” (Madsen 2000) (334) This implies an underlying fear that acceptance in the community is assured as long as participants don’t speak perceived untruths or divulge any indication that they need to be corrected and realigned with the accepted truth underpinning the social environment. Fear of disclosure or being judged as missing the mark is one factor that keeps women members in less scrutinised roles within the social group.

Certain roles carried out by women in faith communities do not attract scrutiny and the reason these functions have become gender-preferred is because of their safety for women. Eagly, Makijani et al. have postulated a basic difference in stereotypical gender-role assignment. They separate stereotyping of female gender-roles by describing them as using *communal* (interpersonally orientated) attributes; it is typified by homemaking type activities and interpersonal and relational roles, each of which is stereotypically observed to be favoured by females. Friendliness, accessibility and concern for others are traits that are deemed to signify a communal approach, particularly in leadership styles. (Eagly, Makijani et al. 1992,16) These are contrasted with an *agentic* (achievement-orientated) approach which is deemed to be masculine and is observed as a task-orientated and domination role. *Agentic* traits in leaders
include making sure subordinates follow rules and procedures and the maintenance of high standards. If the designation of a female gender-role favouring a communal approach is supported, then the perceived threat to male leadership or to the perceived exactness in sustaining the mission (high standards) is averted when women assume a role positively matched to the observed tasks expected of females. The female gender-role is cast as being friendly, involved in pastoral care support and fulfilling homemaking-style tasks that require good interpersonal capacities. As these roles are cast as a female stereotype they do not attract negative criticism and are not measured against masculine expectations. It is in this sense that women have remained trapped in certain gender roles within faith communities. Both the observable social roles and the expectation that females will fill those roles act in concert to create the stereotype.

The prescriptive roles that are typically held by women in a conservative faith fellowship are created by the established norms within the group that members observe and, therefore, expect to observe. Eckes and Trautner refer to the difference between the descriptive and prescriptive components of gender-roles. They say, “The descriptive component consists of beliefs about the characteristics that each gender does possess, whereas the prescriptive component consists of beliefs about the characteristics that each gender should possess.” (Eckes and Trautner 2000,208) Research carried out by Eagly and Steffen has shown that those who perceive people in certain social roles tend to assign that role as a gender-role, regardless of other factors. (Eagly and Steffen 1984,752) In other words, observing someone functioning in a role carries weight in subconsciously assigning gender-roles thus assuming that this is what that gender should be doing – a prescriptive response. They conclude that a significant cause of gender stereotyping is the different, observable distributions of women and men in social roles. It creates a double effect of commonly observed social roles reinforcing gender roles that become stereotypically cast within the social setting. When women consistently carry out communal roles within a community they are observed to be doing what is expected
within the group, which reinforces the task as a gender-role. Conversely, when women are not regularly observed in certain roles it reinforces those roles as masculine roles.

The stereotypical roles described above use psychological and sociological information to explain the norms created within social settings. The reality of female participation in a conservative fellowship is a form of covert sexism. Sexism is defined by Fuchs as “the manifestation of conscious social and cultural practices of discrimination against women” (Fuchs 2008,46) The discrimination against women can become more overt, and more likely to inflict soul-damage, when underpinned by biblical exhortations to preferred characterisations of gender roles. An example is given in articles carried on the website of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Stinson 2011):

Scripture establishes the proper order in the family and in the church accordingly, assigning the duties of headship and protection in the home to husbands (Ephesians 5:23) and appointing men in the church to the teaching and leadership roles (1 Timothy 2:11-15). (Macarthur 2011)

If we are to be faithful to God and live godly lives, we must understand what God intends us to be as men and women. So, Paul doesn’t want women teaching men, and he doesn’t want women exercising authority over men. . . what is said about gender roles in the New Testament is counter-cultural, and it’s to advance the gospel . . . 1 Tim 2:11–12: ‘Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness.’ Now, the first thing here, ‘Let a woman learn quietly,’ I don’t think that means never speaking . . . It means speaking when appropriate, and it means speaking in a way that is (the next word in verse 11) submissive. So there are two things here: learning and then being submissive. (Hamilton Jr. 2010)

Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart (Gen. 2:18, 21-24; 1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:12-14). The Danvers Statement (CBMW 2010)

When Christian culture is referenced against biblical interpretations that are used to limit alternative ways of being female, the entrapment of women takes on an eternal perspective and the language of ‘ordained by God’ becomes the final cause. This then precludes any authentic conversation about gender and gender-roles in communities. Eckes and Traunter note that there is then no desire to, “closely attend to both the developmental history and the social factors involved in bringing about gender effects” and there is limited opportunity or will to find a psychologically suitable match for a person’s capability within a social context.
(Quoted in Lott 2002,142) In other words, there is a gender blindness to seeing women as individuals or creating an environment that may encourage their mode of being female.

Feminist writers in spirituality and religion speak of women being unconsciously authored by the gender roles assigned by the patriarchy and consequent social constructs about being female. (Fuchs 2003) Fuchs refers to recent literature regarding a hegemonic effect underlying many theories that affect women, particularly gender role assignment, and the way it uninges discussions about the ‘freedom’ post-modern women may embrace. Feminist sociologists refer to ‘femaleness’ as a category that questions not just the social-contextual theories of being female, but “the entire hegemonic edifice of knowledge, the methods of finding and establishing Truth, and the strategies of producing knowledge.” (Fuchs 2003,104)

Many of the fields of study that touch upon theoretical understandings of faith development can be critiqued for their inbuilt androcentric bias. ( 2004,9) Within writings on adult development, feminist theorists note that human development theories have been constructed through significant research carried out with male subjects, as Spatig notes, leaving “women and girls judged as deviant or deficient in relation to theories of human development.” (Spatig 2005,301) The research has been almost entirely based upon the study of males by males. For example, the only psycho-developmental theory for female gender in 1960’s – 1980’s was based upon biology using Freudian theory. Freud underpinned his work based upon his assertion that the sexuality of the girl is initially masculine. (Dujovne 1991) This perpetuated ideas about developing a female identity that evolved from female substitutional behaviour for penis envy in the phallic stage of early childhood development. (Tyson 1982)

Contemporary feminist psychoanalyst theory has challenged the masculine view of female development. Dujovne reports that “Freud’s premise that girls are initially masculine has been disconfirmed with clinical, embryological, and observational data” even though the negative implications of Freudian based treatment remain. (Dujovne 1991,318) Indeed, the notion of ‘being female’ now takes into account the early feminine experience of the female body.
(Galenson and Roiphe 1976,639) In the fields of psychological developmental theory and psychoanalysis, there is a contemporary acknowledgement that the complex entanglement of cultural, racial and sexist theories was previously based upon the exemplar of the masculine. Freud’s theories were based upon the cultural view of women in his time, a culture that was profoundly patriarchal. This cultural mindset did nothing to prevent the male-authored views of the feminine being co-opted into religious social settings.

The assignment of femaleness scripted in the context of a patriarchal system raises questions about how to renegotiate an alternate social descriptor when such universal norms create corporate shadows that presuppose ‘feminine’ refers to gender roles alone. Conservative faith statements about femininity usually begin with the equality of men and women – created in the image of God in Genesis 1:26 and being counted equal in Paul’s assessment of the human condition before God in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:28. However, this ‘equality’ is qualified by what is sanctioned as community-specific differences in roles within the fellowship, as noted above. For example, a spokesperson for the Southern Baptist Convention reported that “The biblical passages that restrict the office of pastor to men do not negate the inherent worth and equal value of both women and men before God, but rather focus on the assignment of different roles and responsibilities to the genders.” (Banerjee 2006) The principle of complementarity\(^1\) in more conservative systems, as a Godly plan for humanity, has been constructed to sanction these gender-roles. As noted above, the continued shaping of the observable social structure actually reinforces the members’ perception of gender-based appropriateness for women’s contribution and closes down any exploration of alternate ways of being female.

\(^{10}\) The term *complementarity* is defined as “a relationship or situation in which two or more different things improve or emphasize each other’s qualities: a culture based on the complementarity of men and women.” http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/complementarity Accessed September 10, 2012.
An alternate commentary on these passages is given by Radford Reuther who critiques a Pauline worldview that also leaves gender-role as the only basis for femininity. She states that Paul’s sense of equality uses a baptismal formula taken from an earlier belief in humanity originating from a pre-gendered state in Greek philosophical tradition. In this view ‘equality’ is ontological and refers to the original state of humanity and does not specifically refer to the equal worth of the subsequent male and female gender. Radford Ruther asserts that this view allowed, “Christian women to claim spiritual equality with men, but in a framework that identified such women as having abolished their femaleness altogether” and where equality in Christ was linked to “celibacy and a concept of spirituality identified with negation of sex and femaleness.” (Gross and Radford Ruether 2001,91) She carefully warns against naive feminism that is quick to claim Paul’s statement ‘there is no male or female’ as an underpinning of female value in its own right. This interpretation results in a similar outcome of negating individual qualities of femaleness. Any value that this may embody results in a sanctioned ignoring of femaleness as long as the roles are appropriately fulfilled. The female gender is still defined by roles rather than having an intrinsic condition which has specific characteristics and qualities of value.

Little seems to be argued about differences between the spiritual experience of men and women or difference related to faith condition. Radford Reuther’s critique of the influence of a Greek anthropology on Pauline writings suggests that the compromise for women of the time was to accept spiritual equality at the expense of personal femininity. Other commentators have used the historical record to show spiritual equality has always been present, if not recorded extensively. Ranft has written on the spiritual equality of women by looking at the historical record of the activities of women since Christianity began. (Ranft 1998) As an historian, she is convinced that the mention of women in Christian historical writings indicates the significance of their spiritual standing. She asserts that, “this is another manifestation of their spiritual equality.” (French 1999,965) Her critics question how the idea of spiritual
equality can stand alongside the prevailing misogyny characteristic of Christian sociology. Yet this description may encapsulate the difficult position that women have occupied within Christian faith. The literary record of female participation in religious communities does not give any insight into the difficulties or conditions under which their spirituality was expressed. Carol Christ believes that history is written by the victors: “Those who are conquered, those who challenge the status quo too strongly, and those whose ideas don’t fit in with dominant concerns are written out of history.” (Christ 2004) This may be too broad a brush to take to all of Christian history, however, even if the record is skewed toward a male narrative the presence of women’s stories speaks about the persistence of feminine spirituality. It does not necessarily speak about the spiritual equality or inequality of males and females. Pejorative ideas about saints, convents and Mariology that developed in the Reformation and the diminished credence given to spiritual experience in the Enlightenment, in Ranft’s view, contributed to the reduced visibility of women in historical narratives and the consequent effect on the perception of spiritual equality. It seems like a reversal of what was envisioned as the full participatory role of women in faith communities in the earlier writings, including the record of significant women spiritual directors in early Christian writings. (Ranft 2000) However the term ‘spiritual equality’ is used, it has not truly carried the sense of equal value and respect that allows a woman to express her spirituality according to her innate femaleness.

The prevailing shadow in any discussion about spiritual equality is a presumption of a uniform experience of God underpinning spirituality. Regardless of what has influenced this stance, it has the same phenomenological outcome for women. Femaleness has not been credited as having any bearing upon the spiritual experience of the one eternal God. Extending Spatig’s observation about theories based largely on masculine responses, it is clear that the normative expression of spiritual experience is predicated upon male authority and masculine modes of engaging faith. In Moberg’s evaluation of spirituality measures he comments on assumptions
made in theories about personal spirituality that assume they have universal import but which are informed by the “evaluative theory of only particular groups.” (Moberg 2002,47) He suggests that “each ideological group believes that its own criteria for identifying ‘true’ or wholesome spirituality are better than all others, if not also a universal norm for all humanity.” (50) There seems to be little argument for gender-difference or gender-bias within the nature of faith and spiritual experience when it is broached within a conservative faith community. The presumed faith stance in a conservative fellowship is based upon a masculinised view of sanctioned theology and a consequent mode of engagement that is meaningful as a masculine way of knowing. There is no gender difference.

The intent of this research is to evaluate qualitatively the intimate space a spiritual direction context provides for validating the personal stories of women’s transcendent experiences. The opportunity proffered by a spiritual direction space contributes to the capacity for a woman to develop a framework for an individualised feminine spirituality, one that derived from personal experiential selfhood and not from doctrinal or theological paradigms. The spaciousness of the context includes the openness of the practitioner who is aware of the corporate shadow effects which cloud the freedom to disclose or reveal transcendent encounters. This study does not engage any questions about the validity of personal transcendent experiences – it is presumed that women in this study have spoken authentically, have a personal biblical basis for their Christian belief system and that their transcendent experiences are a facet of their relationship to the Divine. By taking this stance, a fresh view of gender issues in spirituality can opt out of the gender-role debate that has been the dominant concern of a conservative conversation about women and their faith community participation. The emphasis can shift to the way in which women themselves have legitimately authored their feminine spirituality, often outside of their past faith fellowship context.
Contemporary Spirituality

One significant social change that has brought more openness to the expression of personal faith experiences has been the variety of new expressions of spirituality that are being embraced by society, including evolving theories of spirituality in the Christian tradition. Faith experience has transitioned from being referenced against faithfulness to a tradition to a much broader sense of the lived spiritual experiences within all of life. Zinnbauer, Pargament et al. describe the more formal clerical approaches as remaining anchored in one’s “attendance at formal religious services and adherence to a church’s tenets and doctrines [as] the central features.” (Zinnbauer, Pargament et al. 1999,896) However, they believe that a growing trend toward individualisation of spiritual expression has developed privatized and personalized religious expressions. (891) This trend toward personal religious expressions and new spiritual practices has raised concerns with some critics.

Schneider’s view, for example, is that there is an existential flavour to many of the new spiritualities which are more related to personal satisfaction and immediate gratification. (Schneiders 2003,166) Writing within a theological milieu, Schneiders employs a composite stance that wishes to embrace a feminine approach to encompass the lived experience of the believer that also speaks out of the master narratives of the Christian tradition. She holds an interconnectedness between religious contexts and spirituality that maintains a faithfulness to the tradition through a shared embodiment in public life. (171)

Yet, despite the scepticism about how broadly the term spiritual experience is now being used, and whether or not it is being cut loose from traditional religious contexts, the heart of validating personal spiritual experience still resides in the lived context in which the experience took place. For Frohleich, “lived spirituality must remain the key point of engagement for any study of spirituality.” (Frohlich 2005,68) She advocates for a self-implicating character of lived spirituality and suggests it means that “one attends with as much authenticity as one can
muster to the truth of one’s own experience.” (68) The authenticity of personal experience is problematic and any attempt to define lived experience cannot undermine the validity of what remains as the foundation of personal faith. Frohlich also urges that we not simply take the “narrative of an experience that is straightforwardly presented as authoritative for the community of hearers.” (69) One resolution would seem to be an education in interiority as a critical appropriation of one’s presence to oneself, including knowing what self-validating aspects of experience are chosen to embed one’s knowledge of faith.11

Moberg’s recent description of the range of modalities of spirituality include “God-oriented, worldly-oriented, with an idolatrous stress on ecology or nature, or humanistic, stressing human potential or achievement” (Moberg 2002,49) indicating that the boundaries between what is ‘religious’ and what is ‘spiritual’ in contemporary postmodern language have become more blurred. The rising interest in integrative spiritual wholeness shifts the debate to a different domain, as noted by Zinnbauer, Pargament et al. (1999): “for those who find the whole of life to be sacred, there is little difference between the two processes” (191) They note that there are divergent definitions being included in the literature and more diverse academic contexts in which the topic is being debated. For example, they found that social theorists’ definitions of spirituality now seem to fall into four categories: relationship with the divine; inner motivation; existential quests and prescriptive assertions, none of which are necessarily linked to a traditional religious stance.

Sinnott proposes a contemporary expression of spirituality as, “one’s personal relation to the sacred or transcendent, a relation that then informs other relationships and the meaning of one’s own life.” (Sinnott 2001) This reflects a growing societal awareness of meaning-making as a significant, yet underrated, influence throughout life. Wellbeing includes how people connect with their sense of the Ultimate (however that is named) as a means of making sense

11 The implications of using lived spiritual experience in a research process are discussed in Chapter 4.
of life. Studies in psychology and other helping professions are beginning to acknowledge spirituality as a part of an integrated lifeframe which has hitherto been neglected. Its inclusion in professional therapeutic contexts is seen to have significance for wholeness and wellness. (Moon 2002; Sperry 2003; Yee 2005; Berg, Crowe et al. 2010)

Therefore, the discussion around definitions of religion and spirituality within post-modern society, what was formerly debated within an oppositional stance between the two disciplines, is moving from a dialectic approach to a more integrative paradigm. This movement shifts the idea of faith from a formation process related to the control of the boundaries defining religion to a broader embrace of relationship and interaction with what is believed to be the Divine in the lived experience of the believer. The shift brings the focus onto the experience of the individual, as Hill and Hood suggest: “both religion and spirituality are understood as a search for or experience of the sacred, as defined by the individual.” (Hill and Hood 1999, 1019)

Such a stance that wishes to embrace something broader than the confined understanding of a religious paradigm requires growth in the ability of a person to be open to alternate constructs and possible ways of interpreting experience.

The capacity for openness is listed as one of the personality traits within the psychological discipline of Personality Theory. McCrae’s Five Factor Model of personality traits lists Openness-to-Experience as a significant aspect of personality that may affect interaction with religious experience. (McCrae 1999) If so, McCrae believes that “at least part of the polarization [between religion and spirituality] is due to the association of religion with Closedness and spirituality with Openness“ (1214) and a change of perspective about what is meant by spiritual experience must engage both the existential circumstance and the heritable traits that predicate experience. Vassilis states that a fundamentalist viewpoint will be held by, “those who are low in openness to experience, that is, breadth, depth, originality, and complexity of an individual’s mental and experiential life.” (Vassilis 2011, 46) However, Piedmont, who incorporates spirituality and religiosity under the term Spiritual Transcendence,
proposes that spirituality may be considered as a sixth factor of personality, having a particular set of components that are universally recognisable. (Piedmont 1999,989) Table 1 below summarises the components of Piedmont's theory:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connectedness</th>
<th>A belief in one contributes to creating life’s continuing harmony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>A belief in the unitive nature of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer fulfilment</td>
<td>Feelings of joy and contentment that result from personal encounters with transcendent reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of paradoxes</td>
<td>The ability to live with inconsistencies and contradictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonjudgementality</td>
<td>An ability to accept life and others on their own terms, avoid judgements and be sensitive to others needs and pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existentiality</td>
<td>A desire to live in the moment and embrace all that life brings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratefulness</td>
<td>An innate sense of wonder and thankfulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Summary of Piedmont’s Components of Transcendence

For Piedmont, each of these components links the term *transcendent* to a more existential paradigm and connects a person’s intuitive awareness with something greater and beyond oneself. This framework suggests a capacity for each individual to intuit the transcendent as an aspect of their personality, and dissolves the religious boundaries that confine spiritual experience to a particular form. Being open to experience requires compromising what was formerly held as the necessary conditions for valid spiritual experience and encourages one to accept a subjective engagement with transcendent experiences. Although each of these are referred to as individual traits, it may well be that the feminine aspect of personality preferentially and innately uses these aspects. The components listed above resonate with what feminist theorists have called women’s ways of knowing and are remarkably similar to the preferred feminine modes of engagement that will be discussed further in Chapter 2.
In summary, the following interwoven threads have been considered in this chapter:

- the gender-bias against valid feminine spiritual experience
- the fear to disclose intimate experiences due to perceived judgement
- the phenomenologically derived stereotype for female gender and biblically based theories of female roles
- the changing perceptions of spirituality and the significance of lived experience

Each of these issues has impacted the experience of women in conservative faith settings. The aspects of feminine experience that are influenced by gender bias contribute to the bounded nature of the social environment that constrains how a woman may speak of her spiritual experience. The next chapter will consider how feminine experience may be expressed differently.
Chapter 2

Other Ways of Being Female

Feminine Ways of Knowing

For the past three decades, there have been a growing number of theories about the difference in epistemic modes employed by males and females for establishing personal knowledge. These theories provide a way of challenging the patriarchal religious loci of control which are characterised by *closedness*, and provide new frameworks for a spirituality that embraces *openness*. A central issue for women in conservative religious settings is their freedom to hold *epistemic agency*. Scardamalia and Bereiter define epistemic agency as: “the amount of individual or collective control people have over the whole range of components of knowledge building—goals, strategies, resources, evaluation of results, and so on.” (Scardamalia and Bereiter 2006) If this is applied to the discussion on gender-roles and the resulting dismissal of female capacity, then it follows that women’s epistemic agency is also diminished because of the prevailing environment of masculine power and domination.

Epistemic agency allows women to validate their own knowledge and lived experience. Townley believes that epistemic agency is limited if others refuse to acknowledge an individual’s capacity to contribute to the social action of the group. They may be discredited, dismissed, excluded or used as instruments of the group’s goals (Townley 2006,40) and the social structure of a group can disadvantage individuals that are from nonprivileged sectors within the group. When women are limited to particular sectors of a community, and the development of the body of truth that defines the boundaries of the community is under the
control of a patriarchal system, then the epistemic agency of women is often neutralised and results in disempowerment.

In recent times, alternative modalities by which own-truth is established, including ideas about feminine ways of knowing, have been applied to many disciplines. (Gringeri, Wahab et al.; Chafetz 1988; Gilbert and Masucci 2006; Given 2008; Spongberg 2008) Feminist psychologists in the 1980’s began to isolate the ways in which women develop their view of reality. (Perry 1981; Gilligan 1982; Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986) These have become known as feminine modes of knowing, and were contrasted with the epistemic processes that have dominated the androcentric culture. This work refined the earlier ideas of gender stereotypes that isolated character attributes of the male gender as using agentic (achievement-orientated) attributes and the female gender using communal (interpersonally orientated) attributes mentioned previously.

The British feminist theologian Nicola Slee applied this work to faith relationships by using open-ended interviews to explore the faith lives of 30 Christian or post-Christian women. (Slee 2000) Slee refers to the conclusions from other literature that supports the earlier work: “women’s spirituality is essentially relational in character, rooted in a strong sense of connection to others and an ethic of care and responsibility.” (9)

Two themes emerge from Slee’s work:

- there are recognizable modes of faith development in women
- many women experience three stages of spiritual development that typifies the feminine struggle - paralysis, awakening and relationality.

The first of these themes implies that organisations that cannot recognize the different modalities by which women formulate their faith will, overtly or covertly, belittle, dismiss or exclude alternate ways of a significant mode of expressing an experiential knowledge of God. Culturally acceptable forms of spiritual engagement have been established via masculine
modes of knowing – these are listed as intellectual and cognitive, abstract ideas-based, power orientated and are primarily based on consequential formulations.

Taylor recognises that women find meaning through different ways of knowing: “It is the rejection of blind impartiality in the application of universal abstract rules and principles that has, in the eyes of many, marked women as deficient in moral reasoning.” (Taylor 1998,19) In an intellectually-based theological system, being marked as deficient means being less than capable - in reasoning, moral fibre and trustworthiness to know and hold to the ‘truth’. In Taylor’s view, feminine psychological experience is more likely to be “interior, relational, creative, sensual, intuitive, cyclic, repeating and emotional.” (19) These are pathways by which experience is validated in the feminine psyche. This challenges a sociological framework of a society which predisposes women toward disadvantage, particularly by not recognising or accommodating a more affective expression of their reality. This study will investigate whether these are pathways by which spiritual encounters are validated by women from conservative church backgrounds using the spiritual direction space.

In the research noted above, Slee observed similarities between the way women develop their faith. Women generally seemed to prefer conversation, metaphor and narrative to elucidate their perceived spiritual encounters. (Slee 2004) They also personalize engagement holding conceptual connections as a significant part of making sense of things. In general, women were more able to hold the tension of an apophatic approach to Divine encounters as mystery without needing to measure the experience against the certainty of a philosophical affirmation of truth. This description provides the basis of understanding the way individual women engage in the faith-making process and the mode of knowledge construction.

At this point a cautionary note is given as to the relationship between feminine and masculine epistemic modes and what actually happens in the male and female experience. There is a view that argues for a post-discourse epistemological framework which questions a binary
approach to assigning qualities to one gender or another. According to Tissdale, this framework would want a “deconstruction of binary categories such as male-female or affective-rational.” (Tissdale 2008,333) This may be helpful in tracing the origins of theoretical approaches, but it still holds the danger of ignoring the existential reality of women. It is the view of this study that a more helpful discussion on feminine or masculine attributes follows a Jungian concept that outlines the recognition of both masculine and feminine aspects within each individual psyche. Jung posited the notion of anima and animus, in which he says a “woman is compensated by a masculine element and therefore her unconscious has, so to speak, a masculine imprint.” (Storr 1983,111) In his categorisation, he takes a conceptual approach to describe male and female consciousness where a “woman’s consciousness is characterised more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos.” (P.112) In Jung’s view, Eros, the function of relationship, is usually less developed than Logos. This has been a foundational contribution to the later research work on psychological attributes of gender.

In this study, the research has focused upon the experience of women and their expression of a feminine spirituality, but it is assumed that the capacity to engage a feminine modality is also available to men. It is not the sole the property of women. Both women and men have the capability to access feminine and masculine attributes. This does not rob the discussion of its strength, but notes the limitation of the approach. This research has focused on the experience of women in the light of the impact of patriarchal influences on their liberty to validate personal spiritual experience – the discussion will focus on women, but the principle refers to ‘feminine’ forms of expression in both male and female genders. The approach taken is that the female gender preferentially accesses feminine epistemic modes, while still having access to the rational-intellectual capacities, whilst the male gender preferentially accesses masculine epistemic modes in the course of their everyday experience but also has affective capabilities available. In this light, the discussion is focused on women’s experience and
consequent development of a feminine spirituality *through women’s experience*, including the experience of being in a female body. This stance argues for an integrated approach to spiritual experience that also recognises the distinctions of gendered engagement, rather than a dualistic approach which holds that feminine modalities used to engage experience as not accessible to a male. In a dualistic stance which emanates from an oppositional construct, it is posited that men and women are not able to engage experience using gendered modalities used by the other. This thesis would dispute this stance and hold that all individuals have the capacity for both feminine and masculine preferences for interacting with their environment. It may be that this can be enhanced and expanded in a later study that examines the male experience of feminine spirituality.

The second theme from Slee’s research found that many women experience three stages of spiritual development that typified their struggle - paralysis, awakening and relationality. Wherever it originates, the experiencing of oneself and one’s faith as paralytic seems to represent a major developmental challenge for women in a patriarchal culture. (Slee 2000,11) The paralysis seems to indicate that women are not able to employ preferred feminine modes of engagement to validate their faith experiences and live in a social setting of masculinised modalities that dismiss their natural preferences.

One of the significant aspects of a feminine epistemology is the importance of connectedness to what is being apprehended. In reference to feminine spirituality, transcendent experiences remain the personal and intimate property of the individual and, in their naive state, have the potential to avoid the imprint of patriarchy. Validation of transcendent experience relies on the degree to which a connection to that experience has been embedded in the inner psyche and incorporated into the repository of inner spiritual certainties. However, the way women verbalise their experience *is* conditioned by the internal scripting that has been fashioned by the patriarchal imperatives, where the internalised scripts obey the rules of the collective shadows of the group. It is likely to impact the depth of connection available to embed
spiritual experience and is often sensed as a lack of certainty in the faith relationship. When a woman becomes aware of an intuitive mode of connectedness, one that makes sense of her experience, she experiences an awakening.

The inherited scripts influence the potential to be open to experiences, where, as mentioned earlier, Openness-to-Experience is a personality trait required for assessing the depth of a spiritual experience. McCrae’s study of personality traits has shown a marked difference in scores in openness between conservative and liberal Christians. He reports: “Fundamentalists scored significantly lower on all 12 items in the Openness scale, claiming to be less affected by poetry, lower in intellectual curiosity, less inclined to try new and foreign foods.” (McCrae 1999,1214) So it would seem that openness to transcendent experience is predicated upon a personality characteristic that has been reshaped by the patriarchal scripting and is ‘highly heritable.’ Sensing a connectedness to intimate spiritual experience becomes more difficult and a lack of openness to embrace spiritual encounters undermines faith agency.

Another note of caution is sounded by Woodhead early in her critique of feminist theology, in which she notes her disappointment with making ‘women’s experience’ a higher authority, one that is disconnected to the wider theological and ecclesial discourses. According to Woodhead, a feminist approach which operates within a political agenda of elevating personal experience as a superior authority is “just another variant of an individualistic form of modern spirituality.” (Woodhead 1997,192) Continuing the critique, Woodhead wishes to maintain the embodied place of spiritual experience within the Christian church ecclesia: “The church is not an institution which threatens the autonomy of the individual, but the community in which human beings are formed and shaped as faithful and loving creatures.” (195) The sense of idealism here is laudable, however, the existential product of this ‘formation’ in conservative faith communities is far below ideal for women. Whilst these comments are targeted at feminist theology in general, it is the very agendas of those in the church, assigning how
females may be within the fellowship, that prevents an individual’s reality from matching Woolhead’s desired community outcome.

Finding a feminine spirituality which is authenticated by the woman’s ownership of her experience requires freedom from collective shadows that dictate what is a legitimised as a valid faith experience. Jantzen summarises the task: “This intense, pre-linguistic experience is available only to those who will enter into themselves and recognize their own innermost feelings . . . it is this which is shared across the divides of language, creed and culture.” (Jantzen 1995, 344) For women who struggle to challenge their inner scripting, validation is a key word. How can the personal experiences of encountering the Divine be validated in a way that affirms the experience to be authentic for a female believer? And what role does validation have in helping women resist the patriarchally driven need to reformulate the experience in terms of approved ecclesial statements?

**Other Ways of Being Female**

Gradual changes in the constructs of gender identity arose when feminist writers called women to articulate ‘other ways of being female’ (Lazreg 1994, 6) and encouraged creative strategies in their search for individuation. Some feminist constructions of ‘being female’ have been critiqued as authored by Western, white feminists and do not account for contextual individuation truly based on personal circumstances or choices. In some sense, feminist viewpoints can entrap as efficiently as the patriarchal shadow they seek to escape. Post-feminist constructions have addressed a wider range of factors that have included individualized existential realities like colour, faith tradition and geographic-cultural location that encourage personal choice appropriate to how a woman wishes to express herself. Wink and Dillon observe that, “Autonomy, insight, openness to experience and cognitive interests” are described as contributory factors in spiritual development alongside cognitive flexibility, as opposed to rigid and inflexible standpoints. (Wink and Dillon 2002,81) The recent recognition
of the psychological deficit that results when aspects of affective expression are denied means that ‘being female’ refers to all levels of the female psyche. (Krause, Mendelson et al. 2003) It includes how personal spiritual experiences are embedded into the framework of the personality and how personality traits like openness can be influenced by profound transcendent encounters. The effect on personality traits may not be great but McCrae et al. and others believe transcendent experience can transform habits, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as impacting the perception of oneself. (McCrae 1999,1215; Paloutzian, Richardson et al. 1999)

If the aspect of openness in the personality can be supported, women are enabled to take ownership of the spiritually profound experiences which have arisen out of their own existential condition, and use that connectedness to legitimise their spiritual self-image. Those who ‘theorised gender’ theologically have tended to ignore legitimate experiential knowledge and have dismissed a core grounding of the individual female in her own faith experiences. For many women who have had their religious formation in a patriarchal faith context, connecting with intimate faith experience is an unfamiliar and unknown process.

Such a lack of connectedness to transcendent experience is not dissimilar to issues raised in other social arenas where a lack of personal experiential engagement has created a particular social dilemma. Two examples are found in the challenge of ecofeminism over the past fifteen years and the critique of conservative religious responses to the Deepwater Horizon Oil disaster of 2009. Firstly, the dichotomy between nature and human industrialised life has divorced lifestyle from being necessarily rooted in the environment. Ecofeminists’ attempts to solve environmental issues are thwarted by the essential lack of experiential connectedness with the environment. The lack of understanding of the “moral and spiritual relationship with nature is clearly magnified by the poverty of our experience of nature. . . The problem is not at base one of mismanagement, but a problem of impoverished experience.” (Gatens-Robinson
Having removed oneself from a nature-reliant lifestyle, one’s life is impoverished of the experiences which create spiritual care connections with the environment.

Secondly, the response of conservative religious communities to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill affecting the southern American states in 2009 was derailed by two ideals that disconnected spiritual care from the tragedy that was unfolding: a mechanistic view of creation in which God remains outside of creation and the ideal of domination of the earth that sanctioned political economy. Each of these distanced the believer from an embodied sense of being creation and therefore kept them ambivalent. (Northcott 2010) In other words, the experiential component of being spiritual is crucial to developing a personal spirituality which includes one’s connection and experience of the environment – faith was found to be bereft when it was predominantly an intellectual or conceptual process.

These examples from the wider lifeframe of experiential connectedness are echoed in conservative women’s impoverished experience of intimate sharing of their deep inner mystery. Where the ecofeminist rues the lack of experience in the natural environment of many urban lifestyles and sees the inherent lack of intimate connectedness with the environment as a result, the encultured avoidance of sharing one’s inner psycho-spiritual experiences in conservative religious cultures produces a similar impoverishment, making it difficult to grasp what is being asked in terms of personal spirituality.

However, it is not helpful for women to crusade against a patriarchal system as a means of addressing the poverty of their own engagement with spiritual experiences. A different method is required that offers an individual empowerment without systematic conflict or social dislocation. Women can find their own faith-form, as they personally wish to express or engage it, without subconscious patriarchal scripting predetermining the mode of engagement. Fiorenza has employed the term ‘malestream’ to identify the underlying encultured normality of the language and thinking that affects women. The definition of
'personhood' for a woman has been idealised in religious contexts without reference to a liberated self-choosing of their own identity in an environment free of malestream interpretive norms. Within her field of biblical analysis, Fiorenza highlights the influence of the malestream paradigm of biblical criticism on the narrative that was recorded and believes that it has shaped the reading of scripture at many levels:

My aim . . . is to show how the story of the field is named and told differently depending on the audience to whom it is told, and to highlight how different theoretical frameworks and social locations shape this story in different ways.”(Fiorenza 1998,23)

Even though her reference is to biblical analysis, it can be argued that Fiorenza's comments raise some parallel issues that shroud a woman's liberty to tell, and engage with, her intimate faith experiences:

• How can women be empowered to connect openly with their intimate spiritual experiences without needing to define them according to socio-religious norms?
• How do women tell their own faith story without bias or reference to those who are hearing?
• Is it possible for women to escape the normative structures of theological frameworks for faith in a particular religious culture and find the freedom to express their faith story as they have encountered it?

In summary, a lack of familiarity with telling one’s intimate faith story, who hears the story, how the story ‘ought’ to look and expectations that are determined by the context are significant factors that influence how a woman tells her faith story. The spaciousness of the conversation space in which the faith story is told can accommodate each of these factors.
Chapter 3

A Broad Place

*He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.* (Psalm 18:19 NRSV)

*. . . the Lord was my buttress. He brought me into untrammelled liberty; he rescued me because he delighted in me.* (Psalm 18:19 RSV)

The Spiritual Direction Space

An essential aspect of validating feminine faith is a less bounded space in which transcendent experiences are affirmed, without constraint, so that a woman may express or re-envisage her experience in forms that adequately relate to her affective experience. If viewed as a metaphor for spiritual direction, the opening reference in Psalm 18:19* 12 to a ‘broad place’ as a place of rescue raises the question of the quality of space in spiritual direction and its implications for liberating women’s spiritual experiences. The following section explores the relationship between the validation of the feminine faith and the nature of the space in which companioning takes place.

The historical term *spiritual direction* conveys a sense of giving directives but does not reflect many of the contemporary forms of the ministry. Terms such as spiritual accompaniment or spiritual guidance are found in contemporary usage and are closer to the sense of the intent of

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*See also Job 36:16 “He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no constraint, and what was set on your table was full of fatness.” Ps 31:8-9 “. . . you have set my feet in a broad place. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;” Ps 118:5 “Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.” 2Sa 22:20 “He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.” All quotations taken from NRSV.*

51
the ministry. (Edwards 2001; Ruffing 2011, 19) The Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction (2011) describes the process:

Spiritual direction is a ministry in which one person, the spiritual director, helps another, the directee, become more aware of God’s self-communication in his or her life, respond to that self-communication, and live out the gifts of that relationship.

Spiritual Directors International (2011), an international body coordinating the practice of spiritual directors from various faith traditions, offers the following definition:

Spiritual direction is the contemplative practice of helping another person or group to awaken to the mystery called God in all of life, and to respond to that discovery in a growing relationship of freedom and commitment. (James Keegan, SJ, Roman Catholic, USA, on behalf of the 2005 Coordinating Council of Spiritual Directors International)

The ministry of spiritual direction is often called a prophetic ministry which Glass locates firmly in the existential reality of the lived life, calling everyone to “value the whole gamut of experience in each life; the giftedness and limitation, the vulnerabilities, the sinfulness and failures.” (Glass 2009) Using the term ‘prophetic’ does not isolate the process in a spiritualized environment in which the mark of fruitfulness is having specific, sometimes ecstatic, experiences of the Divine. As Glass notes, the process of spiritual companioning is embedded in the lived realities of both the director and directee’s life experience, wherever the coracle of life may journey. This is a significant aspect of the project that was undertaken. The narrative methodology was aimed at hearing the benefits of spiritual direction in a life context and whether the integration of spiritual experience in this manner validated and embedded a personal, feminine spirituality.

There are many dimensions to an examination of the space in which people encounter a conversation with their spiritual companion. The space has variously been viewed as a holding

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13 In this study the term ‘spiritual direction’ will refer to the stance of one person accompanying another as they engage their spiritual experiences of the Divine. The terms ‘directee’ and ‘pilgrim’ will be used to refer to the person seeking to explore their spiritual encounters and ‘spiritual director’ or ‘spiritual companion’ will refer to the person accompanying the other as they engage their spiritual journey.

14 A coracle is a small round boat (especially in Wales and Ireland) made of wickerwork covered with a watertight material and propelled with a paddle. http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/coracle, accessed 5.9.12
space\textsuperscript{15}, a sacred space, a relationship space and an instructional space. (Langer 2005, 36) Some of the descriptions offered for a spiritual companioning space may not concur with the sense of spiritual companioning taken in this paper. For example, spiritual direction as an instructional space originates in an historical context of novice or acolyte training which adheres to specific goals or desired outcomes from the companioning encounter. It is used in some contemporary paradigms where the minister or leader accepts responsibility for the theological and doctrinal wellbeing of the pilgrim. (Carroll 2002)

Spiritual companionship as one-to-one companioning is usually held in a private place in which two individuals, the spiritual companion and the pilgrim, meet with an intention to focus on the immediacy of the Divine in the company of the other. Sheldrake (2001, 8) makes the distinction between the use of \textit{space} as void and \textit{place}, stating that “place is a concrete and symbolic construction of space that serves as a reference” for how individuals locate their experiential memory. The distinction between space and place is significant to this study where the primary interest is focused on the interplay between participants in a spiritual direction conversation and how that influences what is happening in the space between them. In Sheldrake’s distinction, space as void does not infer the nuance and innuendo of the different voices carried by each participant into the conversation space. Place as a location or position with significant meaning for the participant will evoke a variety of connections and past memories that may well contribute to the space of the conversation.

The terms are used differently by different practitioners. Some use the term \textit{private place} to signal the intention of creating a place for confidentiality and withdrawal, often within an hospitable ambience that encourages authentic and open conversation. For example,

\begin{quote}
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according to Langer, “We need a place that slows the hustle and bustle,” something that, “moves us into a space of cantered[sic] attention. . . The space should speak of hospitality.” (Langer 2005,36) The lack of physical distractions within the room in which the conversation may take place enables busyness to be put aside by creating an ambience of welcoming simplicity. For those who employ the sense of sacred place as the companioning environment there may be ritualistic aspects to the physicality of the environment. Carroll refers to the spiritual direction space as a sacramental space: “the spiritual direction relationship is sacramental; it is an instrumental cause of grace.” (Carroll 2002,97) Many other practitioners would also agree, believing this sense of sanctity in the companioning place facilitates the meeting of God and pilgrim.

However, one can also refer to the quality of space in which many non-physical dynamics, including the tensions carried by participants, impact the emotional environment created by the two particular identities sharing the space. How we imagine it, the quality of the space is closely connected to our expectations of what is to unfold in that space and the two people relating as companions each bring a plethora of expectations that create the fabric of the space. An anticipation of openness cannot be presumed, for the weight of expectation shapes the attitude a pilgrim brings to the conversation. For some, just the act of stepping aside from everyday life promotes creative potential. For others, withdrawal can be internalised as a metaphor for the attitude taken toward engaging in the space; maybe creating a cleared space interiorly or viewing the space as a refuge perceived to be free from threats. Burton-Christie asks whether the desire to withdraw can be viewed as an end in itself, an “act that has the capacity to open up generative, creative space within the one who enters the place of solitude?” (Burton-Christie 2006,viii) Withdrawal into a private conversation space may be seen as an aid to engage one’s inner creativity, however, it is simplistic to say withdrawal alone will initiate the creative potential. Each identity carries shadow effects of their past experiences that also mould the expectations or anticipation of what is going to happen.
Burton-Christie continues, “We fail to see or notice entire dimensions of experience, especially if they fall outside the bounds of what we know or have come to expect.” (ix) Becoming aware of the wider influences on the conversational space contributes to the quality of work that can be achieved. Two of these influences will be considered – the social fabric of the conversation space and the contribution of critical space theory to an understanding of the dynamics of a conversation.

**Sociality of Space**

The fabric of the companioning space is woven from both conscious and non-conscious content carried by each of the participants. Because each person’s identity has been shaped by their past life experiences, they consequently carry shadow effects and expectations. The sociality of the space and its sensory phenomena give cause both for concern and hope when examining the potential to validate faith using a spiritual companioning context. When the sociality of the space between two people is tainted by an inability to embrace the value of the other’s affective responses, relationship becomes action and reaction rather than affective interchange. (Benjamin 2005,449) These added dimensions of the shared space give a framework for looking at the social aspects of space and the nature of intersubjectivity that may predispose a woman’s attitude to entering into a companioning conversation.

Intersubjectivity theory postulates that mutuality and recognition lie at the heart of personal interaction – that an intersubjective stance is a mutual openness that sees aspects of oneself in the other, and recognises within oneself what needs to be confronted and acknowledged in order to greet the other as unique and valued. (Benjamin 2005,449) Benjamin refers to this as the “principle of affective resonance and mutual accommodation” that establishes “a recognizable, co-created entity in which both are active and adaptive to the rhythm between them.” (449) Ruffing speaks of a spiritual director remaining “consciously interactive and
mutually participative “in the conversation (Ruffing 2011,165). The two-in-relation enter into a sociality of space as subjects, not objects interacting according to norms or expectations.

An important feature of companionship is the nature of intersubjectivity that may predispose a pilgrim’s attitude to entering into a companioning conversation. Unexamined shadow behaviours have an impact upon the two-in-relation who wish to enter into the social space as subjects, often skewing behaviour toward acting like objects relating according to shadow effects, norms or expectations.

Manipulation of space through the introduction of projections, symbols or ideas, from either party, may affect the sense of personal security within that space. If the desire is to facilitate the Divine invitation to encounter God’s transformative presence, feeling unsafe or wariness will counteract the desire for openness. A space made to feel secure through being welcomed and related to as a subject is more likely to encourage openness.

To relate to a person as object is to detach them from the meaning they derive from being connected to their context, including the affective meaning they take from their life experiences. If the spiritual direction conversation is located within the existential reality of the human person, then that person brings with them their array of affective experience as “an entity that is essentially embedded, intertwined and otherwise immersed in the world that they inhabit.” (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,105) If either of the persons-in-relation in a conversation space is measuring their engagement against hypothesised mental structures, then the dynamic of the sociality of the space is changed. Aspects of control and power are more likely to feature in a conversation that measures the response of the other against preferred intellectual constructs. In this case, each may function as an isolated entity rather than beings-in-relationship, reducing the sensitivity to affective movements in the other.

The social exchange between participants in a companioning relationship can facilitate the invitation of Psalm 18:19. The call of God on the pilgrim’s life is to be open to Divine love. This
has implications for changing the conceptualization of personal identity and the possibility of becoming a person who, as the psalmist says, is a person in whom God delights. An intersubjective space requires each participant to engage as responsive subjects, and consequently, affects the quality of the openness in the pilgrim as she reveals her intimate story of faith.

**Critical Space Theory**

If the conversation space is clouded by the expectation or anticipation of one or both of the participants, theorists argue that the notion of space becomes a construct. Critical spatial analysis provides a broad framework to interpret what is happening in the moment of the spiritual dialogue. A superficial reading of Psalm 18:19 may infer the broad place is a void, or neutral ground, when in fact it ignores the layers of meaning that participants bring to the process and the consequent outcomes derived from it.

One may approach the spiritual direction conversation with a sense of spaciousness as an empty space. However, rather than an unexamined or presumed sense of nothingness, the spatiality of a spiritual direction encounter is a construct woven by aspects of both members of the conversation. Flanagan’s work in *critical space* theory has examined this living context of place and space and he has shown that “space, along with time, is a cultural subtext, i.e., a fundamental cultural framework.” (Flanagan 1995) Referring to the theories of Soja and Lefebvre, Flanagan argues for a theory of the inherent spatiality of human life that is socially produced through praxis and is essential to understanding the nature of human relations. (Soja 1989) He proposes that, “Space is a fundamental subtext in all social understanding ... [it] is constructed through praxis and therefore based on experience.” (Flanagan 2001) Subtexts are cultural presuppositions that are generally unexamined because they are assumed to be the way things are. Space, therefore, is a construct shared by persons who will bring their own
subtext into a shared space, creating a subconscious milieu that gives that space a certain
dynamic. The movement between cohabitants of the space is influenced by the subconscious
frameworks each brings.

One of the early theorists, Henri Lefebvre, suggested that space is produced and reproduced
through human intentions. He argues against “any treatment of space as mere container or
milieu, as a kind of neutral setting in which life transpires.” (Molotch 1993,888) Lefebvre
observed that there is a distinction between those who produce a space for domination as
opposed to those who produce space for more humane purposes, a helpful note when looking
at the use of conversation spaces in a conservative religious context. Therefore, in Lefebvre’s
theory, the production of space is a process and can be analysed according to the intention
and objectives of the architects of the space. Lefebvre also offered a categorisation of space
that has formed the foundation of later theories. Lefebvre (1991,11) states,

“The fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical - nature, the Cosmos; secondly,
the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly, the social. In other
words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice,
and the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination
such as projects and projections, symbols, and utopias.”

Matthews, for example, categorised spatiality into three levels. (Matthews 2003) Using a
model based on Soja, Matthews differentiates between various aspects of space:

- **Firstspace** refers to the physical place; the setting, furnishings, aromas – the
  sensory input received from an existential awareness of the situation.
- **Secondspace** describes how one imagines or perceives the space; the formal and
  logical conceptual understandings about the space that encompasses the two
  companions.
- **Thirdspace** attempts to understand the way the space is used as a lived space: how
each participant uses the space, including how firstspace and secondspace
  influence the use of the space.
Furthermore, each space-type implies that a participant will subconsciously carry a presumptive imagination, woven from prior experiences, which is translated into their expectations of being within the space.

In Matthews’ examination of space, he particularly explores the reference to biblical boundaries and ownership of the land by the people of ancient Israel. He proposes that, “In fact agency and even individuality is itself the result of spatial conditions” and suggests that the manipulation of space can be the cause of “a change in the conceptualization of personal identity.” (Matthews 2003,16) The idea of individuality being related to a space-ownership requires a complex acknowledgement of human relations, human history, cultural praxis and experience, as well as the religious and spiritual connectedness to the space. Sheldrake notes, “place has three essential characteristics – it engages with our identity, with our relationships and with our history.”(Sheldrake 2001,9) These qualities of a space have, as Matthews demonstrates, the potential to shape the identity, the relationships and the history of those operating within the space.

Similarly, creating a space for intimate conversations offers the possibility of bringing a new shape to personal identity through beliefs which Silf refers to as offering “our deepest heart and soul consent [and] which our personal experience endorses.” (Silf 2001,14) The shaping of personal identity and validation go hand in hand. At this level of identity, validation is accompanied by the increased capacity for agentic behaviour. Lee speaks of agency as “goal-directed intentionality [and] the effectiveness of that intentionality over against other constraints and causal factors.” (Lee 2004,224) He states the therapist’s task is to produce agency in a client with regard to the “landscape of action” – they gain a sense of perspective on life that enables their capacity to make change. A spiritual director holds a similar objective with respect to the faith perspective of the pilgrim and their capacity to embed intimate faith experience at the deepest level of heart and soul. It is not simply about words, for as Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern note, validation “is always linked with concrete, social, cultural,
historical realities, including psyches and bodies.” (Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern 1999,134) Conversations that aid vocalising transcendent experiences have the capacity to help women self-validate their feminine spirituality at a very deep level.

The conservative patriarchal discourse is particularly difficult for women because of the lack of synchronicity between an intellectualized approach of the ‘logical and formal abstractions’ of Matthews’ secondspace, and the thirddspace nuances of the reality of the situation and context – the groundedness of the experience. The lack of connectedness between intellectualized abstractions and grounded experience is a significant cause of a feminine dislocation, causing a subsequent fracture of spiritual understanding. A feminist approach that focuses on the grounded experience of the conversation, the earthing of all experience, can be informed by the theories of Flanagan et al. and a more keenly attuned sensitivity to women as embodied creatures.

However, by simply focusing on language as the examining medium, whatever view is taken of the meanings carried by the words, there are extra dimensions referred to by critical spatial analysis that provide a broader framework to interpret what is happening in the moment of the conversation. If the **broad place** of Psalm 18:19 as a context for spiritual direction is viewed as a spatial void, inferring neutral ground, some aspects of women’s experiences are excluded by ignoring the layers of meaning that participants bring to the process and the outcomes derived from it. Spatial sociologists consistently link the medium and the outcomes. (Gilligan 1993,19)

The physical setting of spiritual direction has classically been the director and the directee meeting in a private, possibly cloistered, environment. For women entering into a conversation about their spiritual experiences, aspects of the firstspace dimensions influence how freely they are able to share the intimacy of their own spiritual experiences. Soja believes, “We operate in ‘different spaces’, and these differences may be creating complex barriers that
constrain our practical and theoretical understanding.” (Soja 1999,11) For example, a place of worship will carry a certain sense of being in the ‘house of God’ and therefore, may carry a greater consciousness of the correctness or appropriateness of the thoughts expressed. Conversations in a worship setting will carry overtones of power or status, particularly if the director holds a significant status in the social group normally associated with the worship. In a conservative Protestant ideology, experiences of worship include a time of sermonising where the listener is the learner being instructed by an authority or their representative. The implied authority of the role that is taken in the worship setting is easily transferred to a subconscious assignment of authority in other settings. However, conversations in a coffee shop will create a different ambience with a less formal stricture and the ability to engage the thirdspace lived experience will be freer from the perceived limitations of formal physical surrounds and the secondspace projections and perceived overtones.

In the imaginations and presentations of the secondspace, the patriarchal milieu brings an implied power that changes the way the receiver may re-image responses to personal spiritual experience. Any initiative toward empowerment and agency are consequently affected. Soja’s work notes that creative responses to the precise circumstances of the present moment are the basis of new cultural polities, movements created to empower and galvanize social action – in each, power and control is embedded in the spatiality of human life. (Soja 1999) Flanagan supports a multiplicity of qualities in the human experience of a space, reiterating that “power, knowledge, and space are obviously related.” (Flanagan 1999) The patriarchal shadow emanating from perceptions of power and authority affects the pilgrim’s subconsciousness and limits freedom of expression and vocalisation of deeply felt sensitivities. Transference by the pilgrim onto a companion with an assumed power status may well be an observable feature of women pilgrims from patriarchal environments as they engage in the spiritual direction conversation. It can shape the story that is shared.
Formalized Liminality

“The subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation.”
Peter Berger

To return to the broad space of Psalm 18:19, the psalmist implies an experience of deliverance leading to freedom or respite occurred in a space in which transformation has been initiated through the quality of the space. The repeat references to this in Psalm 31, 109 and 2 Samuel 22 underscores the value of this hymnic stanza. It resonates with the Hebraic experience of transformative possibility when following the call of God. Psalm 18 recounts David’s tale of thankfulness to God for deliverance in the face of oppression, and the faithfulness of the Lord to deliver from powerful enemies. The language of this psalm invokes a broad place as a liminal space, where David transitions from the fear and threat of a greater power with greater might to the peace of relief and openness to God as rescuer. The experience of spaciousness (the feeling of liberation) when the soul encounters God’s Spirit is contrasted with the anxiety of being overpowered. The RSV Bible uses the older term “untrammeled liberty” in Psalm 18:19 implying that liberty of expression includes freedom from constraints. Verse 19 implies an expectation that God will act appropriately to provide the hospitality of spaciousness that does not have any hidden agendas or subtexts. In this place, it is the experience of spaciousness that is transformative.

In 1909, Arnold van Gennup coined the term ‘liminal’ to describe the experience of being in an in-between place. In its original sense, the term denotes a threshold, a specific time and space where social transition was taking place. (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003,269) When speaking of changes in societal connections, van Gennup described three phases of a rite of passage – separation (divestiture), transition (liminality) and incorporation (investiture). During the transition phase, a person who is separated from their previous environment experiences the liminal condition. Later work by Turner characterized liminality as a blurring and merging of
distinctions. He believed that people are “temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others.” (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003, 271) As David experienced an in-between space of disengagement, the broad place took on a liminal nature in which he became without rights, divested of former social connection and in a limbo state without definition. However, something transformative occurs in the investiture phase of David’s experience that is the result of Divine attention. Separation from previous constraints or threats in an open environment is initiated by the desire of God for David to enter into freedom. It is significant that David ascribes his change in circumstance to the spaciousness of God’s presence. He becomes aware of God’s desire to love him.

The final phrase of the Psalm 18:19 pericope reports David’s sense of being drawn into a broad space by God, “because he delighted in me.” The liminality of the space facilitates the transition in David’s relationship with God. It is clearly affective reporting of the memory of a spiritual encounter that was significant to David’s relationship with God, one that changed the relationship and laid the foundation for David growing into a new social and spiritual role.

The biblical metaphor of a broad space provides a means to describe the way in which this encounter is more than a simple meeting of two people in conversation. If spiritual direction resonates with the metaphor of a broad space, then it may be thought of as “formalised liminality.” (Lindsay 2010) This concept connects the intention of meeting a spiritual companion with the productive capacity of the meeting space to re-imagine transcendent experiences. It connects the lived experience of thirdspace reality with the creative potential at the threshold; a place where there can be a reimagining of God’s call to a deeper inner awareness of the desire of God to delight in the fractured soul. The creative nature of the space engages a deeper awareness of meaning and perspective, spiritual and creative alternatives. The broad place as a liminal space allows the creativity of reimagining and reframing spiritual experiences if the director maintains an intuitive awareness of the nuances of shadow constraints clouding the space. The liminal space of a spiritual direction
conversation can be held open by conscious awareness of the constraints and shadows carried by pilgrims and companions.

Public Space – Private Space

The presence of the shadow is particularly strong in theologically conservative Protestant congregations, where the structure and mission of the fellowship is often modelled on a particular view of first century churches in the New Testament. Consequently, contemporary women encounter cultural gender constructions intrinsic to a model that is no longer relevant to their context. Antoun lists one form of fundamentalism (traditioning) as holding to a “mythic past in the present” and an orientation toward “making scriptural accounts, events, and images relevant to present day-to-day activities.” (Antoun 2001,2) A later re-reading of scripture came with the Reformation in which the contemporary conservative interpretations of gender roles had political and theological overtones, and were not necessarily true to the original revolutionary character of the New Testament. Current conservative interpretations are often based upon the anachronistic Reformation characterization of social form that has not been subject to critical reflection on the possible underlying social practices or frameworks of the era. Bendroth (2001,48) notes that such literalist models follow both the subjective preferences of the conservative leadership and the evangelical norms set by “adherence to the Bible as the standard for belief and practice, its emphasis on personal conversion, and its missionary fervour.” Consequently, the female space-mores of the ancient Mediterranean world are transposed conceptually and ideologically to create the accepted norms of female role interpreted through a literal patriarchal interpretation of the scriptures. The result is a trivialising of women’s roles in a congregation that reflects the dismissive view of women interpreted through an uncritical use of biblical narrative. (Abrahamsen 1995,77)
One characterisation of contemporary women has them relegated to a reconstruction of the ‘private space’ of the ancient world. The dominance of a literalist view of biblical exemplars seems to cement the Christian woman into a caricature-role with greater rigidity than would exist in other contemporary settings. The gender role is part of a scripturally referenced interpretation of who a woman is meant to be – a particular mode of being female. As Einwechter (2008) explains,

I (and other Christians of the Reformed faith) believe that the question of the role relationship of men and women can only be answered by turning to Scripture. The Bible teaches that there is a positional priority (not an essential priority) of man over woman in terms of headship and authority, and there are distinct roles assigned to men and women by the Creator (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:3, 8-9; Eph. 5:22-25; Col. 3:18-21; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). This created order extends to all spheres of life. Hence, when we submit ourselves to God’s interpretation of His own purpose in making mankind male and female, we arrive at a full complementarian view. This full complementarian perspective is three-point complementarianism because it advocates male headship and the distinction of male and female roles in family, church, and state. This biblical complementarianism keeps the lines of authority clear and the fulfillment of roles free of any internal contradictions.

This response was written in light of the candidature of Sarah Palin, an evangelical woman, aspiring to US vice-presidential leadership in the 2008. The debate arose out of the apparent disparity between authority roles in home life and civil life. The pastor quoted above, from a Free Reform tradition, called this “a watershed moment for evangelical Christians, particularly those who claim to be complementarian in their views of men and women.” The biblically based complementarian views of the evangelical Reform tradition typify gender stereotyping that is described by Jost and Kay (2005) as a social construct that maintains the status quo.

As with most movements, the evangelical tradition also embodies other ideological stances to gender inequality, such as egalitarianism. Kaiser (2005,10), writing under the auspice of Christians for Biblical Equality International, outlines one movement endeavouring to uphold equality as a status quo within a biblically based evangelicalism:

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Together men and women are “joint heirs of the grace of life” (Pet. 3:7), submitting themselves to the Lord and to each other (Eph. 5:2). Each owes to the other love, respect, and an appreciation for the sphere of authority given to each one as part of the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts are never gender-coded in Scripture, but they are meant for the blessing of the whole body of Christ.

Similarly, in some cases, rather than overt egalitarianism, the organisational structures are focused on presenting inclusivity as their brand. Lindsay examines an organisation known as The Fellowship which has strong connections to the political stage in the USA. He demonstrates a biblically based ethic that allows a form of organisational liminality that skirts the strictures of conservatism by elevating values of interpersonal connectedness and welcoming an interfaith approach. (Lindsay 2010,178) Such variations within evangelical conservatism provide a welcome attempt to address the societal shift that has occurred outside of religious circles. However, in each of these variations the question remains as to how women’s personal experiences are given space and place to be validated as authentic expressions of a relationship with God – are they changes to the facade rather than a substantive movement.

Another form of facade that masks the reality of women’s authentic inclusion is benevolent sexism. Based on a rationale of male protection of the needs and preferences of women as the more vulnerable sex, benevolent sexism is “used to reward women who embrace conventional gender roles and power relations.” (Glick and Fiske 2001,113) Benevolent sexism patronizingly masquerades behind chivalry, or self-sacrifice, to care for the women in men’s lives. It is a form of prejudice that ensures inequality between groups, yet purports to support gender inclusion. This style of ‘inclusiveness’ is always taken from the male perspective of authority as the dominant cultural form. (Fuchs 2003)

At the other end of the spectrum, hostile sexism disadvantages the wishes or desires of women for full individuality and punishes those who challenge the status quo. But, whether the sexism is benevolent or hostile, a sociological paradigm is created to relegate women to a particular social status that consequently diminishes any internal authority to advocate for
their individuality. Social mores developed within a sociological framework reinforced by socio-religious imperatives reduce a woman’s resistance to patriarchy. They may even make it advantageous for women to support the group through reward systems of affirmation and warmth for being compliant. (Jost and Kay 2005,508)

By referencing a social paradigm against biblical imperatives created through uncritical reading of the texts, the same sociological ideology of the era of the text is translocated into the contemporary situation, including the rationale for different forms of sexisms of that era. Neyrey outlines the evidence for the gender stereotypes in the ancient Mediterranean world, and describes the significance of ‘female space’ as a culturally restrictive domain in which women were deemed ‘biologically suitable’ for activities appropriate for female body form. Such benevolent paternalism is rationalized in ancient literary discussions of female tasks proper to women as compared with what is expected of males. Greek texts have, for example, proper male gender space in the ‘open air’ and males do tasks appropriate to that space: "open-air occupations such as plowing, sowing and grazing." (Neyrey 1994,79) But females, whose proper gender place is ‘covered’, do the basic tasks which support the household: "indoor occupations such as child rearing, food preparation and clothing production." (79)

This stereotyping was accepted across the Roman, Greek and Judaic worlds and informed social practice in European society. Even though some Roman women of noble birth enjoyed limited freedoms, behaviour that breeched accepted norms attracted the ire of male critics. To contravene the social norm was to invite labelling, a form of hostile sexism, as prostitutes, gossips or women of low standing. Women were to maintain a high moral standing since “female sexual exclusivity was a primary value in the ancient gender-divided world” (5) and the stereotype of the ideal female was maintained by whatever protected her sexuality. Such stereotypic characterization of the value of female sexuality became the pervading normative standard for female participation in society.
The intervening time between first century society and the present day has given rise to enormous varieties of cultural expression in European based societies and one would expect the time separation to have made such connections vague at the least. However, the descriptions of female ‘covered space’ behaviour above of mothering and homemaking seem disturbingly familiar for women in conservative religious society generally. Gilligan notes Kate Millett’s work of 1969 as “one of the earliest discussions of the public and private.” (Gilligan 1993,17) Millett refers to a nineteenth century discussion of public-private space in a lecture outlining the Victorian approach to the place of women. The home was described as woman’s private, domestic, feminine space, “for only man could be the doer, the creator, the discoverer [in the public realm]; in contrast, a woman was passive, self-effacing, pious and graceful” within their confines of the bounded home environment. (17) Gilligan implies that very little has changed the Victorian attitude in the ensuing hundred years. Schneiders critiques the “romantic exaltation of womanhood in the ‘feminine mystique’ with its ideology of complementarity” because it legitimizes the “consequent limitation [of a woman] to the private domain of home and family.”(Schneiders 1991,11) Einwechter’s response of 2008 to the feminist aspirations of Palin assert “This feminist vision is the arch enemy of the biblical vision of the godly woman who is the helper of her husband, the nurturer of her children, and the keeper of her home.” (Einwechter 2008) Such a sociological paradigm is the distillation of social, political and religious influences that is authored out of biblical imperatives designed to maintain gender role separation.

A significant underlying issue is the literalist view of biblical interpretation and one might question how such a formational attitude might be predisposing twenty-first century women who wish to establish a cultural norm of freedom to express an identity that is not gender-referenced? Scholz argues for a sociology of biblical hermeneutic which investigates the “larger geo-political and socio-cultural dynamics that have shaped biblical gender ideologies throughout the ages.”(Scholz 2010,11) It takes a paradigmatic shift to develop a sociology
firmly grounded within the world, not situated in a preferred idealistic model that is crafted around acceptable biblical interpretations; a shift from protection of female sexual ownership by males, benevolent sexism, to validation of the individual based upon personal worth in the sight of God.

From a sociological point of view, the entrapment of women in a ‘private space’ of particular gender roles reflects very poorly upon the nature of current society and the aspirations of women to express their individuality as they desire. The change in attitude toward sexuality in the past fifty years is contributing to an environment in which women can assert the right to claim ownership of, and responsibility for, their own bodies. The women’s liberation movement of the sixties undermined the male proscription of female identity and reclaimed the right for women to be themselves in public life: a public life persona is a dimension of identity. In Sheldrake’s view, Christian theological tradition has always viewed “the public element of identity [as] inherent to Christian discipleship rather than merely contingent.” (Sheldrake 2003,26) Civic life is our social existence. In order to find a suitable underpinning for the validation of individuals within a Christian ideology, a spirituality of living publicly has to engage with everyday life, and it is possible to see this from a biblical perspective.

There are occasions when Jesus acknowledges the culture of isolation and behavioural impositions that prevented some women from being acknowledged in their suffering, intentionally engaging them in a thirddspace conversation in a public context. Paradoxically, Jesus’ lack of regard for the social norms that ‘contain’ the women in their cultural private space is underscored by engaging them in intimate conversations that seem to intentionally violate their private space. In this way, Jesus points to the plight of the one who suffers and gives the woman a public voice.
For example, Neyrey comments upon the ways in which the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 illustrates Jesus’ skill at moving the woman, through conversation, from a ‘public space’ of restrictive expectations into her ‘private space’ to speak freely of personal circumstances. Jesus’ method of engaging the woman one-on-one, allowing him to enter into her ‘private space’, demonstrates his intentional acknowledgement of the personhood of the woman. The cultural norm did not expect women to be engaged, to speak or to even be seen in public, especially not with an unknown male person. A benevolent sexism made women invisible out of ‘good intent’ for their well-being, safety and sexual exclusivity. Jesus’ pattern of speech addressed the personal issues of the woman directly, rather than bowing to male convention in the public arena. The structure of the conversation about her issues demonstrates Jesus’ ability to focus the woman on her own needs, without reference to the situation which contravened societal expectations. Her transformation demonstrates the power of intimate conversation to validate identity.

Similarly, in Mark 5 Jesus responds to the touch of a woman almost lost in the crowd. The conventions of the Hebraic world excluded menstruating women from the Temple, considering them to be ritually unclean and, therefore, unacceptable to God. Without access to God, who was primarily approached through the male mediated space of the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the ‘unclean’ woman had been an outcast for twelve years. The interaction with Jesus ‘heals’ the woman, not only of her physical affliction but, more significantly, of her acceptability to God. Mark 5:33 reports, “But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.”18 Recounting intimate story details to a man in a public space is highly unorthodox. However, Jesus’ acknowledgement of the woman breaks the social taboo and allows him to enter into her thirdspace experience of social outcast and religious isolation. The suspension of the cultural

17 Leviticus 12:1-5; 15:25-31
18 Mark 5:33 (NRSV)
milieu of gender-restrictions, and its subversive suppression of the inner woman trapped in personal suffering, validates a new status of liberated self.

From these brief examples, the inherent right to have a public persona is supported by these Gospel narratives. Women are called into the public space to engage harsh existential realities and live out a faith-life that reflects the compassion and grounded embrace of Jesus. The patriarchally manipulated textual interpretations of scripture are no longer relevant to women living in the real world of a contemporary European based society. Foulkes regrets the legacy of scriptural interpretations that have left women in negative and destructive circumstances because of the misuse of sacred texts. Foulkes (1995,9) argues,

Increasingly alienated by conservative patriarchal Church structures, Christian women are beginning to question the continued relevance to their spiritual lives of the sacred texts and traditions that lie at the heart of those structures. For many these texts and traditions seem incapable of providing an approach to the transcendent which is redemptive and life-giving. For them, the patriarchal ethos which shaped the Judeo-Christian religious tradition has proved overwhelmingly negative and destructive.

Women do not need a privileged place of protection in society and women are not called into a private space existence as their sole inheritance by virtue of gender. The capacity to voice their personal, experiential foundations of faith publically is a way of validating their deepest identity. The liberty of having freedom to speak openly about their spiritual realities affirms their identity within the social context. It is our subjective experience which is called into full sociality without fear of revealing who we are or what we hold as the motivation for our meaningful existence. As Larkin and Watts et al. (2006,109) note, “the very nature of our being is to ‘be there’ out in the world, located and observable in our relatedness” not secluded or bound by mores that are not of our choosing.

An alternative interpretation of Christian texts calls women into the full expression of life that Jesus intended. Women are also called to discipleship, to testify to the saving grace of Divine love and participate fully in the everyday life-death-resurrection narrative. The model that

19 “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:9-11 (NIV)
Jesus set forth was that of intersubjective engagement with the person who was being denied the opportunities to live openly and fully engaged in all of life.

In following the theme of a broad place, the wideness of the space implies freedom and liberty to engage the spiritual story intimately and without constraint. At the core of spiritual direction is the belief that creating a space in which one may speak of personal relationship with God connects with the intimate aspects of personhood. A significant question would be how to ensure such wideness truly enables liberty, without the hidden or unspoken constraints carried from past experiences of disadvantage impinging upon the freedom to speak. For the directee, it is the liberty to speak freely of transcendent experiences of God, and to re-engage with the experience of God in that moment, that brings about transformative movements in the spiritual journey. This is not a simple task for any believer. Earl (2001,277) notes that “spirituality addresses, mainly, our need to ‘transcend the mundane,’ but not the difficulties we have in doing so.” What might be the nature of the constraints that unconsciously impinge upon a directee’s willingness to be open with their spiritual director? In the next section we will examine the implications of the collective shadow of a conservative religious fellowship on women members of the group.

**The Collective Shadow**

*I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. (Thomas Merton)*

Constraints that prevent women from speaking authentically about their spiritual life are carried as unconscious patterning that is acquired through interaction with the norms set by the faith-group within which one would normally express relationship with God. Each faith-
group is bounded by the prescriptions that give it its uniqueness and, therefore, carry with it the unspoken rules for behaviour for adherents. Negative responses to unsanctioned behaviours or attitudes reinforce the group expectations; those who align themselves with the group expectations receive positive affirmations and warmth. Consequently, members of a group will enact the shadow aspects of the group and adopt the unconscious behaviours and attitudes that keep them in good standing. This is psychologically advantageous for achieving belonging and acceptance.

It is not often acknowledged that conservative religious groups constellate a shadow side that determines normalized, reactive behaviour. Jung defines the shadow as “everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly.” (Jung 1968, para 14) As a representation of the repressed unconscious, “everyone carries a shadow and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.” (Jung 1938, para 131) This is in reference to personal experience. However, Jung’s concept of the shadow has a valid application to a group situation which may also be called corporate, collective or cultural shadow. For the purposes of this paper the term ‘collective shadow’ will be used although each term brings a particular nuance to the discussion. Von Franz (1995, 8) describes the different ways in which shadow behaviours not normally exhibited individually can be adopted when part of the group. For example, when a person is drawn into acting-out a group rejection of another group member with whom they have previously had cordial relations or “if a person is caught by ambition only when in a group, you could say that it was a collective shadow.” The collective shadow of a religious fellowship is described as an accepted norm, not explicitly rationalised or articulated in protocols or doctrinal statements, that unconsciously sanctions normalised ecclesial behaviour. Collective shadows specifically disadvantage women through hegemonic norms created to support the dominant male leadership.
Hede examines the intragroup relationship dynamics of an organisation in which ‘self-in-group’ is a fluid movement between the ‘overt self’ and the ‘shadow self’, depending upon the emotional stress or triggers experienced in organisational situations. Hede (2007,27) explains,

Our overt self is responsible for managing our interaction with the world and with others in the group. The shadow self, by contrast, is the opposite of the overt self and comprises the parts of the psyche that people do not readily recognize in themselves and that they may project onto others.

In this model, the shadow self is the opposite of the persona that is presented to the group in order to maintain conformity. Hede believes, “they avoid doing anything that will threaten group cohesiveness . . . or risk alienation from the group.” (27) When an emotional trigger initiates the shadow self, behaviour changes and the need ‘to be nice’ and maintain cohesiveness is engulfed by the greater emotional outburst of the shadow self.

By refusing to acknowledge the darker side of behaviour in the group, projections and rejections inevitably belie the type of group shadow carried by a particular collection of individuals. Each group has its own form of shadow, according to the repressed material which is not adequately articulated or which remains hidden. In a group bound by religious conviction, those inside the group will not necessarily be aware of the shadow aspects, but rather they will experience a united and comfortable group context that focuses on the positive requirements of confessional membership. In this situation, benevolent sexism is free to affirm and reinforce member’s compliance. Anyone who meets the group from a different group context, or who has had negative experiences of the group’s behaviour, begins to name attitudes or activities that constitute the group’s shadows that are not overtly acknowledged, and about which there is no verbal recognition.

Women, in particular, encounter group shadow responses that emanate from the gender biases inherent in many Protestant conservative fellowships. The overt bias is evident in corporate organizational structures, ecclesial roles and participatory expectations. However, the shadow aspect is reflected in attitudes to women’s potential contribution to the ongoing.
theological discourse of the community (including mistrust of intellectual capacity to exegete texts faithfully); mistrust of the feminine insight into the truth; the emotionally expressive capacity of women; and most significantly, the diminishment of women’s experience of God as trustworthy or real. None of these effects are vocalized or acknowledged by male leadership. As a shadow effect, the manipulation of female members is by innuendo, body language or tentativeness to vocalize affirmation. A common experience of shadow effect is silence; women become invisible and voiceless. The impact upon the identity and worth of a woman as an authentic and fully-participatory, valued member of the group is significant. Identity, as outlined in the earlier chapter, is central to spirituality and the valuing of the female experience as authentic promotes the integration of the spiritual awareness with the identity.

To determine the existence of shadow material, Miller suggests at least five pathways for gaining insight into the group shadow: how others are experiencing the group; uncovering the content of the group projections; examining the behaviour and investigating what is really occurring when the group is perceived other than as intended; considering humour and identifications; studying the group dreams, visions and fantasies. (Miller 1991) The inability of a group to engage with such pathways denies the potential for change through such avenues as self-disclosure and information about the shadow’s effects on others.

Across most conservative religious groups, the way shadow behaviours impact women is consistent. Firstly, they maintain normative attitudes and behaviours through denial of the opinions or assessments of outsiders and through forms of exclusivism which ensure potential members are suitably au fait with the hidden rules and agendas of the group before being acceptable for inclusion. Acceptance within the group is not based upon the doctrinal conditions for membership overtly stated in a constitution or governance process, but upon perceptions gleaned covertly through unstated assessments by the authority figures, usually male. Thus, what non-group members have to say about the group is irrelevant and the style
of governance based only on an internal referencing process means a vital source for revealing the shadow is lost.

Secondly, the conservative mode of operation avoids publicly raising issues related to women, particularly in regard to leadership roles. The projection of the conservative Christian group is that scripture embodies the compassion and consideration of Jesus toward disadvantaged women, and as a scripture-based confession, acceptance and inclusion of women is what the group espouses. However, the existence of the intraconfessional shadow is apparent in the inability to put into the language of the group the existential realities of why women are so consistently excluded.\(^{20}\) In conservative Christian groups, the norm would be to never hear any verbalisation about women’s roles, either affirmed or denied roles. Recent professionalisation of ministry roles has made job descriptions a valid form of role description, yet these often hide the assumed presumptions about male leadership behind the efficacy of good governance. Women’s membership parity, particularly with regard to equality of roles within the church, is hidden behind archaic biblical interpretation.

Thirdly, the airing of women’s feelings (the emotional content of her speaking) about being treated unfairly is viewed with suspicion and considered subterfuge designed to undermine the congregational stability; or worse, as undermining the good grounding of the group’s basis in orthodox scriptural interpretation. There is no capacity for a rational discussion about the existential reality of women’s exclusion. Even the possibility of such discussion is viewed as potentially dangerous and causes responses that either deny exclusivism exists or exerts greater control over the women expressing those feelings.

\(^{20}\) The use of language to expose the shadow is important, for as Zweig and Abrams carefully put it, “Using language consciously seems to be the most fruitful method of retrieving shadow substance scattered out on the world. Energy we have sent out is floating around beyond the psyche; and one way to pull it back into the psyche is by the rope of language. Certain kinds of language are nets, and we need to use the net actively, throwing it out. Language contains retrieved shadow substance of all our ancestors.” Zweig, C and Abrams, J Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature (New York: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1991) p.280
A particularly damaging subconscious effect is the projected female image adopted via benevolent sexism of what constitutes an acceptable female member of the group. Historically, the sanitized image of the feminine within patriarchal spirituality was embodied in Mary, the mother of Jesus, carrying covert female sexuality espoused as the help-mate of the perfect male headship. Haarmann asserts that the female imagery developed out of the devotional and associative needs of the early church patrons. It was an undercurrent to Paul’s Messianic emphasis that was focused on Jesus and was in response to the polytheistic egalitarian environment of Ephesus. Jesus was the main character in the early discourse and Mary took the popular role of a caring mother and protectress. (Haarmann 1998) Mary evolved into a metaphoric representation of the Church and, therefore, the Bride of Christ – the balance of the feminine and masculine spirituality - with the declaration in the Council of Ephesus in 431AD: “And it was the Council of Ephesus that adopted the term theotokos, ‘Mother of God,’ for Mary.” (Haarmann 1998) These early foundations set a flawless caring mother-image of the Divine feminine within the Christian community, predisposing the expectation for females toward perfectionism. This is compounded by doctrines like Mary’s Immaculate Conception in which, as proposed by Kaiser (2005,200), she becomes “the archetypal manifestation of the total consent to the will of God which is the form which will be stamped upon the Church.” It created a dual mantle of perfection and perfect obedience. A rhetorical critique of Luke’s account of Mary’s interaction with the angel Gabriel reveals how commonly the notion of female obedience is adopted into sacred story: “Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”(Luke 1:38) Kaiser notes, “Mary’s consent [and] all-consuming love of God becomes the archetype of the Church’s love of Christ.” (201) And so the third leg of a tripartite feminine image is established. The feminine persona carries maternal perfection, complete obedience and therein demonstrates all-consuming love of God.
While strong in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the cultural European subconscious carried the perfect Mary persona as a hallmark of feminine holiness. Haarmann (1998, 22) notes that even in the various forms of Protestant tradition, “Mary’s role is more prominent than one would expect from the marginal literary embedding of the Saviour’s mother in the New Testament.” In the intellectualised landscape of Protestantism, this subconscious phantom was leavened by the moral and holiness movements that subsequently grew from the time of the Reformation.

For women, such idealisation of the feminine gives no opportunity for a hermeneutic of individuality. For females, it sets an impossibly high goal that is inhuman. Jung (1945, para 131) referred to the difficulty of idealistic concepts:

> Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.

The ideology of perfection commonly affects women believers and brings with it a sociology shaped by the shadow effects of rejection or punishment. When the real lives and existential experience of being human is overlaid by an idealized image that figures as the background canvas of the subconscious, guilt remains a woman’s constant companion. The unconscious group shadow which protects the idealised female image evokes guilt in women for being normal, or not ideal/perfect. Such patterning creates wariness and fear to reveal what is truly intimate in the spiritual self. The ability to move into such an intimate internal space requires a mature psychic integration, but shadow aspects of the environment diminish the potential for internal spiritual integration. (Zweig and Abrams 1991; Earl 2001) The group behaviours work in concert to ensure the message of acceptability is clear. The group narrative determines how one can tell the experience of being in the group and there are acceptable forms of story-lines within the discourse. The outcome for women is a lack of freedom to speak about the reality of their experience, if it is recognised at all, and a continued acting-out of the group sanctioned ways of being.
A summary of some of the impositions mentioned above that are placed upon the feminine in religious contexts is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1 below. Believers participate in religious fellowships because of some prior numinous experience and it is this that they bring to re-engage in the company of others. Women’s spiritual identities meet the patriarchal expectations for feminine participation, reconstructing their native spirituality into what is acceptable in the group milieu. These reconstructions include,

- corporate organisation is based on male hierarchy
- scriptural bases for faith interpreted through selective, literalist, biblical reference
- assignment of roles based on gender
- the idealised feminine of Mary, Mother of God
- value to the organisation based on utilitarianism, not spiritual integrity
- denial of theological credibility or value of spiritual encounters

However, each of these aspects has a counterstory that can free a woman to reclaim her own spiritual identity. The shadow behaviours of an organisational context often preclude a woman from engaging her counterstory – the confidence to do so requires feminine wisdom to recognise the tools wielded by the dominant leadership. The freeing counterstory includes,

- internal authority of the feminine gender in the sight of God
- historical and rhetorical criticism of biblical references relevant to women
- valuing and validating personal gifting as gifts of the Spirit
- valuing the existential reality of being female in all of life
- accepting personal worth as God’s desired creative act, not measured by utilitarianism
- validity of the personal stories of transcendent experience
Figure 1

Feminine experience within a patriarchal setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual Experience</th>
<th>Experience in a Patriarchal Setting</th>
<th>Reclining a Feminine Integrated Experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hegemonic Corporate Structures</td>
<td>Feminine Gender Authority</td>
<td>Masculine Mode of Interpreting Scripture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascribed Ecclesial Gender Roles</td>
<td>Discern Own Gift/Calling</td>
<td>Idealised Female Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Worth – Value to Goals</td>
<td>Valuing Feminine Individuality</td>
<td>Male Authored Female Spiritual Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Spiritual Experience</td>
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</table>
In spiritual direction, the shadow effects outlined in Figure 1 as *Experience in a Patriarchal Setting* affect the subconscious of the female directee – they are absorbed as a persona that will be perceived as a deeply committed, holy, Christian woman. The resultant behaviour is a strong tendency to be apologetic or guilt-bound for not ‘reaching the mark’ spiritually. This apologetic guilt is a protective habit for a fragile ego. Zweig and Abrams (1991,148) speak of the deep seated effect on the personality that remains despite behavioural attempts to change it: “Enlightenment consists in transcendence of the ego-habit, but enlightenment does not obliterate the personality.” When acceptance within a faith community is contingent upon acceding to the shadow behaviours of the powerbrokers, risking non-compliance may bring ostracising or exclusion and affects the sense of identity and worth. Who-I-am-in-relation is shaken, personality questioned. But, as noted by Zweig and Abrams, the *shaken personality* (“I am not good enough as I am”) is only a perception, not a reality. Group acceptance may be at stake and belonging and acceptance are a very high price to pay to reclaim interior authority. Yet the alternative is to continue living a dualistic life, allowing the external authorities to dictate behaviour and personal identity.

To avoid living in a dualistic divide, Hede (2007,28) believes a person’s self awareness is critical: “In emotionally competent individuals, their inner observer gains consciousness over their shadow self and keeps it in a dormant state.” However, the threat to potential loss of group belonging or group sanction is a powerful force on minimising the inner work required to achieve balance. The behavioural norms for the group are strongly protected, even in the face of self awareness.

Vulnerable though it might be, the growing inner awareness, spoken of by both Jung and Hede as significant, is one aspect of the psychic processes required to change the way personality functions. In order to embrace transformation, the fear-to-reveal that is grounded in exposing the ego to criticism and dismissal needs to be replaced by confidence to express what is real for the believer so they may speak from the core of their identity. The older Revised Standard
Version of Psalm 18:19 uses the onomatopoeic term ‘untrammelled liberty’- the broad space that is not restricted by anything that precludes the delightful holy encounter. The experience of women in restrictive conservative communities is often one of feeling trampled by the bullishness of the dominant ideals, goals and leadership.

In the wideness of the spiritual direction space, untrammelled liberty and freedom are only possible if the counterstory is encouraged from the directee, beginning with an awareness of how each of these aspects continues to limit the interior freedom of the directee. The role of the spiritual director is to mediate a process of awareness and risk-taking; to encourage a gentle movement from guilt for being short of the mark; to evoke confidence to name and own one’s inner authority; to facilitate the risk of verbalising of an authentic liberated identity that values the feminine soul as it experiences its transcendent moments.

Psalm 18:19 provides a metaphor for such spiritual direction. The final words bring weight to the endeavour: God delights in us. We can infer from these words that the value of coming into a space free from shadow constraints is an inspired process authored by God, one that heals and transforms because the pilgrim is able to open the soul to the unimaginable welcome of grace.

O the joy and wonderment of spirit
in being with places
as they take us into the beyond of ourselves.

Noel Davis

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Chapter 4

Methodology

Rationale

The core research goal is to analyse the outcomes of using a spiritual direction space to investigate the redress of a lack of validation of women’s stories that have shaped their lived experience of faith. An interpretive phenomenological analysis mode was adopted using personal storytelling as a way of hearing whether or not the spiritual direction process had facilitated validation of personal faith. A narrative research approach has been selected to fulfil the goal of the study: to assess the benefit of the spiritual direction space to enable the validation of faith experiences that have not been affirmed in former conservative religious contexts. The phenomenological approach relies upon first-person accounts for data (Tosey and Mathison; Creswell and Ollerenshaw 2002; Hanes and Gibson 2003; Wilding and Whiteford 2005; Larkin, Watts et al. 2006) as a way to uncover how women have experienced the changes in their personal faith journey, including how to deal with unconscious modes of disempowerment of faith experiences.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is derived from early work by Heidegger who argued that ‘the subject’ of any enquiry is always “accessible to analysis as a reflection of its current intentionality and directedness.” (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,110) Phenomenological enquiry cannot meet the exactitude of quantitative data and necessarily operates in a more nuanced interpretive arena. Larkin, Watts et al. declare that the object of the study is “to understand the participant’s world, and to describe ‘what it is like’.” (104) This exposes a researcher’s view of an individual’s reality and requires adjusting assumptions such that we try, according to Larking, Watts et al., to reveal “a research participant as they are ‘in themselves’ (which must
mean ‘in their relatedness to the world’.” (110) This emphasis is significant to the research approach as the very lack of focus on the actual lived experience of women in conservative religious settings is the motivation for the enquiry. The consistent muting of women’s experiential knowledge about their spiritual encounters cannot be studied or catalogued other than through hearing their particular narrative and affective responses to their disempowerment.

Research using personal narrative is a recent addition to qualitative research methodology in social science enquiry that is gaining favour. Polkinghorne critiques the conventional scientific-method based approach where knowledge about reality is based upon historical and culturally constructed presuppositions. (Polkinghorne 2007) Measuring a personal story against a set of objectified descriptors seeks to use the information in the story to establish generalised constructs. It can be just as dismissive of the individual’s investment in the story as not giving the story voice in the first place. There is considerable critique of decades of feminist research that made generalised summations using a Western, white American perspective that was not able to situate the experience of women within race, ethnic and cultural contexts. The firm commitment of this study is to give priority to the uniqueness of each individual’s story by using an open, non-directive interview, noting and acknowledging what their subjective experience has been in a particular situation. In this manner, it is hoped that the tendency to dismiss their experiences by categorising or summarising through generalisation will be minimised. The particularity of individual stories is the source of information for the study; the cultural uniformity of the cohort is acknowledged as both a limitation and an intention of the study.

The interactive engagement of narrative research gathers data about the phenomenological and existential framework perceived as significant by the participant, rather than capturing objectified moments of information to be measured for credibility or analysed against external measures. Therefore, it is important to restate that the view of the individual is as an inclusive
part of their reality. Larkin, Watts et al. underpin the process with the principle that the world is inevitably encountered via consciousness, in which making ‘objective’ statements about the world will always be derived from conscious self-engagement and asks the researcher to renegotiate their definition of reality. It is the participant’s reality that is being investigated in this project, where each is “an entity that is essentially embedded, intertwined and which is otherwise immersed in the world that it inhabits.” (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,105) The participant’s conscious reality is not analysed or demonstrated as an objectified construct. Rather, the phenomenon to be observed is the subjective reality of each participant’s consciousness of their transcendent experience and the benefit of having an intentional space in which to voice that conscious awareness.

To this stance is added the social dimension of subjective experience. A post-positivist approach to understanding reality, particularly in the social sciences, is grounded in the idea of a socially constructed reality. This means that to understand people, both a person’s experiences and their interactions with other people are required to give a balanced view of their reality. (Creswell and Ollerenshaw 2002) Plummer argues that “studying an individual biography does not bring with it the isolated individual, but rather an awareness of the individual in society.” (Elliott 2005) Life is historically and contextually situated. Kelly and Maynard-Moody advocate for a co-authorship position in which individuals are not the sole authors of their personal narratives. Each person shares authorship both with what is prior (history) and with an interactive authorship of those who share their stories. (Kelly and Maynard-Moody 1993; Brockmeier 2002)

Phenomenological research is interested in the complexity and wholeness of the human experience and the meaning given to it by the respondent. (van Manen 1997; Hanes and Gibson 2003,182) Giving meaning to everyday experiences includes hearing the value given to experiences by respondents and the subtleties or complexities that make up the whole experience. This research is interested in the complexity of the feminine spiritual journey and
by acknowledging the complexity of the task the researcher believes it is possible to capture what is discernable as beneficial aspects of the subjective experience. As McCrae (1999, 1216) comments, “qualitative methods including the analysis of narratives may be needed to understand the subtleties of religious development” and the domain of the religious experience is the subjective consciousness of numinous life events. The summary of the benefits of verbalising personal faith stories in a spiritual direction context will be woven from the person’s appreciation of the process as they wish to vocalise it.

In selecting a narrative research modality, the researcher is aware of the hesitancy of women from conservative communities to tell the story of intimately held spiritual experiences to an unknown other. An intuitive reserve to share such stories can be a product of a conservative environment which dominates and controls how spiritual experience may be expressed, and often creates an apparent *voicelessness* in women. The patterns that have been learnt for protecting one’s soul-story are outcomes of a social environment that values only certain styles of verbalised accounts of inner faith dynamics. Elliott (2005, 127) refers to these patterns as *templates* in a person’s story, stating a narrative can be “creative and original, [but will] take as its template existing narratives which each individual has learned and internalized.”

Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (1998, 2) speak of narrative as constrained by the individual’s parochial environment saying, “the storytelling process [is] both actively constructive and locally constrained.” They note that the auspices under which the story is told is one of the influences that shape the telling of the narrative. They describe these narrative auspices as “the people processing and regulating institutions that increasingly elicit, screen, fashion, and variously highlight personal narratives.” (2) This learnt reserve to share personal faith stories is a product of the conservative institutional environment and taking a narrative approach requires recognition of the limitations of and reactions to recounting personal story in these settings.
Feminist research literature consistently notes two issues supporting the use of a narrative modality for research in this field: giving voice to the woman’s story and de-trivialising the story. This is particularly significant in research in religious contexts where norms in the institutionalised church have been established by the male voice and the female voice has been excluded, diminished or distorted. (Conn 1986; Schneiders 1991; Mayeski 2001) This study contends that women know their own spiritual experiences but often feel intimidated or belittled in a male-dominated environment so that it is difficult to speak of personal realities. What this study is investigating is the outcome of women using a particular place and circumstance in which to affirm their own spirituality, a place that is not intentionally created in a conservative, male dominated society. Slee uses the term feminine faithing\(^{22}\) to describe the process that is known by women to articulate their faith experiences yet cannot be voiced in a way that has meaning based on women’s own spiritual realities because of overarching constraints that women intuit while within their faith communities. (Slee 2000,9) By encouraging women to vocalize their own spiritual realities in a safe place, knowing that they will be heard enables them to authorize their own spiritual autobiographies. Narrative research listens to women telling their own stories and has an interactive aspect which helps women assign significance to their own experience through the telling. Schneiders notes the value of personal recounting in a shared context, showing how it brings together the two aspects of voicelessness and the influence of the social template which patterns wariness. By listening to women’s stories they begin to appreciate the political power in their experiences which, as Schneiders says, “they have been taught to believe is purely personal and private.” (Schneiders 1991,87) In Slee’s schema, using a conversational approach is listed as one medium women use intuitively for establishing a sense of faith. Even though the interview process was conducted as a research exercise, it is also acknowledged that the telling of the

\(^{22}\)Faithing is defined by Nicola Slee to mean the “strategies employed by women by means of which they discerned and embodied shape, pattern, meaning, intentionality and coherence in their life experience.”
story was, in itself, a feminine faithing process. The re-telling aided the vocalising of what may well have been previously held as a covert and internalised conviction.

While a narrative research method for data gathering in this thesis is testing the evidence for the value of a spiritual direction space, the interactive and interpersonal aspects of conducting the research are also a significant part of the process. Therefore, the intent of the research is to give women the opportunity to tell their own story of a spiritual direction encounter but stay attentive to the inferences, emphases and innuendos within the story as clues to how they validated their faith experience.

Story-telling is recognized as a characteristic mode of feminine spirituality through which significance is given to meaningful spiritual encounters. At the individual level, there is a lack of credibility ascribed by patriarchy-based communities to the affective knowledge that is the ground of a woman’s faith experiences. This means there is little personal ownership of these experiences and no consequential empowerment possible from within the group to resource the feminine faith journey. As enculturation of the female faith story is a central concern in this study, it is important to have a means to recognise both the voice of the faith-community culture and the own-voice of the overshadowed, individual faith experience.

Narrative research is concerned with hearing participants’ knowledge-claims, their truth personalised by including the affective aspect rather than speaking about faith through objectified statements measured against culturally constructed suppositions. The truths elucidated through storytelling are narrative truths not objective truths or even historical truths. (Polkinghorne 2007,480) The veracity of the narrative truth stated by each participant lies in the degree of freedom with which the story is told and is enhanced by the internalized connectedness that retelling and revisualising the story evokes. Such affective underpinning of the faith story makes this form of research methodology appropriate for gauging the value ascribed by participants to the spiritual direction space. The task of the research is to explore,
understand and communicate the experiences and viewpoints offered by its women participants. (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,103) This research study is interested in how women have sought out safe places in which to tell the faith-story. A safe place invites participants to give meaning to their truth, something they can express as a knowledge-claim, and is contrasted with the controlled environment of a conservative paradigm where the expression of own-truth has been diminished and devalued.

Narratizing the experience of women broadens the range of what has been conventionally acceptable as researchable data. In the past, the validity of knowledge-claims that include ethical, normative and affective or aesthetic aspects of reality have been dismissed in favour of value neutrality. (Kelly and Maynard-Moody 1993) Using personal life stories as a vehicle through which neglected or diminished aspects of personal spiritual reality are heard afresh gives voice to the significant memories within the narrative that have been dismissed. The focus of feminist research is the lived-experience of each participant (van Manen 1997; Foltz 2000, 411) and that will be expressed through a range of ways of experiencing reality. The research methodology aims to capture some of this depth in the experience.

Therefore, the current study is underpinned by two themes:

1. Firstly, to listen for the unspoken influences of a conservative religious formation that may have shaped the women’s reticence to speak openly about their faith; to observe how those memories predisposed women to find other spaces in which to speak of their spiritual experience.

2. Secondly, the study is concerned with how the spiritual direction space enabled personal agency with regard to faith development and to examine the nature of the process that supports and enhances growth in faith identity.
Process

Sample Selection

The study investigates the experience of a sample of Australian women who have been involved in one-on-one spiritual direction sessions and who had some prior affiliation with or membership in a conservative religious community. Two guiding principles were applied for selection of participants: firstly, being female and, secondly, having some formative contact with a conservative religious congregation. Thirty women from five capital cities around Australia were invited to participate.

The primary starting point for seeking participants for the study was personal contact with colleagues in the ministry of spiritual direction. Practicing spiritual directors were asked to confidentially consult directees who fitted the criteria for the study. Each director received information about the study from the researcher. The directors then canvassed their directees to ask permission for the researcher to contact them and invite them to participate. Once participants had emailed agreement to be involved, meeting times and places were arranged. This type of snowball approach helped to locate a somewhat hidden population, those who were already wary of speaking openly about their faith experiences. (Browne 2005) All participants were currently receiving spiritual direction at the time of interview and were willing to be involved. A person’s attitude to spiritual direction was not a condition of inclusion in the cohort although it is most likely that only those who had positive experiences of spiritual direction agreed to participate. As the study was to investigate the positive effects of engaging in private personal reflection this was not seen as detrimental to the outcome but is an acknowledged bias.
A second, more broad-based initiative was the distribution of flyers outlining the objectives of the project at the National Gathering of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction, held in Sydney in April, 2009. Women conference attendees were asked to speak directly to the researcher at the conference or contact her via email. Some participants took this option.

All participants were made aware of the ethical stance of the project and gave written permission to have material included in the study. The breakdown of participants by their state of residence and their history of denominational affiliation is listed below in Table 2 and Table 3.

### Table 2

Number and Location of Participants in the Study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23 At the time, the researcher was a member of the Inaugural Council, inducted in 2006 in Melbourne, Australia, and attended this gathering in person and spoke to interested parties personally.

24 See Appendix A for the Consent Form template.
In reference to the criteria for religious affiliation, the denominational label does not necessarily carry a uniform style of congregational conservatism. For example, all those who said they belong to an Anglican Church had experienced an association with the Sydney Diocese which is the most evangelical of the Anglican dioceses in Australia.

Although the sampling procedure did not target ethnicity, the population from which volunteers were selected was relatively uniform ethnographically. The research sample was culturally homogenous, consisting of white, Western, European Australian women, most of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Denominational Affiliation</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Denominational Affiliation when Interviewed</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglican/Church of England</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniting Church</td>
<td></td>
<td>Uniting Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic Renewal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Uniting Church</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
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<td>Uniting Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td></td>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
whom had achieved moderate to high levels of education. All were mature people with a long history of attending faith communities. Consequently, the sample could be described as a group of women who were deemed to be spiritually mature. (Moberg 2010,107) It would seem that this profile is a reflection on the female Christian population accessing the ministry of spiritual direction in Australia, although such a definitive conclusion cannot be made on the basis of the small sample size. Other factors like the social network of the researcher, from which initial contacts were made, and the nature of the mainstream Christian-based sampling field have been influential. The narrowness of this study is a strength in that it allows a phenomenological focus on a specific field of individual women’s experiences rather than on a broad, non-specific aggregation of objectified data derived through non-relational sampling of large numbers. This is the strength of a phenomenological research modality that uses narrative modality.

Role of the Interviewer

Data collection was done by audio recording of women narrating their story, with the researcher as the sole interviewer who also compiled the verbatim transcript of the recording. The analysis of the data focused on the individual expression of women’s experiences using NVivo Qualitative Research Software.

Narrative research methods acknowledge the responsibility of the interviewer in the relationship space of the interview and require sensitivity to the potential for personal and attitudinal encroachment into the trust-space. By taking a relational approach to the research process, the role of the listener becomes an interactive one, which, as Gubrium and Holstein (1998,181) note, implies some effect upon the interviewee is inevitable. They elaborate: “Listeners are not simply narrative depositories or passive receptors. Neither are they discursively homogeneous.” For example, the interviewer often constructs the life lines they
ostensibly wish to analyse through the use of language and the questions are constructed to achieve the research outcomes. (175) This study acknowledges these suppositions and the bias that will occur through the interview questions. However, all questions were open ended and non-directive in terms of content.

The intent was for the interviewer to maintain a stance of being the ‘narrative depository’ as a way to limit the influence of perceptions about the researcher, which in this case meant more of a listening role than a discursive role. The interviewer was also sensitive to the perception the interviewee might have already constructed about the role of the interviewer. Unequal power relations in a qualitative research methodology need to be considered, particularly with regard to the comments in Chapter 1 about the fear to reveal personal story. It was important to give participants a sense of control over the interview process and not feel they were being directed in the content or style of story they told. Waller (2005, 334) urges that research methods give the interviewee assurance that their reports will be represented truly. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also emphasize a sense of equality in narrative inquiry which reflects the community of shared story and this includes addressing the imbalance inherent in perceptions of power relations. As noted previously, these perceptions will be an amalgam of the interviewee’s ‘templates’ directing the fear to reveal their story, with the consequent need to tell the right story, and the willingness to have their story heard by someone declaring they are interested in hearing their truth. The sense of being cared for through the story-telling is a way of holding the space of shared community in order to allay the fears of retribution so common in women from these situations.

Corporately generated shadow issues ingrain a fear of retribution, or at least disapproval, in the group’s adherents so truth-telling in the story may be very tentative and often disguised by euphemisms. In some cases, it took some time for the participant to speak confidently about their experiences. Significant aspects of a story were often returned to during the interview and often the language and nuance became more emotive and expressive with each re-telling.
Confidence to speak out one’s own voice with full affective engagement is pivotal to hearing authentic meaning and attachment to influences. The interview technique needed to establish a rapport with the interviewee (Smyth and Mitchell 2008,442) and limit the interjection of the interviewer’s voice into the story, making intentional space for honouring of the voice of the respondent. It was important to be aware of the intimate privilege of entrusting another with one’s personal stories and maintain a conscious sensitivity to the relational ethic associated with hearing the narrative. (Ellis 2007,4) The integrity of this attitudinal stance was intended to reassure participants that they were the only ones who truly knew their own-truth and personal meaning-making of life experiences, and that their truth was valued. By using only one interviewer, the consistency of this relational interaction was maintained and biases that result from the interviewer’s own personality and attitudes are acknowledged, but it was a uniform factor for each interviewee.

In addition, the approach of this work is to use the principle of intersubjectivity in which significance is given to what is taking place between the persons within the story being told. An intersubjective relationship is described as two entities in open and vulnerable relationship, both sensitive to the nuances and emotions of the other. (Benjamin 2005) In the context of the data collection, the same principle needed to function between the interviewer and the interviewee. This required a sensitive, reflexive attitude by the interviewer. A characteristic of the researcher’s reflexive position during conversations was an intersubjective awareness of responding authentically to the interviewee and supporting their affective engagement in their story. It was important not to engage in an objectivising or analysing process as the story proceeded, but to remain embedded in the conversation as a mutual respondent.

In recent literature, intersubjective systems theory has gained acceptance as a research analysis orientation that is a tool to enquire into the affective connectedness between respondents in an interaction. In narrative research an intersubjective approach considers the affective engagement between respondents in the story to be a significant part of the research
Stolorow and Atwood describe the theory as focusing on “the individual's world of inner experience and its embeddedness with other such worlds in a continual flow of reciprocal mutual influence.” (Maroda 1999,476) It acknowledges that the patterns of engagement between people shape the way experience is remembered and later re-storied, and shape the way in which meaning is constructed from the re-telling.

Phenomenological research aims to gain in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experience (van Manen 1997; Hanes and Gibson 2003,149) and Kelly and Maynard-Moody (1993,136) assert that as an analysis form, “validation of claims about understandings of human experience requires evidence in the form of personally reflective descriptions in ordinary language.” Working in the arena of public policy, they posit that objectivity can be achieved through intersubjective agreement. A linear or causal description of the type of experience being reported does not take into account the reflexive engagement of interpersonal interaction. Taking a causal approach will not include the reciprocity or mutuality that is a characteristic of meaningful relationship or how it has influenced the resultant memory of the relationship that is subsequently used in re-storying. Interpersonal interactions reported descriptively or lineally become action by one person and reaction by the other with no place for nuance within the experience. The development of intersubjective systems theory attempts to describe significant ways in which to recognise interpersonal interaction that legitimates the earlier intuition about a feminine mode of faith experience. Tilden Edwards rephrases the interconnectedness that is the focus of attention in a contemplative spiritual direction conversation:

Mind-in-heart presence relates to others heart-to-heart and not just conditioned mind and ego to conditioned mind and ego. We need to trust that when we are heart-to-heart the Spirit is collaborating with us together in uncovering a called-for discernment. In that graced collaboration we find a mutual blending of God’s Spirit and our individual and collective spirits. That collaboration may well lead to a sympathetic awareness of all those sentient beings who will be affected by our decision, which will help shape our discernment. (http://www.shalem.org/index.php/resources/publications/contemplative-leadership/collaboration-as-a-quality-of-contemplative-leadership)
Connelly and Clendinin (1990,3) note it is important to create an environment of trust and mutuality and post-interview conversations often moved into a more collegial sharing of experiences. While some literature supports appropriate personal disclosure in therapeutic relationships that are cognisant of an intersubjective approach (Maroda 1999), the researcher’s stance was to limit any personal response to the interviewee to the closing conversation at the conclusion of the interview. Care was taken not to overshadow the participant’s story with any counterstory from the interviewer, but rather the interviewer maintained an open, contemplative stance of being fully present to the story of the other, and sought to be receptive to all its facets and affective expression.

The hesitancy and reserve of some of the interviewees appeared to be symptomatic of a learnt behaviour from the fear of not measuring up to the required truth of the conservative fellowship’s expectations. It is highly likely that some of the participants would have an intuited stance that was wary of the researcher wanting to ‘check up’ on the appropriateness of the story told. The learnt behaviour could come from a combination of lack of trust of the other and lack of confidence in one’s own truth. The anticipation of such a reaction was addressed by:

- meeting in a familiar environment selected by the participant
- the interviewer being consciously aware of staying open, relaxed and emotionally available to the participant throughout the interview
- the interviewer maintaining an attitude of graciousness toward each participant, being appreciative of the privilege being entrusted to the interviewer
- the interviewer maintaining a consistent body posture, facial expression and empathic stance

The quality of the transcripts and the attitude of the interviewee to the interviewer reveal how effective these measures were in providing a safe and open environment for these women to tell their truth.
When using personal narratives, the validity of the study can be threatened by two errors of interpretation. Either misinterpreting what was meant by the spoken word of the respondent or misinterpretation of the meaning-making that was conveyed in the story. (Polkinghorne 2007,472) Creswell and Ollerenshaw (2002,332) also speak of the need to lessen “the potential gap between the narrative told and the narrative reported” and similarly, Tosey and Mathison (2010,64) note that the risk of a phenomenological method is in “gaining imprecise accounts, or inappropriately interpreting accounts through the researcher’s constructs and presuppositions.” This can be true even with the most sincere intention to report accurately.

In order to be quite clear about the intended meaning of the transcribed words, a collaborative approach was used. Interviewees were sent verbatim transcripts of their story and asked to review the text and confirm that they were satisfied with the wording. Each was encouraged to ensure that the language and phraseology used in their verbal statements truly reflected what they had intended to say, and carried their sense of the meaning of their experiences. In some cases, this process was repeated until the participant was satisfied with the veracity of the transcript. This process was made clear to each interviewee prior to ending the session and was intended to convey a genuine desire to record their story accurately. All participants followed this procedure, returning transcripts with editorial comments or agreement that they were satisfied the script reflected what they wanted to say. The material used in the analysis is the verbatim wording recorded from each participant. The verbal transcription does not always fit easily into flowing or accurate written language. The impact of tone and non verbal body language is difficult to convey with its original resonance. It is acknowledged that this has occurred in some transcripts.

Throughout the discussion of the analysis, transcript codes will be used when a verbatim selection is quoted. All excerpts from each participant’s transcripts have a code at the end of
each quote referring to the coding system used by the researcher. The first two digits indicate the year in which the interview took place and the second two digits indicate the position in the sequence of interviews within each year. All references or names that might identify the participant have been removed, and alternate wording that closely represents the meaning is placed in square brackets to protect confidentiality. The verbatim quotes used in the analysis are indented and italicised in order to honour the personal voice.

## Analysis

### Affective Self-Reporting

An interpretive phenomenological approach to research often uses data collected in semi-structured interviews and the task of analysis is to look for patterns of meaning that convey themes across the cohort. (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,104) In this study, a semi-structured approach meant that the wording of the interview questions was subject to the flow of the conversation and an open-ended set of initiating questions was used to encourage the storytelling process. In order to hear the progression of faith development in the interviewees’ lives, the interview was framed around the following questions:

- Tell me about your early church experiences or your earliest experience of faith in your life?
- What was ‘faith’ like at that time?
- Tell me about changes you have experienced in your faith journey. What was ‘faith’ like after that experience?
- How did you come into spiritual direction?
- Can you summarise the benefits of your spiritual direction experience?
This life-frame then gave some comparative reference between early faith experience and the experience of seeking a spiritual direction space.

The generic style and open-endedness of the questions was designed as a guide for the respondent to indicate the aspects of the personal story which they felt were pertinent. Each interview took approximately one hour.

However, the recent increase in research reports involving spirituality, across various disciplines, has raised issues around how to validate claims made by researchers in the field. The main issue is the fluidity of the accounts based on personalised, affective experience. Moberg (2010,106) summarizes the issue of reporting upon affectively-based responses that are not referenced to objective externalised standards:

Using subjective data, e.g. feeling states, a sense of meaning or purpose in life, self-rated well-being, or other subjective self-evaluations, to measure spirituality can imply that it is no more than a reification of interiorized impressions that differ from one person to another and lack any objective foundation. It also opens the question of whether it is genuinely reflected by verbalized self-appraisals offered in interviews.

The challenge raised by Moberg lies in how to give the ‘verbalized self-appraisals’ a framework for establishing the credibility of knowledge-claims that are so individually contextualised. He suggests that narrative research needs to anchor the story by collecting multiple stories about comparable experiences. Whilst this study is not asking for self-analysis of personal spirituality experiences, establishing the congruence of a number of women’s experiences of spiritual direction will be used as the ‘anchor’ for claims made about the reported value of this type of spiritual engagement. Madsen (2000,337) laments that, “Subjective realities are among the most difficult things on earth to bring into consonance.” Validating claims based upon individual reflections on unique and personalised experiences is addressed by Polkinghorne in his view of narrative research. The solution lies in consensus within a community of speakers, for he states, “A statement or knowledge claim is not intrinsically valid; rather, its validity is a function of intersubjective judgment.” (Polkinghorne 2007,483) Here Polkinghorne uses the term ‘intersubjective’ as consensus agreement between subjects. By collecting a significant
number of personal, subjective reports of experience, the consensus approach will establish congruence between those experiences.

Gathering data about experiences using story-telling is conditioned by the context in which the stories are told. There is interplay between how a respondent chooses an event to include in the story and the themes which they selected to illustrate meaning. Harris names the narrative process as a dialectic construct of both event and frame of reference within the story. Harris (2003,205) believes meaning is shaped by the “examples chosen to illustrate it while, simultaneously, the examples derive their sense from the pattern into which they are cast.” This is a problem if the aim is to reproduce a chronological account of the events that make up a person’s experience, where the validity of the accounts rests on naming events as objective truths. Within narrative research, the aim is not to describe objective reality and thereby infer events are applicable to other situations. By taking a constructivist orientation, the focus is on congruence between accounts, particularly with regard to the arrangement of the story, the different meanings they convey, and the different consequences they may have. (Harris 2003,206) The context is studied to investigate a situation’s impact on the interpretation given by the story-teller in their quest to find meaning. In this study, the movement being tracked during interviews is from the meaning and validity of faith experiences in a conservative religious milieu, toward using a spiritual direction space in which women come to understand their faith experiences in their own terms. As Harris (2003,215) notes, a concept, for example ‘faith experience,’ has meaning when a person has established their own meaning in their own terms. In feminine spirituality, this is a crucial step toward validating women’s faith experiences. It is the outcome of the meaning-making in each context and the consequent impact upon faith-agency that is of interest. The challenge to the validity of individual subjective experiences is met through consensus of a group of stories that provides cumulative evidence for the benefits of engaging in spiritual direction.
The methods by which women’s faith experience is validated have to be at variance with what has been the norm in conservative faith communities. Conservative cultural assertions as to what is valid lie at the heart of the enquiry. Therefore, to speak of ‘knowledge claims’ as valid, one must use alternate methods to those normally used in the ‘rule governed rationality’ of the conservative environment. Polkinghorne (2007,478) comments, “in the actual performance of validity judgments, the background beliefs and assumptions of different communities affect what they accept” as legitimate. This is particularly true of a strongly structured environment where legitimacy of the experience is governed by approval or disapproval according to objectivist norms. Fuchs (2003,105) notes her frustration that male-dominated theory still devalues experience as a category when “women are beginning to enter history as producers of a different kind of knowledge.” The paradox of the malestream perspective lies in not readily acknowledging that there is still a subjective stance that deeply affects assumptions regardless of the attempt to create structured objectivity. The dominant, positivistic approach persists, believing that it is possible to objectively understand experience.

A Constructivist Approach

Narrative analysis, as a subset of qualitative research modalities using in-depth interview techniques, has evolved two particular approaches to examining the data for describing a person in their living context; naturalist and constructionist approaches. The selection of an appropriate orientation has been laboured throughout this report and, as Harris warns, the “analytical orientations may be as consequential for the findings that they create as the particular methodological procedure that they use.” (Harris 2003,203) This study adopts a constructionist orientation in which it is the process of making the social world that is the point of the observation. This is contrasted with a naturalist approach in which the aim is to document the social reality so that a larger explanatory and descriptive scheme is developed.
that seeks to explain experience. Elliott (2005,18) speaks about the constructionist focus being “on identifying meaning-making practices and an understanding of the ways in which people participate in the construction of their lives.” Narrative research takes story-telling seriously as a crucial means of reality construction in its own right. (Harris 2003,204) A constructionist approach sees individuals as active participants in their unfolding story, one that is reactive to, and collaborative with, the exigencies of their life. Interviews are a “site for creation of meaning” (Harris 2003,204) in which the narrator is continually making sense of the story as it is being told. The recounted interactions between the story-teller and other participants in their story become the material of a meaning-making process.

Taking a constructivist approach that has reactive / collaborative awareness of the vagaries of the life being narrated means that the interpersonal relationships are more significant than in a purely descriptive approach. (Benjamin 2005) Being cognisant of reciprocal effects on one another is not a familiar aspect of a conservative religious paradigm or of those ministering within it. It stands in opposition to the core objective of control and power that regulates the community. The conservative paradigm upholds practices that enact selective acknowledgement of the personal story as determined by the power-relations of those in relationship. Acknowledging mutuality requires a person to recognize the listener’s internal conflicts in hearing another’s story and the self-awareness to extend hospitality to the other’s point of view. It implies a measure of self-revelation. (Maroda 1999,488) Benjamin (2005,449) refers to such patterns of mutual engagement as the heart of intersubjectivity:

So it is not only that two people influence each other, but that interaction creates a space for both subjects’ separate but recognizable centers of feeling and initiative. In that space there can be some consensual validation, not of the objectively true, but of what we think we are talking about, what feelings and meanings we believe we are trying to convey about one another in this moment.

By recording the spiritual autobiographies of women using their own language, the research ceases to be about women but rather presents their colloquial narratives of interactive experiences. The feminist stance of this study will try to demonstrate congruence between the
experience of a cohort of women, those who have had exposure to conservative environments and subsequently experienced an intersubjective environment like the spiritual direction space. Measuring individual responses against an externalised rationale grounded in a conceptual framework that cannot take affective engagement into account will be avoided.

Research within a patriarchal environment often places inquiry into a notional, rational and ideological environment, one that is grounded in the positivist nature of logic, text and doctrinal norms, but has limited ability to hear the shared affective and reflexive moments of grief, shame and disempowerment that fashions women’s behaviour in faith environments.

With this rationale in mind, the analysis of this research will demonstrate validity through consensus between the narratives of the women, one that creates a web of understanding about the benefit of using the ‘broad space’ of intersubjective spiritual direction to gain personal agency in their own faith development.

The following chapters will summarise the analysis of the women’s responses:

- Chapter 5: Images of a Broad Place – a sense of space as perceived by participants
- Chapter 6: The Role of Women – detrimental effects experienced in past faith-life
- Chapter 7: Shadow Effects – constraints referred to during the interviews
- Chapter 8: The Spiritual Director – perceptions of the role of the spiritual director
- Chapter 9: The Benefits of Spiritual Direction – a summary of perceived benefits
Chapter 5

Images of a Broad Place

The initial analysis begins with the way women expressed their perception of what made the spiritual direction environment spacious. The rationale for what the term *broad place* may signify has been outlined in Chapter 2 where the characteristics of the quality of the conversation space were considered. It was noted that an essential aspect of validating feminine faith is finding an unbounded space in which transcendent experiences can be affirmed, without constraint, so that a woman may express or re-envision the experience in forms that adequately relate to her affective experience. It has also been noted that a conservative environment is defined by its boundaries of ideology, creating a bounded space within which particular behaviours and expressions of faith are sanctioned. This is intuited by members of the group through shadow effects created by the authority structures in the group.

In Chapter 4 the problem of affective self-reporting as the basis of knowledge-claims that are not referenced to objective externalised standards was raised. Moberg (2010) warns against using subjective data which can be a reified, but which varies between individuals. The initial standpoint for using quotations from the transcripts is to tell the story as *the women narrated it*. However, the researcher was sensitive to comments that seemed to be overly spiritualised, where participants attributed their perceptions to Divine influence rather than a reflective assessment of their experience. Significantly, there was a general lack of spiritualising of this kind in many of the narratives, for the language seemed to be more descriptive and reflective of the experience, with surprisingly little causal reference to the action of God. This is a benefit to the study for it indicates authentic story-telling that has engaged personal experience. In
other words, the narratives are more likely to be first-person-accounts of experience, rather than constructed, conservative-based interpretations of that experience. For this reason, then, the analysis of the transcripts focused on the descriptive qualities of the space expressed by participants and not on spiritualised language which may infer that Divine intervention is responsible for these observations.

The interview process was also a balance between spontaneous conversation and minimal, sensitive questions for clarification about information disclosed. Each participant was aware that the study used the metaphor of a broad place because of the advertising circular received prior to giving permission to be interviewed. When interview questions were asked, it was intended to explore the participant’s sense of the space, and, particularly, whether the process, the director or the space contributed differently to their positive experiences. For example, some of the questions taken from the interview conversations were, “Can you talk about your sense of space when sitting with a spiritual director?”, and, “Is it the nature of the sessions, or the nature of the director, or something else that happens in that space?” The interviewer was careful not to frame questions in a way that may have lead to spiritualising of the participants’ experiences and, as a result, there were few spontaneous comments of this nature.

One of the few examples of a participant referring to God’s role in the experience of spaciousness still has a descriptive tone to the language:

_But the other part of the ‘broad space’ is the thing of God’s grace being broad. The huge breadth of God’s mercy and delight in us; willingness for us to become who we are without judgement. What I see in some of our evangelical and Pentecostal brothers and sisters is a narrowness that insists we must have certain ways of being. There is the sense of breadth in knowing God in a more open way._ (0905)²⁵

²⁵ All quotations from participant’s transcripts have a code at the end of each quote referring to the coding system used by the researcher. The first two digits indicate the year in which the interview took place and the second two digits indicate the position in the sequence of interviews within each year.
She contrasts the experience of narrowness with knowing God in an open way, describing it as a ‘sense of breadth’ and captures the perception of being bounded by normalised ways of being in a conservative situation. This sense of wideness was part of the change the woman described in her own spirituality. She found a distance was looming between herself and her husband with regard to their individual spiritual horizons, even though they were both in ministry together. She reiterates her preference for openness when referring to a lack of understanding between them:

_He saw it as me going off into deception because I was no longer in this narrow, right way of seeing things. I just thought it is much bigger than that; I have just broadened out. I haven’t left it behind, it’s just bigger._ (0905)

She saw her husband being faithful to the narrower, more conservative approach – even the language, ‘going off into deception’, indicates being diverted into something that was not sanctioned. This type of comment clearly conveys the movement from a bounded environment to the openness to become who she wished to be. In this section of the narrative, the reference to God’s role is portrayed as part of her spiritual framework rather than attributing some type of action by God to create a different situation. Instead, the emphasis is on the realities of partners being committed to different frameworks.

A different type of spiritualising may be evident if a speaker refers to a sense of sacredness in the companioning space:

_It’s a very sacred place and you know as soon as you walk in. Full of books and icons; a peaceful space for me is important for me. It’s the best space in which I have spiritual direction._ (0808)

For those using the term ‘sacred’ in their responses, three variations of meaning are mentioned: the ambience of the environment, the quality of acceptance and the nature of the relationship with the spiritual director. The intuitive sensing of something different in the space is also noted by the next comment:

_I think when I go into spiritual direction it’s a very accepting environment, sacred in a way._ (1001)
Another spoke about the relationship itself having a sacredness:

*If it had been [my former spiritual director]*\(^2^6\) *I could have talked openly, so there is something about her that meant we had moved beyond denominational barriers or theories of spiritual direction. The relationship itself was sacred.* (1004)

However, the narrative process did not ask for clarification on what the term ‘sacred’ meant for each participant, neither was there any further discussion to elaborate their intuitive perceptions.

The motivation for this study has been found in the Biblical reference in Psalm 18:19: “He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.” The use of the biblical term *broad place* as a metaphor does not necessitate a spiritualising of the concept, something that overemphasizes divine qualities in the situation. The action of God may be inferred but is not used in the analysis to confirm the quality of the experience. With this stated understanding, the following comments are often more descriptive than interpretive.

**Describing a Broad Place**

The following responses from participants have been grouped into themes that mention particular aspects of their experience of the space during spiritual direction. The comments in transcripts are presented in two sections:

- **Safety of the Space as reported by participants**
- **Nature of Spaciousness outlining some of the attributes of a broad place**
  - a place to explore
  - a place of acceptance
  - an hospitable space
  - space to be me

\(^2^6\) Square brackets indicate word substitution of identifiable references and are used to maintain confidentiality.
Quotations often include a series of interrelated points but the excerpts have been collected according to where the emphasis or the intent of the comment seemed to be focused. In some cases, the spaciousness was attributed to the manner or personality of the spiritual director. The influence of the personality and style of the director is reflected in the following comment:

*I experienced spiritual direction with her as quite a broad path - not narrow or controlling or directive - invitational in the sense of trying to hear or see where the movements of God were in my life. It was more like a companionship; it wasn’t an authoritarian relationship at all. It was very freeing.* (0907)

This comment integrates several aspects of the broad place of a spiritual direction conversation that are described in the following sections. However, references to the role of the spiritual director in influencing the spaciousness of the conversation will be addressed in Chapter 8 – “The Spiritual Director.”

**A Safe Place**

A view of the conversation space commonly held in most helping professions is that feeling safe is a crucial part of facilitating the inner processing of clients. The spiritual direction process similarly aims to offer a conversation space that facilitates the lowering of defences in order to speak more freely of what is important in a person’s faith-life. In this context, the lack of safety is often caused by past experiences of being judged and/or not meeting expectations that demonstrate true membership of the conservative community. Scott Peck (1987,67) describes the experience of being in a ‘less-than-true’ community in which members have high defences. He notes that we rarely feel wholly accepted and acceptable when we enter a group. As a consequence, he believes that everyone is wary, conveying a sense of being in a bounded space where the freedom for an individual to be open is limited by inbuilt fears that have created unconscious defences. Any admission of weakness is, in Scott Peck’s words, “met with fear, hostility, or simplistic attempts to heal or convert [so] that all but the most courageous will retreat behind their walls.” (67) The language he uses depicts what is meant by being in a
bounded space, one that causes a person to retreat behind walls of defence. Scott Peck’s
language about ‘attempting to heal or convert’ is in contrast to his ideal of community as a
safe place: “no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. . . You are
free to be you.” (68) The wariness to speak openly and stay behind one’s wall of defence is
seated in the fear of non-approval, but a safe relationship allows the undefended self to speak
freely.

In the metaphor of a broad place, an unbounded space represents the opportunity to enter
into a place where you are free to be you. For some participants, feeling safe seemed to be an
assumed state of a spiritual direction conversation space. For example,

*In a safe space, both of us are expectant of God.* (0802)

This woman’s opening statement ‘in a safe place’ preconditions what is possible in her
perception of the engagement, including the belief that God will act within the encounter. She
continues:

*It is a mentoring situation, not a teaching situation. If I know where I am going to walk for
that hour, it’s not that she knows any better than I do where we are going; it’s where what
emerges, what lightens. God is active in things.* (0802)

The concept of safety here liberated an inner trust in a process which anticipated spiritual
work will be done. Trust is foundational to the operation of an unbounded space – both trust
of the other and trust of the process. This participant used the idea of a ‘safe place’ without
defining what she meant by the term ‘safe’. For her, it was about having a place to speak
without repercussions from her social circle:

*It created a safe place for a sense of accountability; safe in that I could go back and live my
life. I could say what I liked there but go back and live my life on those reflections without
anyone in that situation knowing about it.* (0802)

Linking the idea of accountability with a place to speak openly implies that there is something
which prevents her being open, or honest, in other situations. As she is speaking about a
conversation with her spiritual director and her relationship with God, we can infer that the
feeling of a lack of safety is in reference to her other faith contexts. Being safe for this woman
is freedom to speak without repercussions which, again, raises the issue of being guarded, defensive or secretive in other situations. The safety to speak openly seems to be a desirable experience; to be accountable implies an intentionality and a determined will to keep accessing this space.

Another participant refers to her need to share rather than being accountable:

\[ I \text{ need someone to talk to deeply and share with at a deep level – spiritual direction is a place I thought I could find it. It is safe, it's ongoing . . . it's there, like God. (1003) } \]

Yet, the need that is met within a safe environment of spiritual direction concerns a deeper connection with the inner desire to validate oneself through conversation.

Another term that might be used for a safe place is refuge:

\[ \text{It was a refuge for me. (1002) } \]

This participant used this term often. She was sensitive to the connections that had been created within her circle of associates because of her father’s role in ministry. In making this more universal statement, she refers to confidentiality as a means of isolating parts of her story; she wanted to share more of herself but felt unsafe to do so because of the fear of uninvited others gaining access to her inner thoughts and feelings:

\[ \text{It was a refuge in the sense that I could start to be who I was more fully. It was the confidentiality. I think the confidentiality was that it would not be spoken anywhere else – it was between me and God and in the care of the director. (1002) } \]

This woman also expresses her trust in the process and her spiritual director that created a sense of being companioned, rather than carrying her burdens alone:

\[ \text{I kept things to myself elsewhere and I think that was the refuge - I didn’t have to carry it by myself anymore. There was someone who shared the way. (1002) } \]

When speaking of a safe place as a refuge in this sense, it includes the idea of escape. The theme verse of Psalm 18:19 also refers to the notion of the safe place as David’s refuge from his oppressors. If this participant’s construct about the value of spiritual direction includes the key elements of escape, confidentiality and refuge, then one might ask, “From what
oppression she wanted to flee?” Nothing was offered to indicate what she might fear enough to seek refuge and the story she told had a context of physical security. As her story unfolded, this sense of refuge gave her confidence to share more of herself with trusted others. She says,

Initially the safe place for me to do that was within myself, and then it was with another who I felt safe with – there is the refuge thing again. Initially it was with myself, and then with another and then with trusted companions. (1002)

The value of spiritual direction in her story included a growing confidence to be less isolated and more able to share who she wished to be. There was a sense of expansiveness in her growing engagement with the space and her trust of her director.

A different image of safety was used by another participant who described her sense of safety even though moving away from her ‘old centre.’ The interviewer asked, “What has been your experience of the spiritual direction space?” As in the quotation from the previous participant, she relates safety to trust but uses the imagery of the box. She contrasts the security of being in a confining box with a different sense of being safe when in spiritual direction:

It’s not as safe as being in a box, but who would want to be back in the box . . . It’s like I have moved - God holds us in the palm of his hand – I felt I was in the middle of the palm of God’s hand when I was in the box, but I have moved right to the very edge, a very dangerous place to be, but God has held onto me. I didn’t jump off and throw it all away; he didn’t lose me or let go of me. It’s still safe even though I’m not in the centre. (0912)

Again, the imagery of Psalm 18:19 is relevant to her experience of being enclosed in the box or trapped. Oppression can create a feeling of safety because of the security of entrapment, but the freedom to express oneself without constraint was intuited as a different kind of safety. Her sense of safety in the spiritual direction context is closely linked to the freedom she has to trust God as she explores, even though she is aware of this being new for her, away from her ‘centre.’

Yet another participant has practiced as a spiritual director. She sees her own experience of spiritual direction as a blessing:

This time and space just for me, learning to recognize that it was a blessing and a generous thing I needed, and it was OK to indulge. Wonderful blessing. (0903)
But she goes on to speak of what her ministry has to offer women in particular:

*I think what I offer in spiritual direction now is that I come with my own particular story.*
*Where people attend their stories [I can] pick up those nuances of self-deprecation and help them hear what they are saying. It’s a safe place for a woman to explore that.* (0903)

Earlier in her transcript, this woman refers to ‘self-deprecation’ as a key theme of women’s stories. This comment infers that addressing an attitude of self-deprecation depends upon a directee intuiting that she is safe in the conversation, which then encourages her to see her own authentic value, thus validating her spiritual story.

Previous chapters have referred to the fact that women’s voices are not often heard in the context of a conservative fellowship. One participant, quoted above in reference to the qualities of her spiritual director, commented on the opportunity to speak in her own voice, reflecting on it in terms of being ‘invitational’; it helped her engage with some deep aspect of herself. For her, searching for ‘who I am’ is possible when the space or process is perceived to be safe:

*It was very helpful because she didn’t put words in my mouth, but was very invitational.*
*She provided a really safe place for me to share the depths of who I was.* (0907)

One might question what the expression ‘didn’t put words into my mouth’ may be touching from her past experience. A conservative faith context has a particular discourse in which the language dictates whether one is accepted and included as an approved group member, for there is a proscribed manner of speech that is attuned to the ideology and theology of the group. Although there was no attempt during the interview to ask further questions on this matter, the comment demonstrates openness in the spiritual director to hear the participant’s story as she wished to tell it, in her own language. This resonates with the words of Scott Peck where simplistic attempts to heal or convert cause one to retreat behind the inner walls protecting the fragile self. (Scott Peck 1987) Wanting to ‘convert’ to the worldview of the spiritual director was not part of the process, and being ‘invitational’ provides a contrast to the accustomed manner of being in a conservative setting. Consequently, this affects the level to
which the participant felt safe to engage with her deeper feelings of selfhood. So the safety of the space brings several significant dimensions to the process of spiritual direction – trust, openness and giving space to engage the true self in the presence of the Spirit.

A final series of quotations from one participant interweaves three different aspects of a spiritual direction space and the sense of safety:

It’s a safe, loving place to be heard and accepted, and taught - I think I have been taught by my spiritual director. (0909)

The first aspect in this comment reflects a key underpinning of Psalm 18:19, where the final phrase states: “he delivered me, because he delighted in me.” Feeling loved is intuited from the idea of God deliring in those who are faithful. Because they are loved, God draws the faithful into a place of spaciousness so that they may experience God’s delight. The comment from this participant reflects this sense of being in a loving place. The attitude of the spiritual director has conveyed something that the directee intuits as loving acceptance and that, in turn, encourages the participant to address the difficult issues, as described in the subsequent part of the narrative:

It’s paradoxical because it is a safe place where you are loved and accepted, and in there you can get to the harder, deeper stuff. It’s not a warm and fuzzy place where we like being together, and I like you and you like me, and I’m a good little Christian woman. (0909)

The second aspect to note is the cynicism with which she refers to being ‘a good little Christian woman.’ Here she seems to be making a point about the significance of the work to be done in the conversation space. Once again there was no further opportunity in the interview to ask her to elaborate. However, it may touch a complex of shadow issues that are associated with comments about playing the game in a faith fellowship in order to be acceptable. She seems to be railing against diminishing the spiritual direction conversation to a simplistic exchange of niceties. She implies there is real work to be done in the broad place that invites creative

possibilities about reframing one’s relationship with God. So, for this participant, there is a paradox between feeling safe in a loving environment and her awareness that it takes real work to enter into a personal commitment to spiritual growth.

The last aspect of this participant’s reference to safety is the creative possibility that this environment initiates in the directee. Her willingness to ‘get to the harder, deeper stuff’ is contingent upon the quality of space and her sense of loving acceptance. She continues,

> It’s really a place of exploring the hard stuff and deepening and learning; learning more about how God works and how God is working in my life. (0909)

The creativity to re-imagine or reframe her thinking and feeling about God is possible because of her sense of being loved and accepted in that place.

In summary, feeling safe in the conversation place was mentioned in relation to:

- feeling safe, as a prior condition, liberates trust
- a confidential place that gives safety to speak freely
- a place of refuge
- being safe in God’s hand yet on the edge
- a place for women to explore issues and validate their story
- being able to share the depths of who I am
- a loving place to be heard and accepted

**Nature of the Space**

Having focused upon comments with regard to what it meant to have a safe place in spiritual direction, a number of comments from the participants, about the characteristics of the space, enlarge the understanding of the safety of the space. The following features of the space were referred to by participants:

- a place of acceptance
- an hospitable space
The quotations are sequenced in this order regardless of the quantity of excerpts that are used in each category. Women mentioned being accepted and feeling that it was an hospitable space were important parts of the process, but these are precursors to the work that was enabled within the space. The high number of quotes that referred to exploring spiritual issues tells of the significance of this aspect of the spacious context. It creates an intention to keep accessing the space and an appreciation of the liberty to explore and relax into their identity.

A Place of Acceptance

The first characteristic of the broad, spacious place of spiritual direction is acceptance. One participant associated the feeling of acceptance with her perception of sacredness in the place:

I feel very open to say what I need or want to say. I don’t feel like I am going to be judged. There’s a lot of freedom in that. (1001)

The interviewer then asked, “The director, and their manner, or the space in which that process happen – how do they help?” She replied:

I think when I go into spiritual direction it’s a very accepting environment, sacred in a way. (1001)

The use of the word ‘sacred’ implies an interface with God’s presence. Brereton (2005, 7978) speaks about sacred space as “a lens for meaning” and believes that “places are sacred because they perform a religious function, not because they have peculiar physical or aesthetic qualities.” The participant’s reflection on her perception that the environment is ‘accepting’ is significant to giving meaning to her spiritual experience in a place that she feels provides an interface for her experience of God. She has isolated the physicality of the place and personality of the director from the meaning she gains through the process. It suggests another dimension to the idea of a broad place in which feeling accepted gives access to
spiritual connectedness. This raises a question as to why feeling accepted in the space has an impact on a directee’s sense of the sacred, as noted in the quotation above.

Another impact of a sense of spaciousness, described by the one participant as having ‘no walls around it’, is upon spiritual wellbeing which intuits health, love and acceptance, together with a deepening awareness of God’s being:

> It’s one that allows the spirit to work without any . . . for the spirit to be there, to be present, for God to be present . . . and there are no walls around it. The space is one of health, or refreshment, love, acceptance and the aspects of God as he is. (0912)

There is no direct use of the word ‘sacred’ as an image for this participant, but her intuining of God’s presence and the meaning she derives from her perceptiveness has similar characteristics.

So far the participants’ comments have been generalised and refer to an affective state or ambience of place and process rather than a specific response to the person of the spiritual director. In the next comment, the qualities of a spiritual director are directly linked to feeling deeply acceptable:

> Loving, generous, open people – that’s who I encountered; people who are very gracious. Not weak people. Not people who let you go away. . . It’s not like they are soft, but there is a deep acceptance of people. That’s what I experienced. It allows you to open up because it is a safe place. (0909)

Her experience relates openness and safety with a quality of strength in the director; there is intentionality and graciousness that is not superficial or ‘weak.’ In several comments there are hints of the strength of character in a spiritual director that is important to the quality of work being undertaken by the directee. More will be said about the characteristics of the spiritual director in a later section28. Here, the quality of acceptance of people by the director is directly linked to the safety of the space.

28 See Chapter 8, “The Spiritual Director”, p.181
Furthermore, attributes of confidentiality and safety, mentioned earlier in this chapter, were also linked with acceptance and openness. A participant uses several of these attributes to describe her experience of being with her spiritual director:

_I think it is the confidentiality and the acceptance by the director. She accepts me as I am. You don’t have any preconceived ideas or expectations of me. She accepts that this is the way I am, she doesn’t tell me I shouldn’t be like that or I shouldn’t think like that; that’s what you get in the church. It’s an open space, a free space. And her life’s experience and wisdom, which she freely shares, is important to me._ (1006)

This woman has lived in a more fundamentalist faith community all of her religious life and feels burdened by continually being told how to be and how to think. Her experience of acceptance by her spiritual director includes no “preconceived ideas or expectations” and she experiences the environment as an open space.

Each of the comments listed above highlights a different facet of acceptance which is important to the directee. Acceptance:

- enables a sense of sacredness
- facilitates openness in the directee
- is part of a series of affective responses, enabling a sense of God’s presence
- implies openness and strength of character in the spiritual director

**An Hospitable Space**

The title of Leslie Hay’s book _Hospitality: The heart of spiritual direction_ (Hay 2006) captures the significance of an hospitable environment for the spiritual direction space. One participant put quite an emphasis on the centrality of hospitality of the heart:

_I very much resonate with spiritual direction as being hospitality of the heart. Spiritual direction embodies that hospitality in the fullest way, so far, that I can find._ (1004)

Tavard writes about hospitality as “a profoundly religious attitude, which the main religions of the world cultivate.” (Tavard 2007,245) He cites a statement from The Lambeth Conference of 1998 which declares, “Christian faith is a matter of invitation, not force or threat.” (245)

Whether participants felt they had experienced ‘force or threat’ in their spiritual encounters
was not overtly stated. However, there were many references to the internalised voices guiding behaviour that resulted from fearing the covert threat of unacceptability.

Remembering the oft quoted wariness about judgement and failure in the participants’ transcripts, the hospitality of a spiritual direction environment includes the two aspects of invitation and being heard.

Spaciousness underpins the next woman’s comment where telling her story and feeling valued are directly related to her sense of being in an hospitable space:

*The conservative part of me would censor a lot, and mute and see that my voice wasn’t valued. But the liberating part of having the freedom is telling your sacred story in the hospitable space in spiritual direction; these people have heard me into being, and, to use Jeremy Taylor’s words, ‘things can become speech-ripe’... in my ability to share it [my story] becomes speech-ripe; the spaciousness. (0801)*

Her belief that she had not been valued in her conservative context is contrasted with the freedom to self-validate her own story; she hears herself speak her truth.

Two participants noted the physical environment by referring to their feelings of soul-welcome created by the setting the spiritual director planned for the conversation:

*Simple, lots of symbolism. The whole way the centre was set up – beautiful artwork, gardens. In the room there was always a candle and either an arrangement or a rock or something, and something on the wall... the integration, the holistic, everything. God is everywhere – He is the air we breathe, and being able to see Him in a rock or the creative process. Just lovely. (0804)*

This response gives a highly emotive quality to the experience and demonstrates the impact of the setting on her spiritual connectedness with all of creation. Feelings of welcome through the ambience that is created may be related to intuiting sacredness in that place; “God is everywhere” brings a spiritual dimension to the affective response.

The second participant clearly feels that it is the physical environment that helps her spiritual connectedness. Speaking of her spiritual director’s practice room she says,

You go into her room and there are candles and flowers – it feeds my soul. Being in both worlds supplements it. My heart is in the contemplative, my body is in the church but I would find it very difficult to stay [in the church] if we had [a leader] who was very conservative. (0912)

The environment of the spiritual direction space encapsulates something valuable in the encounter which is not found in her formal church environment.

Hospitality of the spiritual direction space has both invitation to being heard as well as the tangible invitation offered by a welcoming space. Hospitality is seen as a characteristic of spaciousness that:

- allows hearing one’s own truth
- welcomes the story of the directee
- is created through setting and ambience
- draws one into a broad sense of creation
- is valued as a contemplative attribute

A Place to Explore

Exploration was expressed in the transcripts using a variety of concepts. The initial quotations show the participant’s awareness of their adjustment in order to explore new possibilities.

Several participants refer to the metaphor of a box, although this metaphor appears in different contexts within each transcript. More references to the box are used in Chapter 11.

For the following participant it is particularly meaningful and the contrast between being in the box or outside of the box is a consistent thread through her narrative:

[In spiritual direction I can] explore my faith without any boxes or perimeters. (0912)

Here she implies that being inside a bounded space does not facilitate her desire to explore faith. Another participant also speaks through the metaphor of a box in relation to limits, where going beyond the limits invites a wider panorama of what is in view in the faith-life:

If I’m outside the box, which I feel I am now, God’s there with me too, so there is no limit. It’s an open vista to what I can explore. (1005)
For this woman, the spiritual direction space offers the freedom to explore in a way that does not seem to have been experienced in former contexts. She also values the companioning of others sharing a similar approach:

_The freedom to explore outside the box again and to be with a community of people who felt free to do it as well._ (1005)

The value of the spiritual direction space is found in the way it encouraged this woman to explore her spirituality beyond past known contexts, and the safety seems to include being in the company of a like-minded community of pilgrims. It resonates with Paul’s ‘cloud of witnesses’ mentioned in Hebrews 12:1[^30], where, by knowing there have been others who have persevered in the faith, a believer feels encouraged to continue on the journey.

One participant affirmed the value of knowing that others had experienced similar insecurities to her own. However, it is not simply about company on the way; the shared experience also connects her need to belong to being validated:

_And being with other people on the journey - it’s not just me; other people have had a similar spiritual journey where what used to satisfy no longer satisfies, where there is questioning and feeling very scared and fearful and insecure. However, moving into a freedom is a beautiful experience, and other people have had that experience so that validates my experience._ (0912)

The perceived connectedness of this woman’s experience to others with similar experiences provides a reference point against which to measure her own legitimacy, and reflects a feminine mode of validation. Perceived connectedness enables women to internally position their own faith experience and feel their own experience is valid.

Another participant found that being connected to a different style of faith community gave her permission to explore. A faith community that includes spiritual direction in its scope seems to validate her ‘right to think and explore’:

[^30]: Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV) “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”
So it was finding this other faith community in a sense. This is what I love about spiritual direction. The faith community gives you the right to think and explore. (0909)

In this case, knowing she is part of a wider community broadens and accentuates her individual endeavour, legitimizing the desire to seek more. In most of the analysis the focus has been on individual comments about their intuiting particular characteristics of the conversation space. The shift of perspective to seeing one’s position within a wider community brings courage and permission, a ‘right to think and explore’ something more.

Another sense of exploration was characterised as feeling free to ‘walk around’ one’s spirituality. For one participant, freedom from expectations is connected to feeling free of judgement on what she wishes to pursue:

*It’s a space that doesn’t have boundaries. It is a space where you can sit without expectation; there’s a freedom in that space for you to explore your own spirituality and where you are able to walk without any judgement or condemnation. There is certainly nothing about being made to feel stupid or failing. You are just a pilgrim on the journey.* (0910)

In this comment, the idea of exploring her own spirituality is linked to judgement and condemnation. ‘Being made to feel stupid or failing’ seems to refer to prior experiences that were not clarified in the interview. However, ‘failing’ and ‘judgement’ are certainly related and imply not measuring up to an internalised standard. The freedom to explore has brought the benefits of discovering her own spirituality, implying ownership of a personal stance, and walking freely in that new finding.

She continues by linking the freedom to explore with time-spaciousness. Exploring one’s spirituality is enhanced by an unrushed environment; again it is the lack of expectations that seems to be creating the greater spaciousness. The participant intuits that there is less pressure when expectations are not evident – more room to risk not getting it right:

*It’s just a space where you are allowed to explore in your own time. The time is important because there is no rush in the time – you haven’t got somebody there expecting you to give an answer just like that. So that’s important for me in spiritual direction – it’s a space where . . . maybe it is the space that is important . . . it just allows you to explore. It’s not a rushed space.* (0910)
In this section of her transcript, she uses the word *explore* in several different ways, 
emphasising the importance she places on this characteristic of the spiritual direction 
environment. She speaks of the “journey of exploring prayer,” “explore your own spirituality” 
and “explore things that are happening.” Lastly, as mentioned above, the significance of 
having time is reiterated several times:

> It’s just a space where you are allowed to explore in your own time. [and] It’s just a space 
> that allows you to explore. It’s not a rushed space. (0910)

Time-spaciousness adds a different dimension to the broad place.

Another participant connects having time in spiritual direction to spaciousness with God that is 
not constrained:

> God is with me all the time and I can just allow that spaciousness, and occasionally speak 
> to God from my experience without having to have this set time or set whatever. (0801)

Having no ‘set time’ suggests a lack of agenda by the spiritual director and the lack of a 
structured environment. Time-spaciousness may be another way to describe a characteristic of 
spiritual direction that other helping professions are less able to offer; the language and 
pressure of ‘sessions’ or ‘treatments’ costed on a timed basis can be significant in creating a 
limited time-space. Professional spiritual directors would also offer services on a paid basis but 
this woman’s experience suggests her spiritual director has retained a capacity to hold a space 
that allowed the directee to avoid feeling pressured by limits of time or other agendas.

In another transcript, the freedom from judgement, being right or wrong, is portrayed as 
“having permission” to speak openly about her own experiences:

> I suppose it gave me permission to explore my own experience. Nothing is right or wrong. 
> Learning the whole of life is part of it . . . learning to be open to the experience of God and I 
> think having permission to say what you like. (0805)

It may seem surprising that someone needs permission to explore their own experience, but 
this reflects an acquired reticence and fear adopted because of the experience of needing to 
be right and hold correct views of faith.
The need to be right is also noted by another participant who compares the experience of talking with her minister, whom she labels as ‘possibly fundamentalist’, with the attitude of her spiritual director. She comments further in her transcript about feeling judged by her minister, whereas her spiritual director leaves questions open:

“... he leaves you [to ponder] whereas some of the others can’t cope with the quietness. I suppose it is the space. . . . Being able to have permission and to be able to give yourself permission. (0904)"

She speaks of feeling that the minister takes a judgemental role in their conversations and ‘having permission’ to speak in the spiritual direction conversation includes a reflexive attitude of giving herself permission to open up as well. This is another type of validation made possible through the liberty of the space.

One participant expresses her appreciation of finding the spiritual director’s role is to listen and support the directee’s spiritual exploration, not judge or approve it:

“I think it was a deep listening to me. Not telling me what I needed to hear, but trying to find out what I was hearing and then exploring that with me. (0907)

To me, having a listener brings me to new understandings of who I am. (0802)"

The willingness of the spiritual director to aid the directee’s exploration takes her into a more authentic endeavour.

For one respondent who had trained in the ministry, her reflection on her own experience is applied to her practice with others. She affirms the significance of allowing exploration as a quality of the conversation space she holds:

“So when I am sitting with other people in that space, I am able to present in a way that just allows them to do that exploring and be ready to leap off the edge if they need to! (0801)"

Being able to “leap off the edge” suggests exploring the unknown and risk. The safe place of a spiritual direction conversation can support someone who may encounter unfamiliar feelings about their transcendent experiences without risking judgement or exclusion.
So, as demonstrated above, one benefit of the spiritual direction encounter was the liberty to explore different ideas and experiences. Exploration as a quality of a broad place was related to:

- broadening the scope of spiritual exploration
- exploring that is empowered by knowing there is a community of faith around you
- a place where judgement or failure is irrelevant
- being open to discovering one’s own spirituality
- time-spaciousness as a different dimension of a broad space
- giving permission to self-validate faith
- affirmation through being encouraged to explore by the spiritual director

**Space to Be Me**

The final feature of a spiritual direction space that was mentioned was the feeling that there was room to be yourself. This was expressed as a space where I can be “who I am”, a place that “allowed me space to be”, a space that gave “permission to be myself” and one where we can be “who we really are.” It was augmented by an additional sense that this was important in relation to being with God. It was seen as “a space where people can just sit and be with God”, where there is “permission to be me with God”, attending to “who God is in us” and “a space for God and me.” As a final section in this chapter, a place to explore selfhood was the culmination of what happened when there was a safe place in which acceptance and openness welcomed the hesitant soul. (Palmer 2004) It is a place to speak authentically about personal experience.

The first comment again refers to expectations that constrain the liberty to speak. There is often a contrast between the broadness of the space in spiritual direction and expectations or constraints experienced in other conversation contexts. Also, in this comment, the experience of freedom in expressing oneself authentically was beneficial to going back to live life in the everyday:
I guess it’s a place where I’m free to be who I am and no one is going to say, ‘Well, you should think this’ or ‘you should think that. So there is a real freedom to be yourself in that, and then to learn how to be yourself in this other, more constrained environment that I live and work in. (0909)

In the section above referring to “A Safe Place”, a similar comment was made implying that freedom to speak authentically was independent of the constraint experienced elsewhere. However, when there is liberation in a space to be authentic, then the experiential benefit of that awareness impacts the sense of self in other contexts.

The space to be is another way to express the freedom for exploration and discovery of self:

So in prayer and spiritual direction there has been an awful lot of freedom that has transcended the boundaries and wells that I have been part of. The different spiritual directors I have had have been very with me, very affirming, and allowed me space to be, which is just wonderful. (0801)

The repeated reference to boundaries throughout this chapter, using a variety of euphemisms, keeps reiterating the value of freedom to speak openly. This freedom is envisaged by another as receiving permission to act and receive:

Yes, I have permission to be myself. I suppose it has helped me. Its permission to be me with God, for what God has to give just for me. It helps to clarify things and to question and give suggestions. But still in the back of my head, it’s time for me. (0805)

The reference to “still in the back of my head” carries significance in terms of there being an underlying need to find a space that is dedicated to hearing or voicing her own story.

The unfolding story being voiced in a spiritual direction conversation is about the directee’s intimate relationship with God. Finding space to be with God seems to have the same limitations as finding space for personal storytelling. Time to be with God alone was another expression of needing space to be.

It’s a space about you and God; it’s about your experience. (0809)

When speaking of her own retreat work where spiritual direction played a role, another participant spoke of a space to wait in God’s presence:

____________________________

31 “I could say what I like there but go back and live my life” (0802)
To create a space where people can just sit and be with God (0911)

One last comment from a third excerpt also came from her personal practice in spiritual direction. She also saw the importance of a space where one could attend to God within:

*I think that there’s something in spiritual direction about really attending to who we really are, who God is in us - taking away all those things that get in the way of it. I’ve been able to hold that for other people to a certain extent, and I just love it.* (0806)

She connects removing constraints with the freedom to be authentic, and the freedom to connect authentically to God-images in the self.

In each of these attributes, having a place to explore one’s selfhood was significant. Having *space to be me* was expressed as:

- a space that gave me permission to be myself
- freedom to be authentic
- a space where people can just sit and be with God
- permission to be authentic with God
- attending to perceptions of God in the inner world

**Summary**

Each of the quotations used above point toward a felt need that the broadness of the spiritual direction place should include a capacity to hold the desire to just be with the Divine. There were no other spiritual disciplines spoken about that were associated with this desire (like wanting silence, solitude or a prayer-space), practices that may be associated with enhancing the perception of being with God. These quotations really emphasize the perception that being in the space of a spiritual direction conversation was spacious enough to hold both God’s presence and the directee and their story, and that was a valued reason to continue engaging with the ministry.

The quotations have been intentionally sequenced to show a movement from the tentative to the affirmative, from seeking acceptance in an hospitable environment to finding the courage
to explore the unfamiliar or unidentified aspects of the faith journey. The spaciousness of the spiritual direction conversation gave both permission and courage to explore areas of faith that had previously been hidden or were unfamiliar.

Table 4 below takes key phrases from the transcript quotations used in this chapter to give an overview of the responses to the questions asked in the interview: “Can you talk about your sense of space when sitting with a spiritual director?” and “Is it the nature of the sessions, or the nature of the director, or something else that happens in that space?”

Table 5 lists the number of quotations from each participant used in this chapter.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Quotations about the Attributes of a Broad Place</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broad Space</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I experienced spiritual direction with her as quite a broad path – not narrow or controlling. (0907)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Safe Place</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In a safe space, both of us are expectant of God. (0802)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It created a safe place for a sense of accountability. (0802)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It was a refuge for me . . . There was someone who shared the way. (1002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s still safe even though I’m not in the centre. (0912)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provided a really safe place for me to share the depths of who I was. (0907)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Nature of the Space</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A Place To Explore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore my faith without any boxes or perimeters. (0912)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Free to explore outside the box. (1005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is a space where you can sit without expectation. (0910)</td>
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<tr>
<td>You are allowed to explore in your own time. (0910)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It gave me permission to explore own experience. (0805)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trying to find out what I was hearing and then exploring that</td>
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128
with me. (0907)

Acceptance
I don’t feel like I am going to be judged. (1001)
It’s a very accepting environment, sacred in a way. (1001)
Space of health or refreshment, love, acceptance. (0912)
Accept God as he is. (0912)
There is a deep acceptance of people. (0909)
It allows you to open up in a safe place. (0909)
Confidentiality and acceptance* (1006)
[My spiritual director] accepts me the way I am. (1006)

Hospitality
Spiritual direction embodies hospitality. (1004)
People have heard me into being. (0801)
Setting helps me to see God in everything. (0804)
[Ambience] feeds my soul. (0912)

Space to Be Me
It’s a place where I’m free to be who I am. (0909)
There is real freedom to be yourself. (0909)
I have permission to be myself. (0805)
It’s a space about you and God. (0809)
Allowed me space to be. (0801)
About really attending to who we really are. (0806)
A space where people can just sit and be with God. (0911)

Table 5

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Number of Quotations Used in Chapter 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>0801</td>
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Chapter 6

Role Models for Women

The cultural norms that have been established in individual Christian communities generate expectations that vary according to their context and tradition. However, conservatism in general is characterised by a patriarchal structure in which women belong to a secondary level within the social hierarchy. Women who do not support the agreed norms or who do not adhere to the unspoken expectations suffer disadvantage, as noted in previous sections. It is contended that there are limitations on the way women may express their faith within any conservative, patriarchal context and those limitations make it more difficult for women to feel connected to their personal faith experience.

The following collection of quotations from the transcripts recounts the type of modelling women have received as it was remembered by the participants. Comments are taken from direct quotations about the roles women could, or could not, take within church structures. It is acknowledged that the interviews did not pursue the influence of societal values on women’s roles, nor is there any way in which what was a church imposed stereotype could be distinguished in the narratives from what was an accepted role for women in the society of the day. The first section of this chapter notes some cases where the societal stereotypes were not spoken about in the context of the faith story. These reflect the culture of the day and several participants referred to them as the traditional role for women. A second section will address the perceptions of women’s roles within church contexts.
Cultural Overtones

Some of the observations noted in the transcripts are recounted as social perceptions of the role of women rather than descriptions of roles within the church context. One interview question asked how each participant had experienced the role model set by their mother. The question was framed as follows: “What are your reflections on the role of women and the way you saw your mother as you were growing up?” In response to this question, the comments reflect how the participants each viewed their mother, not necessarily in her role in relation to the church or her beliefs. These general responses, in part, give a cultural view of the perceptions of women’s roles at the time.

In some cases, the interviewee referred to the family as having no religious connections in her early childhood home. Because of the general nature of the initial question, responses are taken as influential memories without any intent to attribute whether it was shaped by a religious influence upon the family values. The role of the mother established a perception of being female which still affected each participant and her memory of this influence is what is of interest.

As participants were asked about what they observed of their mother as role model, their replies reflect what was influential in their own spiritual development within this model. It was not part of this investigation to cross-reference comments with their mother’s views. The responses were mixed, with some finding it quite difficult to name their perceptions of the received model due to physical and/or emotional estrangement from their mother.

Many participants were over fifty years of age which meant that their memory of their mother comes from experiences in the 1950s or 1960s. Women in that era, being prior to the full effect of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, experienced different cultural and sociological norms to those in the present society. (Wyre 2009) Until the real impact of feminism had taken effect in the next decade it is most likely that the perceptions of women’s
roles were an amalgam of religious norms influencing social norms, where the church still provided the moral compass for society. It was an era on the cusp of scientific and technological change in which society could still be generalised as more conservative than what has followed in subsequent eras.

One description in this period was from a country town in Australia. For this participant, there was no family religious culture but she was sent to Sunday school early in her life, as were many children of that time. Her comments reflect her mother’s life irrespective of any church influence exerted:

"It was a patriarchal society in [our town]. The women weren’t allowed to work. The union said no women were allowed to work when I was growing up. So the men had all the say. Women had to be homemakers. So for my Mother, Monday was washing day, Tuesday was ironing day – Monday you brought things in from the line, damp them down and roll them up ready for ironing on Tuesday! Work clothes were done separately, whites separately – she was a very good homemaker; fastidious really. Then there was tennis. She was dragged off to tennis Wednesdays and Saturdays. [The town] was quite a sporty place so we all played tennis quite seriously. Fridays were baking days. Every Friday when I came home from school there was the smell of baking. They would often have friends around on Friday night to play cards and my mother would make big sponges with jelly on top and mocked cream. (0912)

The memories are quite vivid and the emotive style of language, the sensory recollection of baking and the detailed account of laundry day suggest her mother’s model made an impact upon the participant’s life. It is a unique cameo of a woman’s life in a country town and the societal expectation of that era. In these early years, there is a blurring of the boundary between what she received independently through the influence of the church tradition and what was the influence of the home life.

The cultural norms suggested from the way participants remembered their mother’s home life seem to reiterate the general perception of women’s life at the time, much of which was the cause of the feminist revolution. The following aspects of their mother as role model were referred to in the narratives as general recollections of home life. Their mothers

- provided the homely environment for children, often where food was a key element, and
• modelled a strong work ethic that was undervalued, both by others and themselves.
• stayed at home and did not take paid employment,
• were involved in community and volunteer work
• lacked educational opportunity

The remainder of this chapter will focus on the influence of church values on women’s roles, both within the congregation and apart from the congregation, through the effect on the family life of congregation members. Girls’ concepts of what is possible for them were shaped by these influences, and comments reflect how participants were impacted and remembered those influences.

Church Culture

Because conservative congregations are patriarchal in nature, the value of a woman member is noticeably less than that of the male members. All participants had some prior experience of belonging to a conservative fellowship, but not everyone had grown up in a family whose values had been shaped by a conservative faith. Interviewees were asked about their early religious or spiritual experience without asking how the impact of the conservative culture might have affected that experience. Recollections of the early years within the family structure were collated to investigate any early patterning that established the participant’s perception of women’s roles.

The following sections refer to comments made about

• devaluing the spiritual contribution of women
• the paradox of norms becoming God’s calling
• restrictions enforcing norms
• congregational experiences
• expectations of wives and partners in ministry
Devaluing the Spiritual Contribution of Women

A primary concern of contemporary feminist writers has been the critique of acceptable roles for women within Christian conservative church cultures and the roles that have been designated as the sole right of male members. As noted in Chapter 1, the most significant male oversight in a congregation was to determine the theology of the fellowship, creating the boundaries that defined the nature of the group. This aspect was cynically noted by one participant as she reflected on her participation in the committee of a small conservative fellowship:

There was lip service about valuing women, but when it came to women being actively involved in leadership and making decisions, that wasn’t their role. (0907)

When asked about who set the theology for the community, she responded,

That was all male. They spent hours working on these great documents that were developed and there wasn’t a lot of women’s input in that, no deep listening to women or valuing what they might say. (0907)

The dominance of male leadership as the final authority is remembered by one woman who was in leadership in a denominational setting. Her description of her opinion sounds like a type of benevolent sexism. She felt affirmed as having good or interesting things to say but was not likely to be heard when offering contrary opinions to the leadership:

At the moment there is a very dominant male leader, so lots of people are not heard. I’m certainly respected and valued and having good or interesting things to say. I will be heard in that regard, but if I really opposed what they were doing I don’t think I would be heard so much. (0909)

This woman’s comment is clearly suspicious of the true value of her contribution as part of the leadership structure. Forms of benevolent sexism include the affirmation of roles that are deemed suitable for that gender in order to reward good behaviour with warmth and acceptance. It may come across as ingenuine even though it is well meant.

Another note of cynicism comes through in the following excerpt in which the devalued and lesser position of the women is keenly felt:
But being the next level down, there is less validity of my experience of difference because I am a woman, and ‘I am less able to tell what God is really on about’ . . . I just knew this wasn’t me. I wasn’t at home there and there were very strict rules about what women did and didn’t do. There was a very evangelistic and evangelical agenda. (0809)

These women both had the capacity to verbalise their sense of injustice and to express their frustration at being considered incapable of contributing to the spiritual capital of the community. In another excerpt this participant refers to “the female effect” reiterating the dominance of the male opinion and authority:

I think the female effect was probably very strong and certainly as far as my father was concerned. When I look back even though the young adult women in that group went on to some fairly significant positions in the Anglican Church, they were not the one’s setting the pace. They were the ones providing the support – it was the younger men in the group who were determining the agenda. (0906)

One particular comment that was made revealed the hurt felt by being devalued:

[My husband] said to him, ‘Well the only problem we have got is I’m here [pointing up] and she is there! [pointing down]’ The pastor and I were both amazed. (1006)

When asked what he was referring to, she replied, ‘spiritually he is up here and I am down there!’ This would seem to be a rare example of verbalising a judgemental stance that is directed toward the spiritual ineptitude of a woman. The majority of examples used are references made by participants intuited innuendo or implications of what were acceptable roles for women. In the following section, given that there is a widespread acknowledgement of the patriarchy setting the tone and nature of the conservative fellowship, the comments from participants will be their own recollections of how women’s roles were conveyed to them in that context.

**Restrictions Enforcing Norms**

Another way in which conservative church norms shape behaviour is through the restrictions that are placed upon the individual or family. The woman’s role in the family as traditional homemaker meant working in the home rather than taking on paid employment. A participant
remembers her father’s disapproval of his wife going out to paid work. In an earlier part of her transcript she speaks about her father’s influence:

> My father particularly was very narrow – you didn’t go swimming on Sunday, you didn’t play games on Sunday, you didn’t go to the shop on Sunday, girl’s didn’t wear pants; lots of narrow restrictions. Mum was not quite so, but she was not the head of the house. (1006)

The implication throughout this narrative is that the wife complied with the husband’s expectations based upon religious norms – ‘she was not the head of the house.’ When questioned about her mother having paid work outside the home she responds,

> No. I don’t think Dad would have approved. He saw himself as the provider. She had seven children. She would have stopped work when she first got married. (1006)

After this comment, the interviewer asked, “So would you say she was a fairly traditional role model?” Her response is in general terms without any direct reference to religious expectations:

> Yes, very. She used to make all the family’s clothes, the children’s clothes. Even when the boys got to teenage years she made suits. She had been a tailoress before she got married, but she did all that. (1006)

For some participants there were responses about how rebellion was a response to the restrictions. The restrictions were not solely about the role of women, but designed to instil a strong patterning about what was the ‘right thing to do’:

> Well, it was very confined. Very confined in my thinking. Very fundamental, really, because that was the right thing. You lived by the rules. That was in the home as well as . . . but inside, I know within me I rebelled. But outside, I thought I was doing the right thing. (0701)

Another reflects upon the mould that was cast for being a Christian but, in hindsight, can see the benefits of being compliant:

> Reflecting on that now, there was some reasonable intolerance. People had to be in a certain mould - a Christian looked like ‘this’, and probably I fitted that mould, but I was happy to fit in and be one of the crowd, do the right thing. That suited me. (0703)

A comical aside suggests another aspect of the conservative paradigm. To do something with those who were seen as inside the congregation is condoned, whereas it was not acceptable to mix with those outside of the congregation:
Like going up to the lake with all the boys and swimming. We didn’t have bathers or anything on. You did things like that and hopefully Mum and Dad never found out about them. . . That would be frowned upon. If the boys had been going to Sunday school or going to church it would have been different. (0701)

This comment may be more generalised, but it indicates the restrictions that reinforced the cohesiveness of the group norms and provided another way of controlling compliance. The shadow behaviour around group norms affected all members even though this analysis is primarily interested in the effects of the compliance on women. A similar sense of group norms for all members is reflected in the following comment:

We were sent to Sunday school. . . I think, as I look back, it was a very traditional church. We were told in Sunday school you go to church on Sunday, you don’t do business on Sunday, and Sunday is a day of rest. etc. We actually rebelled against it – we’d sneak out and buy an ice cream then feel terribly guilty! (0912)

Rebellion seems to be in response to the need to feel part of the adolescent society. However, the underlying need to belong is at the heart of compliance with group norms. The tension between seeing what lies outside the faith group and being constrained by the internalised norms created internal conflict:

But to belong you had to do all those things - I wasn’t allowed to go to the pictures, or anything like that. So as a teenager I rebelled a bit, which is very normal. I wanted to go dancing and Mum thought I’d really gone to the devil. I used to go into [the] dance studio every week and have fun. (0702)

Another similar comment is made by an elderly woman who, it seemed, still needed to tell the interviewer that she ‘did the right thing’ in her adolescent years. This is an intuited perception by the interviewer of the manner in which the interviewee was retelling her story and may well be unfounded. However, the participant repeated her testimony in four different ways, emphasising the degree to which she had always complied with the requirement – ‘I knew the limits,’ ‘I didn’t go beyond,’ ‘I knew what was right’ and ‘I knew when to stop.’ She said,

As a typical teenager I would see how far I could stretch the boundaries. But I knew the limits and I didn’t go beyond what I knew was the right thing to do. I always knew when to stop. (0911)

The comment felt somewhat stereotyped and may be a reflection of a cultural norm about the society values of the time.
These quotes cover both the restrictions that were imposed upon women and the restrictions that all members were subject to as a way of maintaining the behavioural boundaries of the group. The early formation of the inner psyche that creates patterns of behaviour remains embedded throughout life and the gender role compliance in later life has been prepared with a strong imprimatur to do the right thing, keeping women compliant.

**Congregational Experiences**

For women who were not responsible for the organisational structures of a fellowship, the memory of the roles that women were expected to fill was often vague. Homemaking, caregiving and non-organisational responsibilities seem to be the assumed roles for women within a fellowship. It can be inferred that this means there was an acceptance of the status quo in the early home environment of participants:

*I don’t remember. It was very traditional. The minister would always take the service and give the sermon. Someone, a man, would get up and read the notices. A woman would conduct the choir, so I don’t really remember noticing that men . . . (1005)*

Being “very traditional” euphemistically speaks of the cultural roles that were acceptable for women, like conducting the choir. The way in which participants’ mothers carried out their roles was sometimes remembered with fondness:

*She would have done a lot of catering. She did catering for the [central church organisation.] Even when they had federal conferences of 300-400 people she and another lady did it all. In the local church she was involved with the Christian Women’s Fellowship. She was involved in [making] clothes for children overseas. In her later years she went to the Op Shop every week – whatever was happening she was always there. Taught Sunday School, Girls Club, started netball. But she wasn’t comfortable up front. (1006)*

When asked if this was typical of women’s roles in the church she continued,

*They might play the organ. Never do anything up front. They used to have a combined Bible study of men and women together. Women would take leadership in the ladies program or in the children’s ministry. (1006)*
Another participant spoke well of her mother’s spiritual searching and the activism that was generated from her commitment to faith:

_Mother was more into the charismatic area; we went to a little charismatic prayer group. She had started a coffee brigade to feed the men who slept in the park and mother was one of the first to offer to help. . . It was wonderful to share it with mother. Then Dad came along and tried very hard to understand, but he went back to his old way of acting. He had to talk and be the leader, organise everything. Mother just clammed up when he was there. She grew and he just didn’t grow with her._ (1003)

For this participant, the relationship with her father was strained and her emotional distance from him colours the appreciation of her mother’s efforts. In another case, there was a perception of the sacrifice her mother made for the sake of her husband’s ministry:

_If Dad was outspoken about things, Mum deferred a lot. She sacrificed a lot and gave a lot, she deferred a lot, but later on there wasn’t that come back for her. I think she deferred her own needs and wants, and there wasn’t necessarily the flow on later when it might have happened._ (1002)

Here is a tinge of sorrow for the support her mother gave without, in her opinion, receiving due credit or acknowledgment of her role.

From these examples, there is a reasonably consistent list of options available to women in conservative fellowships for that era: catering, homemaking, musical support, leading women’s and children’s ministries.

Leadership was not an accepted norm, neither in governance nor in spiritual guidance of the congregation. The early patterning of seeing male leaders was created for one woman who had seen her father take on a lay reader role in her church:

_From a child’s perspective, church meant there were leaders, often male, who were very committed and talked about giving their life and money. So I have a shadow memory of that._ (0801)

One woman who was in a ministry partnership with her husband was confronted by a congregational member who felt she was usurping her husband’s role. Another uses similar language about submissiveness with regard to the woman’s place in the congregational order.

Both of these examples point to the group perception of the male being in leadership and the female being supportive, if not submissive:
One woman said to [my husband] that our relationship was upside down – he should be the leader and I should be submissive. (0901)

I think it wasn’t so much the difference in the training, because it was the same, but it was the cultural difference. Women were meant to be . . . subservient is too strong a word . . . but secondary to the male. The husbands were considered the leaders. (0909)

Several participants felt that their mothers were strong women who had opinions, and exercised their influence through non-leadership avenues, but were still patterned by the male authority. This is clearly the feeling of the next comment:

Strong women, but not in leadership roles. Mum had pretty clear opinions and loved discussing stuff, but very much the man was the head of the house and women are not to take on overt leadership roles or do the public speaking. (0804)

The sanctioned roles largely excluded anything that made the woman visible or where the congregation might assume she was leading the congregation. Another participant refers to her fear of people thinking she was taking leadership authority. This arises when asked why she did not tell her congregation about her contemplative experiences:

They wouldn’t show you the door. Probably show you disappointment; you would be seen as a leader of some sort. Disappointment. (0701)

This participant repeated her comments several times, always with the same underlying fear that people would assume she was trying to exert some sort of authority. It was a well ingrained fear – this woman had the highest number of references to doing the right thing and disappointment was obviously a difficult affective state connected to other needs like acceptance. She adds,

“I would feel unaccepted - the ‘belonging’ thing again.” (0701)

There was no further opportunity to pursue the relationship between fear of assuming authority and a reasonably strict compliance drive arising from fear of being unacceptable.

The one area where women took dominant roles in a conservative fellowship was in the area of children’s and youth ministries. The role model set by women Sunday school teachers or youth leaders seems markedly different from what was acceptable for the adult fellowship.
Narratives record several positive memories of women setting a leadership model. Two examples were:

*The other important part of it was [in our youth organisation] there was specific teaching about women’s roles in the church and in the Bible, in terms of women being leaders. So that was never a question for me – it was never a question about women being leaders.* (0905)

*The [men] certainly didn’t run the women’s group. They wouldn’t really be expected to do that. The wife would be expected to look after the children’s ministries.* (0909)

There were several comments from women who experienced female teachers in their junior faith experiences:

*From when I was very young my mother was a Sunday school teacher of the little ones. I guess I had that modelled, although I can’t remember her teaching me.* (0801)

One participant spoke of growing up in a particularly conservative fellowship where she experienced quite precise female roles:

*They could teach Sunday school or ladies guild. There were no women deacons there. . . If we had a youth service girls could participate. . . There were mainly women in the junior Christian Endeavour. There were a few men in the Sunday school, but in the church it was all men.* (0805)

Even though these recollections are from the 1950’s, she continues by contrasting more recent experiences between churches where some changes had been made with others from a fellowship that remained more resolute:

*The church now has women elders and secretary and deacons – that happened in the 1980’s. That was one of the issues at [my last church] where the minister wouldn’t let women take on those roles.* (0805)

Another clear recollection of defined roles for women was given by a woman who spoke with great Aussie style:

*Very defined roles. The women did the food and played the tennis and did the Sunday School and the blokes ran the church. I don’t particularly remember noticing, in church whether women were accepted as equal or not – I don’t really remember that.* (1005)

Her reference to “the blokes” is an Australian colloquialism and captures the sexism she felt was at work.
Expectations of Wives and Partners in Ministry

In many of the narratives there was a strong expectation that women would be homemakers. Even when there is a spousal partnership in ministry, the expectation on the woman partner was still directed toward looking after the congregational ministries of children and other women as well as fulfilling the family homemaking roles. Men simply do not take on these roles:

So in those first years when the children were little, I was the homemaker plus a worker. In those days I wasn’t expected to take a lead, I was expected to be supportive – that was the cultural thing. I would have lead equally in worship and preaching but then do the things you were expected to do like run the women’s groups or look after the children’s groups. (0909)

Another woman relates her experience of being both homemaker and minister:

With a heavier load, if you want to be the leader, then you have to be the leader and run the house and do all this stuff. (0803)

The feeling expressed here is reiterated by another participant from a different ministry partnership and reflects the frustration in her referring to standard conservative scriptural basis about women’s roles as ‘warped stuff’:

It’s a kind of ‘women are really invisible’. I had responsibility for other women, but it was always under this authority of men. I could pretty well do my own thing, but there was always tension about headship and submission, and that warped stuff. . . . no submit to one another! And I remember saying that; it says ‘Submit therefore, to one another!’ but that was never really grasped. (0907)

In the culture of her tradition she experienced the duality of what is advocated as policy and what is her grounded reality, something she refers to as ‘lip service’ to the valuing of women (quoted previously). It would seem that a working partnership in ministry, leaders of the church as a couple, has the potential to exacerbate any discrepancies between a policy of equal leadership and its execution through the assigned roles and duties.

A woman in a ministry partnership in a church tradition with stated equity in leadership experienced these discrepancies. When one couple was placed in an administrative role in the denominational office the disparity became apparent:
We were [in a church] for three years then went to [work in the office], which wasn’t the best for either of us. That’s when the inequality message came home to me. . . . it became pretty obvious that I was a woman – even in the way our offices were situated in the building! He had things that he was expected to do and I would write letters under his name because he was responsible for things . . . he was on all the boards and councils and I wasn’t on anything. And I was doing a job as Guide Leader for the place and I had to do the badges . . . it was just very obvious and difficult. (0909)

So from the perspective of the women in ministry partnerships, however that may be practised, a lesser role was experienced by this woman and she was aware of the significant roles being assigned to male members:

So the training was the same, but the cultural message was different. In fact, you saw it on the staff – couples appointed to the college, the men had a role the women really didn’t have a role. Some had no particular role. Most of them didn’t teach as a role in their own right. The women staff’s big thing was to make slices – it wasn’t their fault, that’s just what they were given to do. (0909)

A similar experience was told by a participant who also experienced changing contexts of the spousal ministry:

I suppose in early ministry, the whole thing about the man being the main person never bothered me. [My husband] is the main leader, but we lead together. This year is different because we are in a different place and I am struggling to find my place. (0803)

Her move to a more administrative context again made the differences quite obvious and she sensed that:

Even in the office there are dynamics of who is really senior. It’s bizarre how it works. (0803)

She gives an example of the hierarchy going to considerable lengths to have a man to preach at the central worship service when she had significant church experience in leadership and had fulfilled preaching roles in former church appointments:

Recently the [other male leaders] were away so I was the main senior leader around. They were going to fly someone from Melbourne to Perth to preach – a man. And I was here and not even considered. (0803)

Her outrage at being overlooked was obvious. In this case it seemed that there was symbolic boundary at work that made it important to have the male leader heading the central worship occasion. The devaluing of women was expressed by subtle centralised decision-making that influenced the congregation without being made aware of the processes or rational for
particular choices. This unconscious patterning indicates the collective shadow at work. The unspoken belief around gender value is an indicator of the shadow and is demonstrated in the following comment about a shared husband-wife leadership:

They would get up and preach, but you knew that the husband was the leader and the wife was the missus. (0909)

A final comment about husband and wife ministry partnerships comes from the wife of a conservative pastor, and again, reflects the woman’s reaction to the shadow expectations of the congregation to which her husband had recently been appointed:

I guess up until I married [my husband] I was always [just me]. And after he went into ministry I was always the pastor’s wife. I can’t think when it was but I got a bit tired of that; I just wanted to be myself, not attached to someone else.

I think it has something to do with expectation, particularly ‘the pastor’s wife.’ In some of the churches we have been in they expected that the pastor’s wife would do visitation. Well, no! I’m here because I am married to [him], not part of the ministry team. I think the ‘pastor’s wife’, to me, has an expectation that you will do certain things.” (1006)

This is a different perspective from being in a formal ministry role as the spouse, yet the shadow expectations of the congregation was still affecting her sense of value and was deeply disturbing. For this woman, it became an issue of identity. She speaks of spiritual direction as a place where she can ‘just be me’ without expectations that emanate from her husband’s position.

Summary

From the reflections that have been cited, the following issues have highlighted:

- acceptance of the cultural message as the status quo - ‘that’s what women do’
- ministry partnership as a spousal relationship exacerbates the differences
- cultural place for women was as homemakers and caregivers

The perceptions of the female role model that was experienced in the family home and the family church context is contained in the memories that have been recalled. As accessible
memories, it is likely that they indicate an unconscious patterning for these women about gender roles which probably have been formational in some way. However, recalled at a later stage of life, many responses were made in a cynical tone that indicates some emotional distancing from the experiences of the women’s conservative roots. Some participants laughed at what seemed to be an incredulous story they were telling to the interviewer. One participant summarises her feelings about the lack of recognition of her mother’s spiritual contribution to her church, extrapolating from her mother’s story an inferred innuendo about her perceptions of the role of women in the church generally:

_I think in the church I went to as a younger child, our family church, there were no women doing anything then. But my Mother was a spiritual giant and we knew these profoundly spiritual women, and yet none of them had any role in the church. They prayed that church into survival. They were the people who did everything and went to everything. They were the backbone of the church but they were in the pews doing that._ (0809)

A final observation concerns an image of God that has been conveyed to these women through their traditions and a lingering sense of God’s view of women. It strikes at the heart of spiritual growth and confidence and impacts upon the faith agency of women. Such inferences are problematic and the changing perception toward an image of God that is perceived to be an interactive partner in the faith relationship will be dealt with in Chapter 10 – “the Journey Toward a Feminine Spirituality.” Table 6 below takes key phrases from the transcript quotations used in this chapter to give an overview of the responses. Table 7 lists the number of quotations from each participant used in this chapter.
### Table 6

Summary of Quotations about Role Models for Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Culture</th>
<th>Devaluing the Spiritual Contribution of Women</th>
<th>Restrictions Enforcing Norms</th>
<th>Congregational Experiences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Devaluing the Spiritual Contribution of Women</strong></td>
<td>There was lip service about valuing women. (0907)</td>
<td>No deep listening to women. (0907)</td>
<td>[Women] might play the organ. Never do anything up front. (1006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I really opposed what they were doing I don’t think I would be heard so much. (0909)</td>
<td>There is less validity of my experience of difference because I am a woman. (0809)</td>
<td>“It was very confined . . . You lived by the rules: (0701)</td>
<td>The minister would always take the service and give the sermon. (1005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The young adult women . . . were not the one’s setting the pace. It was the younger men who were determining the agenda. (0906)</td>
<td>Spiritually he is up here and I am down there! (1006)</td>
<td>“People had to be in a certain mould – a Christian looked like ‘this’ ” (0703)</td>
<td>Women were meant to be . . . subservient is too strong a word . . . but secondary to the male. (0909)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restrictions Enforcing Norms</strong></td>
<td>My father particularly was very narrow . . . lots of narrow restrictions. (1006)</td>
<td>Mum was no quite so, but she was not the head of the house. (1006)</td>
<td>He should be the leader and I should be submissive. (0901)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It was very confined . . . You lived by the rules: (0701)</td>
<td>“People had to be in a certain mould – a Christian looked like ‘this’ ” (0703)</td>
<td>You go to church on Sunday, you don’t do business on Sunday. (0912)</td>
<td>The man was the head of the house and women are not to take on overt leadership roles or do the public speaking.” (0804)</td>
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<tr>
<td>We’d sneak out and buy an ice cream then feel terribly guilty! (0912)</td>
<td>We’d sneak out and buy an ice cream then feel terribly guilty! (0912)</td>
<td>I wanted to go dancing and Mum thought I’d really gone to the devil. (0702)</td>
<td>There was specific teaching about women’s roles in the church and in the Bible, in terms of women being leaders. (0905)</td>
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<td>I didn’t go beyond what I knew was the right thing to do. (0911)</td>
<td>I didn’t go beyond what I knew was the right thing to do. (0911)</td>
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<td>They could teach Sunday school or ladies guild. (0805)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregational Experiences</strong></td>
<td>The minister would always take the service and give the sermon. (1005)</td>
<td>[Women] might play the organ. Never do anything up front. (1006)</td>
<td>Nursing or teaching or being a deaconess if you were a girl so you were equipped for the mission field. (0906)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women were meant to be . . . subservient is too strong a word . . . but secondary to the male. (0909)</td>
<td>He should be the leader and I should be submissive. (0901)</td>
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<td>Expectations of Wives and Partners in Ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He should be the leader and I should be submissive. (0901)</td>
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<td>I was a homemaker plus a worker. (0909)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The man was the head of the house and women are not to take on overt leadership roles or do the public speaking.” (0804)</td>
<td>There was specific teaching about women’s roles in the church and in the Bible, in terms of women being leaders. (0905)</td>
<td></td>
<td>If you want to be the leader, then you have to be the leader and run the house. (0803)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very defined roles. The women did the food and played the tennis and did the Sunday School and the blokes ran the church. (1005)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I had responsibility for other women, but it was always under this authority of men. (0907)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of Wives and Partners in Ministry</td>
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<td>He was responsible for things . . . he was on all the boards and councils and I wasn’t on anything.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The women staff’s big thing was to make slices! (0909)

We are in a different place and I am struggling to find my place. (0803)

You knew that the husband was the leader and the wife was the missus. (0909)

The ‘pastor’s wife’, to me, has an expectation that you will do certain things. (1006)

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### Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Number of Quotations Used in Chapter 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0701</td>
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<td>1006</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Chapter 7

Shadow Issues

The last chapter referred to the wideness of the spiritual direction space and the implications for the participant’s sense of freedom and liberty to speak openly about transcendent experiences and God. We now turn to the constraints to such freedom emanating from past experiences of a conservative faith fellowship. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, Jung’s theory of the shadow aspect of personality was addressed. Jung defines the shadow as “everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly” (Jung 1968, para 14). It is a representation of the repressed unconscious that affects a person’s relational abilities. Jung’s concept of the shadow has a valid application to a group situation as a collective, corporate or cultural shadow. The term collective shadow is being used in this study to indicate a group shadow.

A collective shadow is experienced as generalised fears that are projected onto others, often as strong emotional responses to an observed behaviour in the other party. The collective shadow determines emotional and behavioural responses even though it is vague and nonspecific in nature. Hede speaks of the dynamic between the overt-self and the shadow-self which, in an organisational group context, finds that individuals can be engulfed by their shadow-self in times of conflict. Everyone has a shadow or hidden part to their individual psyche and a collective shadow “is hypothesized to be the collection of all the shadow parts of the various members of a work or other group.” (Hede 2007, 25) Hede specifically focuses on the intrapersonal dynamics within an organisation which reveal different responses or behaviours when connections to prior negative experience are touched in the unconscious. The trigger of association is evoked as unconscious responses in individuals to group contexts.
that are reminiscent of past experiences, situations or encounters and have consequently patterned the way identity is expressed. (Hede 2007,29) These patterned responses may create constraints upon free expression of the identity when in the group situation if there is a lack of inner awareness.

Hede’s work is referring to an organisational or work setting and is based upon the foundational theories of Jung. The shadow concepts that Jung developed are based on general observations of patients and he contested that shadow issues are discernable in all people, meaning that the internal drives to perfectionism or group shadow behaviours are present in the general population. This study is limited to considering how these attributes of the personality are relevant to the experience of members of conservative religious groups as it is found in the women’s narratives. The interviews were framed around the women’s spiritual narratives and their experiences are spoken of in the context of their faith-life and church-life. Inferences can only be made about the origins of the shadow effects according to how the participant verbalises her responses in the course of the narrative.

One type of constraint that prevents a pilgrim from speaking authentically about spiritual life is the unconscious patterning that is acquired through interaction with the norms set by a faith-group. Each faith-group is bounded by the prescriptions that give it its uniqueness and, therefore, carry with it the unspoken rules of behaviour for compliance. Those who align themselves with the group expectations receive positive affirmations and warmth. Unsanctioned behaviours or attitudes receive a negative response that is intended to reinforce group expectations. Consequently, members will participate in the shadow attitudes of the group and adopt the unconscious behaviours and attitudes that keep them in good standing. This is psychologically advantageous for achieving belonging and acceptance. Group members learn quickly how to participate in the shadow of the group. This is driven by a universal need to belong and be accepted and is a core need of human beings. (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Vohs 2007)
Freedom to engage one’s own authentic experience can be aided if a person can observe and name shadow constraints within themselves. This capacity for self-awareness (or inner awareness) is enhanced by engaging shadow aspects in a safe space. Being able to facilitate awareness of the collective shadows that have been accrued will not be engaged unless the perceived threat of rejection is allayed. Unless shadow issues are named and confronted it is difficult to change patterned behaviours.

All participants had sufficient life experience between the initial experience of the shadow effects and the interview context to be able to talk about them honestly. There has been a ‘cooling-off’ period, yet the memories and reflections that are narrated at a much later time authenticate the impact of the original experience. The process of engaging shadow effects is psychologically stressful and is only possible if the person feels safe. One participant refers to her difficulty:

There is no pretence that it’s not hard. It’s looking at the shadow parts of yourself you don’t want to look at. (0809)

The hesitancy to confront the shadow parts referred to by this participant is more difficult when the space retains a measure of insecurity, possibly due to an unconscious reinforcement of the shadow-causes by the person holding the space. In this case it is not a safe place. One outcome is that the person plays a shadow game that counteracts the desire for authenticity and deep engagement with the inner self. Feelings of falsity, or game playing, appear in several of the transcripts:

It was a game that I had to play – [The message was] ‘I want to control you’ and I didn’t want to be controlled. (0907)

Another participant articulated her sense of how the self was conditioned into playing the game:

You pretend; you’re not real, you’re not authentic. I’m generalising – but that would have been me. (0912)
The issue for this woman was around compliance in order to belong to the group, but a similar drive to belong resulted in a sense of failure for not measuring up to the group standards:

*I think we have many layers, but the harder the rules or the more confines we have or the higher the standards the more we put on pretence that is not genuine. . . The standards are so high you can’t attain them, so you are doomed to fail.* (0912)

A sense of failure was referred to by other participants and may be perceived as inadequacy in trying to achieve the conceptual ideals that are reinforced by the group shadow attitudes and behaviours.

**Shadow Effects / Causes**

The following section reflects the type of constraints that affected participants. Each response has been categorised to show trends in the type of shadow effects recorded in the narratives.

- **Church Shadow Causes**
  - compliance and expectation
  - defensiveness and fear
  - criticism, judgement and ostracism

- **Personal Shadow Effects**
  - feeling guilty
  - not good enough / feeling a failure
  - putting oneself last
  - perfectionism
  - disillusionment

**Church Shadow Causes**

The study asked participants to begin with their earliest memories of religious or spiritual encounters. Often the story began with their early family environment where the beliefs and moral imperatives arising from a conservative church affiliation were influential in the family
home. The collective shadow of such religious affiliation affected participants in several ways. The flow-on effect in the family environment is dealt with in a later section.

**Compliance and Expectation**

Compliance with the group expectations caused a variety of reactions in the participants’ stories. Loyalty is one euphemism for an attachment to the group which can mask the underlying need to belong and therefore cause compliance with the group expectations in order to gain approval. It carries a corresponding sense of betrayal if one considers leaving the group. One participant reflected on her feelings of guilt for leaving her church:

*I am betraying my heritage. I’m not being loyal. The Baptist church gave me so much and I walked away from it.* (0805)

She recounted the story of a female friend who wished to leave the church and was told,

*That’s not what you do. You stay in the good times and the bad times. You still have a part in the ministry there.* (0805)

For this woman, the guilt was compounded by believing that her own feelings were immaterial:

*You don’t consider your own feelings – this is where you belong and you have failed as a Christian because you haven’t depended on God for the strength to stay, or whatever it might be.* (0805)

With some cynicism, she then concluded, “*So I’m not a good Christian!*” (0805) Being loyal under this burden of guilt was a powerful pull on the emotional vulnerability of the woman. She was cognizant that it was secure to be back in the fold but the underlying message she intuited was one of spiritual inadequacy. This demonstrates that her not being loyal to the group has left deeply insidious feelings of guilt.

Being part of a group requires certain actions to demonstrate compliance and participation. A consequence of beginning spiritual direction is often a new awareness of a contemplative spirituality that embraces silence and solitude. As described in Chapter 4, the new canvas
provides a contrast with former church environments where action-based compliance was keenly observed. A participant from an activist church said,

*I think we live off the activism. Our Christian experience is our activism; the busier you are the better a Christian you are.* (0910)

She received the imperative of compliance as action through scriptural terminology:

*There was a huge ‘working for your salvation’ attitude. You had to be seen to be doing things. If I didn’t go to things I would be asked why I didn’t go to them.* (0809)

This comment is framed around a salvation imperative, but the underlying issue is the behavioural expectations put upon members – the busier you are the greater faith-standing you gain. There was no further comment to clarify what acceptable busyness meant, but the point is made that meeting the group expectation had a lasting impact upon this participant.

For a participant mentioned earlier with regard to pretending to comply with the group expectations, the imperative to bring souls to Christ carried a similar expectation of active compliance:

*I was failing a little bit in what was expected; the expectation to win souls for Christ without even knowing the people; without even building a relationship first.* (0912)

With hindsight, the immediacy of group compliance was viewed more objectively and allowed her to reflect upon the wider implications of the expectation. Once again, the sense of failure is quite strong – ‘I was failing in what was expected.’

The style of worship in a particular group has its own underlying innuendos. One woman reflected on her sense of spiritual inadequacy, or ‘not really connecting with God,’ because she became tired of the emotionalism in a former religious tradition:

*I guess I was getting a bit jaded, a bit burnt out from the emotional reliance in the church. Going twice on Sundays, morning and evening, every service seemed to be about ‘if you were not laughing or crying you were not really connecting with God’.* (0908)

She recognised the expectation of emotional compliance as an indicator of spiritual fidelity and felt it was a hindrance to further spiritual growth:
It was not about conformity for conformity’s sake, but ‘this is good and if you’re not participating in this there is something wrong’. It was either good or wrong, there was no ‘it’s OK to be where you are’. (0908)

Her independence to assess her own spiritual reality and accept the immediacy of her own condition further signalled the drifting out of this particular religious context into a new phase of her life – a growth in inner awareness. She was no longer willing or able to support the accepted norms and verbalised this disengagement through naming the group shadows she experienced.

**Defensiveness and Fear**

Personal defensiveness is another expression of loyalty, but is noted separately because the shadow effect that is expressed by participants seems to be speaking of defending what is the better place to be. The following comments have been grouped together as the recollection of how members of a group expressed personal defensiveness when supporting the group norms.

One woman reflected on her own behaviour when part of a fundamentalist group:

*We looked down on the people as if they didn’t really ‘have it’. . . . It was a narrow way of looking at the world in many ways – we were in and the rest of the world was out; it wasn’t spoken but it was a real attitude.* (0907)

In her experience, beginning to break away ‘threatened’ the group and she recalls some in the group responding that ‘I would lose my faith; I shouldn’t be doing this.’ This resonates with earlier comments about an implied judgement on faith and Christian standing that underlies the fear. Another woman reflects upon her past experience of attending a new church, one that was in contrast to her previous positive congregational experience:

*I think I was just confronted with people as people – anti-catholic, believing they were ‘papish’ - they were better than the rest.* (0903)
The notion of being “better than the rest” represents a defensiveness designed to reinforce the boundaries and affirm the sense of rightness and belonging. She did not stay in that fellowship because,

*There seemed to be a clinging to past stuff that I thought was irrelevant to the celebration and justice making.*  (0903)

One cause of defensiveness is the fear of what is perceived to be outside of the group boundary. An excerpt refers to this colloquially:

*These people were unhelpfully worried about finding demons under the chair. Very conservative. . . I think it might be fear bound – hard to say, but I think it was fear bound.*  (1005)

The spiritual journey of one participant made her aware of confronting this shadow:

*It was losing a fear of people who were not Christians. In the past that strong sense of separation from the world had created a fear of others – a fear that we might be contaminated or something.*  (0902)

She continues to speak more colloquially about recognising what was involved in her changing attitude:

*I saw people through different glasses, and saw them as worthy of God’s love. . . instead of with people back there where there were the ‘innies’ and there were the ‘outies’.*  (0902)

One might note the language of ‘contamination’ as a cause of separation from wider society. Nothing was stated as to what might contaminate someone, but the reference to “worthy of God’s love” makes it clear that it has a spiritual basis. The separation of society into Christians and ‘people who were not Christians’ invokes judgement and a corresponding fear of not meeting the standard for being Christian. The shadow effect lingers in what is conveyed by this labelling, even though the unspoken nature of what it defines remains hidden in the term ‘outies.’

In a few cases, the fear of what was outside the known group was focused upon other denominations:

*The Catholics were the ‘badies’ all through my upbringing. You didn’t have anything to do with the Catholics. They were evil.*  (0702)
This sounds quite an eccentric response, but defending a Protestant conservative or fundamentalist stance evokes strong emotional responses that reinforce strong boundaries.

For example:

The church that we went to [one night] was an Anglican church. The comment was ‘You don’t go to that church!’ After the Billy Graham crusade it was the same sort of thing – Roman Catholics were not Christians because they worship a cross with Christ still on it. It was all so stupid really. (1003)

Generalised fears of this nature indicate the presence of a collective shadow; vague and nonspecific yet influential on the emotional and behavioural responses of individuals who belong to the group.

Being fearful was also noted in terms of the internalised boundaries that have been proscribed by the group norms. In one case, it was being fearful of stepping outside of the known domain:

Physically and bodily, a fear and tightness around exploring new places . . . all the stuff saying “I’m a woman, I can’t do that” or “the Bible says this or the church says that.” All those voices of what is the norm, or what is the expectation. (0801)

Here it seems that many different voices have impacted upon the woman to the extent that she is physically aware of her own fear. The norms and expectations of behaviour are often translated into a perception of doing the right thing - twelve transcripts used this language, including the following response:

Well, it was very confined. I was very confined in my thinking. Very fundamental, really, because that was the right thing. You lived by the rules. That was in the home as well as . . . I thought I was doing the right thing. (0701)

This response is from a minister’s daughter who is telling her story in later life. The flow-on effect from early home life meant that her internal sensitivity to compliant behaviour was doubly reinforced because of her father’s vocation. For another, the expectation to do the right thing was grounded in a Biblical teaching:

But I thought I had to surrender myself to God, give up everything to God - as the Word says “You have to give up everything, deny yourself and do the right thing.” (0702)
The wording of the scripture passage found in Matthew, Mark and Luke says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." The participant’s patterning has altered her memory of the scripture to reflect her internal compliance by adding ‘and do the right thing.’ The intent is to exhibit what is required by compliant behaviour – to be the sort of Christian person that is acceptable in the group and the fear of not getting things right is powerfully underpinned by the group’s biblical imperatives. The altered memory of the wording may represent a behaviour that Knowles and Gardner believe reinforces a way of gaining acceptance. This participant experienced profound rejection by a conservative church community for whom she worked:

I went through all this trauma again of being rejected . . . The [board] asked me to resign, because of the label I wore I suppose. . . . I felt the leadership wanted to keep a squeaky-clean image of the church, and me being divorced and re-married at that time (twenty years ago now) wasn’t accepted. (0702)

Knowles and Gardner note personality responses to rejection are, usually subconsciously, aimed at strengthening social bonds with others in the group: “publicly agreeing with others’ opinions, and displaying positive, affiliative nonverbal behaviour. . . . rejected individuals pay more attention to subtle social cues.” (Knowles and Gardner 1998,739) In this case, the social cues were not evident in the transcript, but the six references to do ‘the right thing’ noted in this narrative seem repetitive and overly compliant with an inner script.

Another participant also remembered doing the right thing as a way of compliance:

People had to be in a certain mould - a Christian looked like ‘this’, and probably I fitted that mould, but I was happy to fit in and be one of the crowd, do the right thing. That suited me. (0703)

As Knowles and Gardner say, the interaction of working harder, agreeing with others and displaying positive behaviour is driven by the fear of not meeting the requirements for acceptance. In women, the complexity of these interactions is heightened by the patriarchal ideology that puts women in an idealised situation and exacerbates the need to get it right.

32 Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23 (NIV)
Criticism, Judgement and Ostracism

A critical spirit may arise when group members are engaged in comparisons between inner-world and outer-world experiences. Rather than simply reflecting loyalty, it also appears to be a pattern that helps to shore up confidence in belonging to the group. It is an expression of ownership that establishes the separateness of those within the group from those outside the group. Criticism within a group can be wide ranging, but the most hurtful is usually specific to a person’s own needs for reinforcement. One woman experienced deep hurt through having a gift to her fellowship criticised:

*One of the young guys, with no theological training or education, wanted it thrown out and me declared a heretic. It was handled very badly and a running sore for about 6 months – I was really hurt by it. (1004)*

The youthful enthusiasm of group ownership that is so important to certain stages of faith development fractured this woman’s own sense of belonging:

*I felt deeply alienated. I also couldn’t explain it and I didn’t know what was going on either. I was too fragile in my own understanding of what was happening to talk with my friends even. I couldn’t bear it that they didn’t understand it. (1004)*

For her, other group members were unable to support her changing spiritual awareness and her actions were misunderstood. Her very individualistic journey would eventually create a significant distance between her and the others.

The experience of being ostracised from a group by the behaviour of other members in that group leaves deep emotional scars. Knowles and Gardner (1998,738) note that, “Social rejection refers to one’s perceived reduction of social acceptance, group inclusion and sense of belonging.” They list different kinds of rejection within groups: “Explicit rejection, exclusion, and ostracism.” Individuals may experience passive rejection “when others pay little attention to them or ignore them altogether (e.g. the silent treatment)” or “psychological rejection when their opinions are discounted or ignored.” The overall experience is expressed as being hurt or being emotionally distanced from the group. The rejection intuited in the quotation...
above equates to a perceived lack of acceptance by the group, for whatever reason, no matter how great or small the event.

Some participants specifically mentioned the way in which they experienced people who dealt with difficulty or threat by using ostracism to create emotional distance. To ostracise someone is to exclude them from a society or group.33 Forms of exclusion include non-engagement, passive aggression or discussing concerns about someone with other members of the group without being transparent with the person concerned. All of the following excerpts were in relation to experiences within a conservative church fellowship. This commentary does not examine the reasons for the behaviour but simply exposes the ways in which women have experienced the enacting of a collective shadow. These recalled memories are indicative of the imprint such behaviour leaves upon a person.

One example came from a woman trying to pursue a leadership position in a church organisation. Her rejection and her feelings of being misunderstood were compounded by the inability of people to speak openly about their fears of allowing such a change in the norms. She recounts,

*But worse still, people not being prepared to engage in conversation with you to help you understand* [a particular issue]. *(0802)*

Another participant seemed to exhibit a fear of letting her friends in the church know that she was receiving spiritual direction. When asked what she thought they might do, she responded:

*They wouldn’t talk to you - shunning, or something like that. But I don’t really know, because I didn’t say too much.* *(0701)*

Her intuited fear kept her from being open and, consequently, being validated by her spiritual companions.

Yet another woman found leadership in a church fellowship difficult because criticism was made personal by undermining her role as wife and mother:

*Another comment was about how I control my children – how we were supposed to operate as a family. I was obviously not doing something – I was just letting them be children.* (0901)

She was in a leadership role in the church yet she experienced being made to feel inadequate and without a clear understanding of how to implement her professional job description. She found the expectations were never overt but exercised through group disapproval or innuendo and affected the way people behaved, making leadership intolerable. Her conclusion was,

*But no one ever says anything to you. It's always rumblings and grumblings... I always found that the people outside the church far better, because they didn't have those expectations. I was actually human!* (0901)

The experience of one participant reflects another form of ostracism which is to ignore or dismiss; it is a way of not engaging the subjective reality of a member of the group and the concerns of the person become quite invisible. It has been noted in earlier chapters that women’s experience in conservative fellowships often includes having their voice dismissed and the dismissal allows the leadership to distance itself from questions that challenge presumptions. This woman recounts,

*It was more the fact that questions were not answered – they were dismissed. They would be just overlooked; we would move on to something else. That sort of questioning was just not encouraged at all.* (0906)

Remembering her experience with some cynicism demonstrates a way of disengaging with the group through recognising her diffidence toward the group goals:

*Given that most of the youth group were all very busy planning the next beach mission and how many souls they were going to save... I don’t think I ever fitted. It was always a struggle for me to find where I fitted in that place.* (0906)

Acknowledging she does not fit affirms her place outside of the group and may have been her way of neutralising the ostracism.

Another participant’s story included a particularly difficult home environment in which the church norms were enforced in the family interactions. Her narrative was retold to the
interviewer with some anger and she expressed disgust at the unconscious effect of her early church experiences and the family’s circumstances:

You would hear a sermon about love or compassion, but at home that wasn’t being carried out. At home we lived under shame, guilt and fear – and we had to be perfect as well! (1001)

She continued to describe the ostracism that was used to reinforce discipline within the family and maintain the appearance of a ‘Christian home.’ This flow-on effect of a collective shadow into the family context was carried out by the mother through patterns of ignoring others or non-engagement:

It wasn’t all spoken. I suppose in terms of being perfect, she put a lot of pressure on us. The shame and guilty thing was very much that she just didn’t talk to us at all. She would ignore us. If we did something that she thought was shameful, she would ignore us. (1001)

The memory of her mother’s strategy had left a deep mark upon the emotional wellbeing of the woman, and, as a result, she verbalised her hatred of church during the interview:

I can remember being dragged to church every Sunday and sitting in the back row thinking, “I hate this! I hate this place! I hate it!” I literally hated it. (1001)

The fervour with which this was said was obvious even after so many years had passed.

In summary, when referring to past memories of the impact of conservative church affiliation, the significant experiences of collective shadow causes referred to by participants were behaviours that

- evoke loyalty and reinforce a sense of belonging
- promote compliance with the group goals and impose consequent expectations of compliance
- create defensiveness and fear
- exhibit a critical spirit and can result in ostracism
Personal Shadow Effects

Collective shadow is a vague and generalised intuiting of group behaviour that supports group expectations and objectives. The effect of experiencing collective shadows is most powerful when it is personalised and, therefore, the experience is perceived to be a reflection on some aspect of identity and personal worth. The shadow causes noted above had behavioural outcomes that impacted self-perception, and the following were noted in the transcripts:

- feeling guilty
- not good enough / feeling a failure
- putting oneself last
- perfectionism
- disillusionment

Feeling guilty

Some of the transcripts refer to guilt, or feeling guilty, as a result of religious experience:

All during this time I was desperately trying to find some peace and I knew I needed peace with God but I was too guilty to face God. (0702)

This woman was speaking in later life after significant changes to her spiritual practice. She had an intellectual understanding of her welcome into the grace of God that helped her to counter the older internal voices. However, she continues on with the narrative to say,

Nothing I can do in service or devotion or flagellation earns his love. It's all free like his grace. I know this, but I still feel guilty if I don’t perform and deny and surrender. (0702)

The deep imprint of her need to behave according to old demands still remained. A similar sense of living with guilt was echoed more forcibly by another woman:

I was constantly guilty, constantly feeling like I would be struck down by lightening because I was doing all the wrong things. (1001)

In this case, the move out of her early church context and into a different lifestyle created tensions which arose when new activities clashed with what would have been sanctioned by
her former faith community. The internalised fear of doing something different like, "drinking and going out, doing stupid things," surfaced as guilt, yet, “It didn’t stop me; I just carried on making a mess of my life.” The rebellion against the old demands represents a stage of disengagement from the prior expectations, but the way the story is recounted shows that the power of these effects continued to influence her.

For the women in this study, the origins of feeling guilty were varied. For some women it was trying to live up to the expectations of spiritual practice:

In my prayer I had always been feeling guilty because I was never very good at praying. I tried to pray a Scripture Union prayer thing - I tried really hard to do that but I would fall behind and just feel guilty. (0806)

Expectations of how to use the scriptures was common for those who had been part of an evangelically based fellowship. There were comments that implied that learning the scripture was integral to faith and some participants looked back in appreciation of how faith was grounded in a routine of reading the scripture:

Faith was about a daily habit; to pray every day, have a quiet time with your Scripture Union notes. As a young teenager, faith was about having those sorts of habits and certainly going along to all these things at the church for teaching and to be encouraged. I did have a sense of personal faith in that evangelical context. (0703)

An appreciation of the value of early grounding in a regular discipline of reading scripture came at a cost to the individual sense of achievement:

Those personal disciplines were very much emphasized – having a quiet time in the morning, spending time in prayer, that sort of thing. . . . it was rich at different periods of life, but at other times it was an incredible struggle and an incredible source of guilt when I couldn’t keep it up and I failed in it. (0902)

The guilt comes in not meeting the expectation to be regular rather than from the practice itself and not being able to ‘keep it up’ means comparing reality with another internalised standard requiring perfect compliance. Her later reflection indicates some freedom from the grip of compliance when she names the duplicity as ‘hypocrisy’:

The shame was that I didn’t talk about it! I was too ashamed to admit it to people. To me that was evidence that there were a lot of people out there who were in the same boat that I was and there was a level of hypocrisy about it. (0902)
When considering the shadow aspects of past experience, it should not be implied that all parts of the experience were negative. Some valued the learning that continued to be important in their adult faith-life. One woman appreciated her foundational faith grounding even though she has since widened the scope of her spiritual experience:

> While I shun any kind of fundamentalism, I still feel very grateful for that. While many of my friends are reading Borg and Spong, I still hold as much value to that conservative basis. (0802)

In another case, the value of good teaching of the scripture remains significant:

> That strong early Scriptural teaching is still very important to me. (0906)

The value in later life of learning the scriptures is expressed in emotive terms by another woman who saw it as a preparatory stage for the spiritual growth to come:

> I still know the Scripture passages we learnt by heart and I’m thankful that I do. Beautiful passages of Scripture. It was important for the next stages of my faith, that I had a container for my faith. (0912)

However, even when the memory is so emotive for this woman there remains something of the guilt that surrounded the practice:

> It was all about belief, intellectual learning, memorising Scripture, doing the Navigator’s course. I learnt all those Scriptures – well, I never learnt all of them as well as others did. (0912)

For many women, the practice of learning scripture was an early faith experience that occurred in their younger years. One woman recognises the youthful compliance with what was required by her faith context:

> My experience, as a younger person, of the scriptures was very limited and I believed what I was told. (0911)

Another recalls a reliance on the habit of routine scripture reading that became ingrained as her method for hearing God:

> I could very easily fall back into my default position. I used to read God Calling and Daily Light and that was my authority. Whatever the scriptures of the day were, that was God speaking to me for today – it was a very familiar way of hearing God and I did that for years. (0907)
Thus, having a structured practice had become a recourse to safety. As noted earlier by one participant, the practice was a container that gave assurance and had clear boundaries about what was expected.

In contrast, a participant reflects upon her feelings when things became more fluid:

*I went to [my spiritual director] because I felt guilty. I kept wanting to go back to the black and white, the rigidity that was safe in some way. I felt I was missing something by being in this ever expanding place and I wanted more surety than that.* (1003)

Another comments,

*But part of me still wants to be told what to do. It goes back to if I had been in a convent I would have had the structure.* (0904)

This is a double-edged sword where finding security in regular or structured practice means taking on the expectations that lead to guilt or shame for failure.

Such effects can be longer and difficult to overcome. One woman, for example, wrestled with her inner drive to be successful in her spiritual practice. In later life she was encouraged to take up journaling as a way of raising spiritual awareness. However, the same voice from her past impacted in this later desire:

*I had decided with my spiritual director the last month, that if it doesn’t work for me I’m just going to be me. I’m going to stop trying to be what I think I should be. If it’s not working for me I just get frustrated and I feel guilty about it.* (0807)

The shadow aspect is made evident in her statement ‘to be what I think I should be’ and shows the old voice being applied to the new practice. Shadow fears are deeply patterned and the impact on the personality remains until there is a safe place to be reflexive and to recognise the behaviours.
Not good enough

One of the collective shadows from conservative fellowships, outlined in Chapter 1, was the unspoken sense that a woman is never quite able to attain the impossibly high ideal set for a female Christian persona. It compounds the already demanding goals set for the general membership. The behaviours that enact the norms reinforce the fact that no woman will ever be able to meet the standards. For example, one woman felt that,

*Only if you produce a perfect looking, perfect acting persona are you worthy of God's love.* (0902)

In a more cynical tone, one participant spoke of residual feelings that remained from her previous group encounters:

*Perhaps a feeling of unworthiness... Evangelicals put a big fundamentalist emphasis on the utter 'rotter grovelling in the gutter'.* (0904)

Her words were said with passion and relayed the difficulty of her ongoing struggles.

As noted in the section above on Church Shadow Causes, one alternative is to act out a persona that will appear to suit the requirements:

*It was about me being a fake. It was about me having that very nice Christian persona but never looking at the dark side, the darkness in me.* (1005)

Another quotation supports the way in which women feel false because they try to measure up to the expectations, often without any clear idea of what the standard was:

*Because I was a good girl, nobody knew. It was an inner heart thing. Inwardly, I was not good enough. I was not measuring up because there were standards to measure up to.* (0912)

A third comment isolates the struggle to present a public persona that will give acceptance:

*You can go through all the right motions; you can run your life at one level for public acceptance. But when I get down to dealing with this stuff in the emotional realm, the spiritual realm, I get frightened of the feelings. Very, very frightened of the feelings.* (0904)

For this woman, there was a fear of confronting the feelings that reflected the deep impact of the shadow on her behavioural responses. It resulted in a split between a persona that
appeared to cope and a fragile inner identity that had resulted from quite chaotic experiences in her life, experiences of judgement. She continues:

*It irks me to be with conservative women because many of them are judgemental. She continues, “A couple of them I have told my heart to - something has been said and in seconds I’ve almost dissolved into tears, something almost involuntary. . . . I will just collapse in seconds and phase out and almost become a nothing. That’s very frightening.* (0904)

In her interview, she named some of the psychological issues that had resulted from trauma. A significant part of this participant’s social support was in conservative religious parachurch organisations and her local church. The groups in which she worked were women who supported the conservative norms of the organisation and her sense of being judged weighed heavily in her psyche. The need for ‘public acceptance’ noted above exacts a high emotional toll. For another woman, living with a shadow effect has created a performance drive:

*But also in circumstances of a potentially dangerous environment, you end up with a pretty good intuitive sense of what other people want from you and how to make people happy. I know I have a desire to make sure everybody is happy.* (0806)

She recognises her deeply attuned sensitivity to situations that trigger her shadow responses and has come to name the exhausting emotional cost:

*The big thing for me is, ‘I have to be careful to make sure everything is OK.’ It’s exhausting really.* (0806)

This may be labelled as rejection sensitivity. Rejection-sensitive people often overreact to situations through their sensitivity to others’ attitudes to them. If you belong to “a stigmatized minority group, this can affect how you interact with members of the majority group.” (Kang and Downey 2007,741) The response, which comes at great emotional cost, is to overcompensate, be on your guard and ensure that you have the situation covered. For example,

*I think I’m working really hard to keep it together, and then it all falls apart now and again and I feel hopeless.* (0806)

There was a constant emotional burden of holding back the sense of failure (‘I feel hopeless’) that could only be met by constant vigilance.
These shadow effects leave women feeling they are never good enough. One woman found the feeling of not being good enough remains even in a new and more supportive religious environment in adult life:

> After all the learning I had up until 18, it took a lot of unlearning – it was a slow process. I’d often go to church in the morning and come home in the afternoon with the kids and feel I wasn’t good enough to be there. I still had that left-over. (1001)

She continues to tell of how this impacts on different aspects of her life:

> I think the old patterns of not being good enough and being a failure – I felt I was a failure by being divorced. (1001)

Not being good enough easily develops into a sense of failure.

The intention of a collective shadow on members is to make them acceptable to the group through compliance. The personal impact of shadow effects means that member’s core confidence in their identity is shaken. Not only are they unacceptable to the group, they experience a universalised sense of lack of acceptance. Once again this is a generalised feeling and not as the result of any concrete event, indicating a shadow effect from former experiences. A participant who is referred to above summarises how she feels about herself:

> If I feel let down by people, I don’t feel good enough; I don’t feel accepted as a person. (0904)

**Putting Oneself Last**

The outcome of feeling not good enough in a particular situation often leads to, and reinforces, feelings of submissiveness and acquiescence to the needs and well being of others. 34 This is a common experience for women who have been taught principles of

34 The following verses have been routinely used as the foundation of gender discrimination in faith fellowships: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (TNIV) “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” 1 Timothy2:11-12 (TNIV) “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”
submission through a literal translation of scripture. One participant refers to feeling like a martyr in order to acquiesce.

*I grew up with a martyr personality, so I would always put myself last. I’ve had to learn to put myself first.* (0907)

The need to put oneself last becomes a form of oppression, where the shadow effect of the Biblical imperative of 1 Timothy 2:11 to ‘learn in quietness and full submission’ mutes the needs and opinions of women in a faith fellowship. One woman experienced this as a learnt behaviour:

*I lived in submission so when I disagreed with [my husband] or there was some decision to be made, I would go along with what he wanted because I thought that’s what I was supposed to do.* (0905)

Worship experiences also could overtly make the demand to put others first:

*Like singing that stupid song, ‘Jesus, first and yourself last and others in between.’ Good grief! I’ll never sing that song. Tell a perfectionist that and I’m dead!* (0803)

Her linking perfectionism to the ideal of self-sacrifice reinforces the connection between submissiveness, identity and performance.

The outcome of putting oneself last is to keep women in a particular place or role in the group and to render them invisible, if not impotent, members of the group. One respondent reflected on the way she had absorbed this oppression into her core self-belief:

*So I think there is always that gap between what I believed about myself and what others see as the reality. . . . It’s a kind of ‘women are really invisible’.* (0907)

In this extract, the comment was couched in terms of her disbelief that she was able to achieve good results in her theological studies (‘How could I actually do so well?’) when her experience on a faith fellowship committee had meant that her capability was doubted:

*It was very much dominated by male leadership, and I often used to feel like I was never really listened to, never really heard.* (0907)

As in the previous quotation, the outcome of being made to feel worthless is to put others before your own needs as they have a far greater value. One participant uses the term
‘selflessness.’ She has been an advocate for women and has enjoyed accessing spiritual
direction for personal growth. However, a remnant of the voice telling her to put others first
still remains:

For all that I might have spoken otherwise, there is still something about the need to be
doing for others. (0903)

Her reflection about being in the spiritual direction space was that she experienced a time to
focus entirely upon herself and her own experiences. She notices the expansiveness of so
much freedom:

Just being able to talk it out; what a luxury, what a gift. . . [but] a call to selflessness was
playing out unconsciously with me – what right do I have to have everybody’s absolute
attention? (0903)

This interplay between proactivity and submission demonstrates the ongoing nature of the
shadow effect imprinted from prior group experience and an internalised tension that
continues to surface.

Perfectionism

One of the boundaries put around spiritual development involves the illusion of perfection.
Although not specifically named, perfectionism has been an underlying drive behind the stress
of compliance that is experienced in conservative fellowships – seeking “absolute answers,
fostering a rigid and confining mindset.” (Crider 2003,70) Biblically based conservatism holds
the ideal of being perfected through faith in Christ: “Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be
perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.
Then come, follow me.’ ” (Matthew 19:21) and “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father
is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) Pauls writes: “Therefore, since we have these promises, dear
friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting
holiness out of reverence for God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1) The Greek word τέλειος (teleios) is
defined as (a) complete in all its parts, (b) full grown, of full age and (c) the completeness of
Christian character yet the word that is consistently rehearsed in many congregational readings of these passages is ‘Be perfect as God is perfect.’ The overarching directive has been to achieve perfection in one’s character and life. One Christian writer who supports the notion of perfection as a goal of faithfulness says, “The ideal can be seen as an internal structure designed by God to maintain a constant awareness of him in life.” (Markham Berry 1988,186) Markham Berry finds God’s wisdom in this interpretation “to remind us constantly of our failings and our need for a Saviour.” With this literal picture of our life-goal, the need to be perfect becomes an easily wielded tool to link compliance with faithfulness. Crider (2003,70) continues, “When faith communities rest upon such an apparently straightforward and concrete reality, they influence one into thinking he or she holds or should hold ‘all the answers.’” The struggle to live in a paradox of being imperfect by nature yet called into perfected holiness is reflected in some of the quotations from different participants.

Putting yourself last is compounded by feelings of guilt or inadequacy that result from striving to be a perfect Christian. For example,

I feel I have to do the right thing; I have to not hurt other people; I feel I have to put other people before my well being. (1001)

An image emerges of what was expected in order to be acceptable, something that was incorporated into the identity and manifested itself as being a perfectionist:

I didn’t get it right but I’m learning. We went through this whole stuff about overcoming perfectionism. I think I’ve overcome it and it rises up to bite you when you least expect it. (0910)

A similar comment came from another woman:

But it wasn’t my mother or my parents saying this was right or this is wrong, this is how you behave. It’s just me. It’s just me! That’s the stuff I’ve been trying to get to the bottom of for years – why did God make me like this! (0803)

These three participants had been part of different fundamentalist faith fellowships and each spoke of patterning that was completely absorbed into their belief about their personality. The last of these excerpts continues:

> So the combination of my personality and what I was taught meant I got guilty. . . I would just take in everything and just so want to be right and good. (0803)

In this case, the woman’s belief about her personality retained a measure of responsibility for her own guilt and the inability to comply adequately. The patterning was still influential in her unrelenting need to be ‘right and good.’

**Disillusionment**

One motivation for taking on the group expectations and the desire to conform is the unconscious belief that there will be benefits in staying faithful. Compliance with the group mantra promises a positive result. However, there were comments that indicated it was not always the outcome that was hoped for. One result is disillusionment due to the mismatch between what faithfulness should have produced and the actual reality. The drives to comply with group norms are derived from the bounded goals of the group and are learnt in a closed environment that is discontinuous with wider life circumstances. The vague nature of a shadow effect means it is rarely linked to concrete outcomes; it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between desire to conform and physical events that support and affirm behaviour. One woman remembers,

> I just accepted that life with God and accepting Jesus was the right thing to do and was good. There would be challenges but God would always be there with us. (0908)

Her memory that ‘God would always be there with us’ was not directly linked to specific circumstances. It was a generalised exhortation to believe rather than an experiential outcome of existential cause and effect.
For another woman, who encountered unwanted difficulties in her life, God bore the brunt of the disillusionment:

_I was angry with God too - ‘I had been a good Christian! Why did you let all this happen to me?’_ (0702)

The disillusionment for this woman was created by a series of poor decisions by her leadership that felt like rejection of her for some of her life choices:

_I guess there was a feeling of rejection again from God and ‘God, why did you let me be rejected again. All I had done all my life is serve you, why did you let this happen to me?’_ (0702)

The rejection from her church congregation was generalised into rejection by God. God and church are the same thing in her mind and the shadow exerted by the innuendo and manipulation of the leaders inhibited her ability to see any broader explanations or a more compassionate view of God’s role in her situation.

A similar sense of disillusionment is experienced by another woman who struggled with hurt experienced through the behaviour of the church leadership:

_I felt that if I was doing the right thing by God and if I was really, really trusting Him and loving Him then I should feel better about myself. I should feel better about myself, I should feel loved and that should change everything._ (0804)

The disillusionment was turned inwards and the consequent lack of self-worth did not provide the positive outcomes that she expected.

It is difficult to read the consistent blame that is placed upon God for the disillusionment. Spiritualising the personal effect of disillusionment deflects its cause away from where the blame rightly lies – trying to meet idealistic goals as a measure of acceptability in the group. In each of these comments, the lack of God’s intervention to bring the expected outcomes of approval, however that should be experienced, is impossibly intertwined with the ultimate cause that is overlaid on the endeavours. There is no clear evidence in the transcripts as to what precise measure the participants would use to feel acceptable.
In summary, the personal shadow effects of the collective shadow referred to by participants were outcomes related to

- guilt from not living up to inferred expectations
- an internalised sense of a lack of acceptability
- an inability to put one’s own needs first
- the drive to perfectionism
- a mismatch between belief and outcomes leading to disillusionment

The Role of Spiritual Direction

In response to the recognised personal shadow effects of the collective shadow, there were some references that indicate spiritual direction has been a place to confront and name shadow behaviours. For some, the place of freedom to articulate what has constrained them has been significant in their spiritual growth and ownership of their personal spirituality:

> In my case I think I have just moved on. You meet the shadow and you move on, but then you find it again. (0802)

Speaking about ‘moving on,’ whatever that may mean for this participant, implies recognition of something that needed to be left behind. The process that aided her progression was spiritual direction and she was able to contrast this process with that of the companionship of well-meaning others:

> Well, spiritual direction and engaging in conversation with people about those experiences has helped me carry it and articulate it. . . . It hurts at the time; I’m reduced to tears. There are friends who I can share it with honestly. There are others who want to come and say we love you, but their actions don’t show me any kind of love I understand, so I can’t talk to them and can’t stay where they are. (0802)

This part of her story is recounted after an experience of being denied leadership within the church fellowship. The experience of not being able to talk with people about her hurt, deep hurt that brings her to tears, is an example of the effect of the constraint that limits openness.
One outcome of recognising the shadow effect is self discovery as retold in the following
current, a result of engaging in spiritual direction:

_One of the things I have discovered very recently in spiritual direction is this thing where I
tiptoe, tiptoe, tiptoe and then, oops, come up against the danger of the thing that harms
me. Then it’s, ‘Oh, I’ve made a mistake. I must fix it.’ . . . Not holding the other person
responsible at all for their behaviour._ (0806)

The psychological wounds that have held her trapped in repetitive behavioural patterns have
been voiced, and change has been facilitated by the act of naming her mode of behaviour in
response to her shadow situations:

_Something I’ve experienced recently is this invitation to stay in my woundedness and let
myself feel hurt; not try to fix things quickly. I don’t think my Mum does that at all. I can
see that in me, this real need . . . but to not jump in and fix it, but to stay in the
woundedness._ (0806)

The language of ‘wounding’ was used by another as a way to identify the hurt inflicted by
other people’s behaviours that were designed to show non-acceptance of the participant:

_The whole wounding, finding the inner wound, recognising its influence on the way you
relate to people, that’s another huge value that the spiritual direction conversation. It
allows you to tend the wound._ (0802)

One of the issues noted in the discussion on the personal shadow effects of the collective
shadow was the need to get things right in order to be acceptable:

_And I felt like I had to get it right. I’ve seen that a lot in adult women too – not game to say
what they think because they might get it wrong._ (0907)

Different parts of this woman’s story referred back to her lack of voice, not being taken
seriously and personal hurt through a failed marriage. Her lack of trust of herself left her in a
very passive state and her liberation came as a surprising experience in the context of her
conversation with her director:

_I was very accustomed to being told what to think. . . And all of a sudden this spiritual
direction I experienced with [my spiritual director] was not about getting it right. It was
about hearing what God was saying._ (0907)

In a story overshadowed by inadequacy, the redirection of her focus led her to a more open
and liberated inner spaciousness.
In each of the examples above, the focus shifted away from concerns about personal inadequacy and created a new perspective that enabled change. Shadow issues create doubt about one’s acceptability and many comments from transcripts speak of the change that enabled self-acceptance or self-affirmation. One participant says,

*It’s this acceptance of myself. I am accepted in my relationship with God; I don’t believe anymore that God has only one will for my life. I think God is interested in all of my life. I’m just happy, more content, more fulfilled. Life’s good.* (1003)

In this example, the woman had a companion who facilitated her recognition of learned ways of behaving in order to be accepted. She continues,

*[My spiritual director] asked me what I wanted to get out of this time; I want to not act the way I’ve always acted – I want to not act so people will like me. I want to be able to forgive. That’s very freeing and healing.* (1003)

She was able to name her constraint and redirected her desires toward a more liberating outcome.

**Summary**

Unconscious responses are evoked in people by contexts that are reminiscent of past situations which have patterned an individual’s relational identity. These behavioural responses have been called shadow effects and have been observed through the comments in the participants’ narratives. With a hundred years of psychological science behind us it is generally accepted that the impact of the family, or early significant social situations which impact the child’s attachments, patterns the child’s worldview and affects later life. (Dujovne 1991,324) Participants did not explicitly identify shadow effects and this was not a specific line of questioning. However, even when there is no desire to make implicit what is inferred, the inferences from the women’s stories are strong. The patterned responses create constraints that stop a full and open relationship with oneself and others – or as one participant stated,
living a life that is happy, more content, more fulfilled. As Crider (2003,70) says, it is the role of a healthy, balanced, liberated faith to expect and anticipate everyday, “the dynamic presence of God that helps one to live authentically and joyfully.” One participant relished the freedom she had found in spiritual direction:

*I’m freer. I’m not constrained by the niceties of church politics or church expectations. When I’m in spiritual direction I’m not constrained by anything. (0903)*

Some of the faith community shadow behaviours voiced in the transcripts show shadow causes that

- evoke loyalty and reinforce a sense of belonging
- promote adherence to the group goals and impose consequent expectations of compliance
- create defensiveness and fear
- exhibit a critical spirit

The personal shadow responses referred to by participants noted outcomes of

- guilt from not living up to inferred expectations
- an internalised sense of a lack of acceptability
- an inability to put one’s own needs first
- the drive to perfectionism
- a mismatch between belief and outcomes leading to disillusionment

The final section has given to a few comments that illustrate the naming of shadow effects in a spiritual direction context and show the resolutions that are possible in that space. This will be revisited and enlarged in the later chapter on the Benefits of Spiritual Direction.

Table 8 below uses key phrases from the transcript quotations used in this chapter to give an overview of the results of experiencing the collective shadow behaviour in group situations.

Table 9 lists the number of quotations from each participant that have been used in this chapter.
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<td>Topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>I kept wanting to go back to the black and white, the rigidity that was safe in some way. I felt I was missing something. (1003)</td>
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<td>Not good enough</td>
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<td>You end up with a pretty good intuitive sense of what other people want from you and how to make people happy. (0806)</td>
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<td>Then it all falls apart now and again and I feel hopeless. (0806)</td>
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<td>Putting oneself last</td>
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<td>A call to selflessness was playing out unconsciously with me. (0903)</td>
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Chapter 8

The Spiritual Director

Having considered the responses to the quality of the space of spiritual direction in Chapter 5, the focus of this chapter explores the qualities of the person offering companionship. Validating transcendent experiences that adequately relate to affective experience requires an openness and confidence to speak authentically about the encounter. In Chapter 5 the exploration and analysis of women’s narratives brought together the participant’s reflections on their experience of a spiritual direction space. It is important to note once again that the recorded comments are analysed using a phenomenological methodology in order to see the participants so we can strive to see the world as they see it. (Larkin, Watts et al. 2006,110)

One significant feature of the experience of all participants was the relationship with their spiritual director and the contribution made by that relationship to support their spiritual journey. The transcripts have been examined to reveal the subjective responses to the relationship established between the women and their spiritual director/s, how the women reported the qualities of their spiritual director and how it helped their sense of openness to explore their spirituality.

The analysis is divided into several sections. There were personal qualities of the spiritual director that were deemed to be helpful by participants and there were skills that facilitated new insights in participants. The following observations summarise the most commonly noted attributes:

- Appreciated Qualities of a Spiritual Director
  - gentleness
  - calmness, patience
Appreciated Qualities of a Spiritual Director

One interpretation of a broad place is an attitude within the spiritual director that is expressed as largesse and a generosity of spirit toward their directees. This resonates with the substance of Psalm 18:19 in which it is God who creates a broad place that allows David to experience healing and love. In this sense, it is from within God that the broadness is proffered, offering a welcome to those in whom God delights. While there is no intention to speak of a spiritual director as a proxy for God, a similar largesse may be required by the director in order to enable the directee to experience openness to the Spirit during their conversation. However, this experience to the openness of the space offered by a spiritual director can be influenced by the personal qualities of the director and their awareness of what a generosity of spirit may look like. This section of the analysis collates the named qualities of the spiritual director that participants felt had enhanced the broad place of spiritual direction. These included attitudes like calmness and gentleness, patience and acceptance, and the ability to hold a non-judgemental space.

The need for a non-judgemental approach reiterates the references to judgementalism as a significant shadow effect of conservative culture mentioned in previous chapters. When issues of judgement permeate accounts it must be acknowledged as a key element of the life-world of participants. Larkin, Watts et al. (2006,111) believe that the role of the analysis is to identify and describe two aspects of the narrative: “the key ‘objects of concern’ in the participant’s
world, and the ‘experiential claims’ made by the participant.” When experiential claims made by the participants include words or phrases inferring judgement, it concurs with Larkin, Watts et al. use of the term ‘object of concern.’ It gives an insight into the feelings and connections made by a participant that relate to their lifeworld construct. Larkin describes this task of analysis as, “A hermeneutic account of the person’s relatedness to the prevailing topic of interest” (p.111) Judgementalism is one of the attributes that has consistently been an ‘object of concern’ for participants and the way they couched their responses gives greater insight into their perceptions of how a spiritual director was able to overcome that concern.

**Gentleness**

The quality of gentleness may invoke a feeling of warmth in a relationship. Several participants referred to their image of God as that of a gentle God, rather than the harsh judgemental God they had known previously.\(^\text{36}\) In Galatians 5:22, the fruit of the Spirit includes gentleness, and elsewhere Paul speaks of being gentle with one another as a mark of the nature of Christ.\(^\text{37}\) Gentleness is an intersubjective characteristic and is an experiential attribute. To be gentle requires another to experience gentleness as a response. It is not an objective or descriptive term but refers to an interpersonal capacity to take an attitude of compassion toward the other. It could be suggested that God’s attitude of compassionate gentleness toward David in Psalm 18:19 is a subjective response from God that draws David into a place of possibility and healing.

\(^\text{36}\) Quotations referring to the gentleness of God are found in Chapter 10, “The Journey Toward a Feminine Spirituality”, p.238
\(^\text{37}\) Colossians 3:10-12
From what was noticed by participants, being with a spiritual director who exhibits gentleness may encourage the directee to relax into the space. One participant linked gentleness to being more able to explore in the spiritual direction space:

*Maybe that’s a good word – gentleness; gentleness with which you explore things that are happening. Certainly my spiritual director helps with that space because she is gentle.* (0910)

Here, the participant shows that the manner or personal capacity of the director is a significant part of the willingness to explore. In the mind of this participant, a space for exploring has a causal link to the gentleness of the director. In comments quoted elsewhere there has been a link between openness or freedom and a willingness to explore faith experiences.

The linking of a gentle person who facilitates the process with an invitation to explore is connected by another participant through her awareness of a gentle God. She connects the memory of her father figure and the quality of gentleness which seems to give her assurance:

*[The spiritual director] was very loving, and very gentle and quiet with a very Irish voice. I suppose he reminded me of the soft, gentle God I remembered through my Dad.* (0702)

She notes that this encounter was one of her first meetings with a spiritual director and although she remembers very little of what was said, she comments that, “*I just know I felt warm and accepted.*” Elsewhere in her narrative she speaks of the movement from perceiving a harsh God to accepting a gentle God, a significant movement in her faith journey and her initial visit to a spiritual director seems to have been a catalyst for that transformation. A later section will comment further on the need for acceptance as another facet within the spiritual direction experience.

The quality of gentleness may also invoke notions of softness or meekness which, in turn, could suggest that the spiritual director lacks substance to their character or to the work they carry out with the directee. Such a view is countered by the next excerpt where the participant speaks about a ‘gentle strength’ in her spiritual director, contrasting it with the harshness she had experienced in her conservative setting:
I think it was the language he used and his body language as well. There was a gentle strength about it – I think that’s what he gave me. This evangelical footprint had been really harsh, and had really hard edges to it. And this was really the first time I really experienced the gentle strength. (0906)

Her recognition that strength did not need to mean harshness has played a part in affirming her emerging feminine spirituality:

I heard the affirming of the role of the feminine in the spiritual life – that had not been my experience. (0906)

This participant found it difficult to relate to her mother and she connects her early experiences with her mother to her own struggle to find her femininity. The gentleness exhibited by her male spiritual director contributed to her willingness to engage an area of healing. A male spiritual director allowed her struggle with a feminine role model to be examined from a different gender perspective:

But I have struggled with my femininity, with really accepting myself and that softer side. So that is where it started for me. And he encouraged that – he just affirmed that. I think for me it was probably really important for me that my first spiritual director was a man. (0906)

So again there are connections being made by the directee between aspects of the spiritual director’s character and what was enabled in the spiritual direction experience. Somehow her director’s ‘gentle strength’ enabled a creative capacity to affirm the feminine in her spirituality and gave her space to engage something new in her identity.

The final comment links gentleness with perceptiveness and affirmation:

The man I have at the moment is just wonderful; incredibly gentle and incredibly perceptive. He is incredibly affirming of this journey I am on and how wonderful it is to be on this journey. (0907)

The emotive language speaks of admiration of her director’s skills, but her key words of ‘perceptive’ and ‘affirming’ are couched in an attribute of gentleness that creates a different space. It is possible to imagine a conversation that is both perceptive and affirming without being delivered with gentleness. However, such a conversation may not have enabled this directee to hear the validation of her story, something that she says was important:
I think it’s making valid what I share. It’s probably the opposite of being made invisible, or being ignored or have what I say not validated. (0907)

Gentleness invites the directee into a gracious space where her faith journey can be validated.

**Calmness**

Perhaps another way to speak about gentleness is to observe a calmness in a person.

Comments that refer to an attribute of calmness are separated out due to the difference in the quality of this characteristic. Gentleness is an attribute that is experienced by another person. It is an interactive attribute that requires perceptivity by the other party. To be calm is a characteristic of the inner being and is a static state. As such, it suggests a lack of inner conflict or turmoil. The ability to be ‘centred’ is a contemplative practice common to most spiritual directors in the study’s cohort. One participant explains her director’s calmness as an outcome of being centred:

The person, my spiritual director, is very calm and that helps. She is obviously centred herself and that creates a space for honesty and openness, and allows me to choose what I do with that time. (1001)

This response again refers to openness in the space that is possible because of her director’s inner bearing, noting the liberty that is accorded to her through this stance.

Another participant described the inner demeanour of her director with the words ‘peace’ and ‘love’ – peace being a synonym for calmness:

She had a peace and demeanour that I had never met in anyone else. And a love too that I had never met in anybody before. (1006)

The description of this woman’s first experience of a spiritual director is in the context of being born into a Christian home where home life and church life were very integrated, something she described as narrow with lots of restrictions. The manner of speech that repeats her amazement at meeting these qualities in a person underlines the contrast of her experience of being with her spiritual director and other encounters:
She was so non-judgemental. She didn’t try to fix me up. She didn’t put me down either or tell me not to be silly or grow-up. It was just a totally new experience to have someone, who was a total stranger, but who so understood me. (1006)

Her comments are made in her middle age years after many years of faithfully supporting her husband’s ministry. The use of ‘non-judgemental’, ‘didn’t try to fix me up’, ‘didn’t put me down’, ‘silly’ and ‘grow up’ give an insight into her perception of how she felt she was treated in her faith-life context. Encountering someone with a peaceful and loving demeanour provided a different environment for her psychological and spiritual exploration. The disparaging language suggests an early childhood in which she was dismissed or ignored as being silly or unacceptable and would also suggest that there was considerable soul violence as a result. Encountering a person whose gentleness drew her into a ‘totally new experience’ has begun some of the identity repair work in this woman’s life.

Finally, the last quotation refers to calmness as serenity:

But I had [my spiritual director], a minister and mother, very quiet and very different to me, but had a real serenity to her. (0803)

As with the previous participant, this was a first experience of spiritual direction and was contrasted to other relationships within a life of ministry and church involvement:

It really made a difference to my life, having someone who I could talk to. (0803)

There were no further questions about what was meant by ‘having someone who I could talk to.’ However, both family and social life were contained within a faith tradition and, from other parts of her narrative, it implied that all other options for talking about personal life or faith issues were with people from within her tradition. It also suggests that ‘real serenity’ was not a familiar attribute in others around her. As a quality in her spiritual director, it has enabled a space in which she had freedom to talk:

It’s helped me survive. I wouldn’t have survived – I would have self-destructed. It’s given me support. (0803)
An associated characteristic of being gentle and calm is a capacity for patience, another example of the fruit of the Spirit. Two participants expressed appreciation of their director’s patient companionship:

*Now I have a different spiritual director whom I have been with for five years. In that relationship I am finding things more possible; it’s taken a long time - she has been very patient.* (0806)

Opening up possibilities resonates with creating a space to look at something different. This is also supported by the second comment:

*It’s been great. She is very caring, very helpful, giving me ideas about what to do and what to think about, trying to get in touch. She is so patient.* (0807)

A similar sense of creative possibility is attributed to the patience and perseverance exhibited by the spiritual directors of each of these women. The three attributes of calmness, gentleness and patience have provided an environment that was noticeably different for the participants in the study and was often in contrast to a family home that absorbed the traditional faith values and shadow behaviours.

**Hospitality**

There were a number of attributes that described the spaciousness of an hospitable spiritual direction environment, where participants felt it was central to the spiritual direction conversation. Two of the aspects were: a *place of invitation* and a space where the directee’s voice is heard. As with the idea of gentleness referred to above, hospitality is experienced by another person as an act of graciousness and generosity toward the other. The spiritual director is pivotal to that experience and their personhood contributes to the overall impression.
The first comments refer to the way the environment of the conversation space was intentionally designed by her director. She describes it as a welcoming space which was created by the director who invited the directee into the generosity of table fellowship:

*She showed me hospitality; she lived only a suburb away from where I was staying and she had been in spiritual direction herself for some time. Our meals together became spiritual direction conversations.* (0802)

Another participant noticed the ambiance of her director’s room and appreciated the spiritual director’s consideration of her personal comfort, something that was important in advancing the relationship:

*The environment where the spiritual direction happens, the pictures on the wall and the way things were set up – she always made sure I was comfortable, warm enough and made me feel at ease.* (1002)

The setting of the space has been referred to earlier in Chapter 5 and is seen as a way of creating an ambience of welcome, sometimes described as a sacred space because of the interface with the work of the Spirit.

In a slightly different way, one participant who has become a spiritual director herself, explains her rationale for offering safety in an hospitable space:

*I have a very high ethic of wanting to make sure people do feel safe, in the sense of being held in the hospitality of spiritual direction – that their sacred story is held sacred and not misused.* (0801)

This comment reflects another innuendo about the fear of revealing one’s story in an unwelcoming atmosphere that does not graciously accept what is being shared and is, therefore, felt not to be safe.

Finally, a last comment in this section refers to the hospitality offered to the directee with regard to their faith ideas, particularly their image of God. It implies a willingness to hold whatever spiritual material the directee may wish to bring to their session. The participant was surprised at her spiritual director using the term ‘your God’: 
I remember the first time she talked about ‘Your God’ and I remember thinking, “Well, it’s not my God. It’s God.” I was very much in the place of God is God and we know the truth about God. So it’s not my God. (0905)

The participant saw this as respect for her ideas, a crucial part of encouraging openness and trust:

Very early I think I realised that she was being very respectful. It’s not telling them anything, it’s making the space so they can look at their relationship with their God. I experienced her respect of my God. (0905)

The outcome of this respectful welcome of the directee’s relationship to God was an encouragement to speak openly about spiritual life, something that deepened the relationship she experienced with ‘her God’:

And I loved it because of the deepening of my relationship with God and the more experiential and feminine way of knowing that it is. (0905)

The sense of being hospitable to what is brought for reflection is another form of encouragement in the ongoing process of transformation. This capacity to welcome, deeply listen to and respect the faith stance of the directee encourages ownership of her relationship with God and confidence to engage in other aspects of that relationship, like exploring a feminine form of faithing.

Encouraging and Affirming

From the previous quotations in this chapter, an underlying theme of encouragement is emerging. Whether it is through the personal character of the spiritual director or the attributes they are able to bring to the conversation space, encouragement and affirmation are key elements to the validation of a directee’s faith experiences. Encouragement was felt both as a general support through the qualities of the director but also as a help in the practical expression of the directee’s experience:

Mostly it was about who she was. It was just her being. She encouraged me and the practical side of things. (0803)
For her, the ‘practical’ referred to her managing her work-life demands in ministry:

_It was about my whole life, my relationship with God. I see faith as about my relationship with God and how I relate to others, and pray and so on._ (0803)

One participant expresses this validation in terms of her spiritual director feeling proud about what was happening for her:

_He was a great encourager. I always felt that he was so proud of me on my journey - I felt so encouraged, affirmed._ (0702)

Whatever feeling proud may mean for this woman, being affirmed in her faith walk was a significant part of her continuing to see her director. Her narrative covers several difficult experiences in church congregations in which she was ostracised or treated unfairly, often by male leaders. Meeting for spiritual direction with a man whom she felt was an encourager offered her a different style of validation in her faith life, one that most likely had deep positive psychological implications.

Another participant had experienced some difficulty going to her female priest for spiritual counsel:

_People who ask questions threaten the current priest. She is actually quite fundamental._ (0904)

She continues to reflect on finding a spiritual director, a male director with whom she felt comfortable, that happened to come at a time of recovery from quite a devastating circumstance that was personally debilitating:

_I found him encouraging. I talked to him about the priest situation and he said you can do things in the background, be available. I think his direction has helped – I don’t think I’m deep and meaningful. There are holier and more devout people who go to him, but I’m very grateful. It has been formative._ (0904)

This woman had experienced considerable trauma in life and struggled with feeling accepted by any one she perceived as being judgemental. Encouragement was a significant word for her to use:

_[He] is non-judgemental; he doesn’t make you feel like a rotter. Sometimes I would like to be chastised, but he is quite human. He has been able to confirm and affirm value with_
me, so I can see where I have been journeying. I have felt he has taken me seriously. (0904)

The life view of this woman made her suspicious of anyone she intuited might harm her or put her down. ‘He has taken me seriously’ is a significant comment in the light of the guilty overtones in much of her narrative. She had value.

Similarly, the connection between being encouraged and validation is continued in the next quotation:

I guess she opened me out. She validated my own experience, opened me to other ways of being with God. . . For the first few years I very much doubted myself in this regard; she constantly believed in me. She expanded my vision of myself and what I could do and be. (1004)

The gratefulness expressed by this participant echoes previous comments where encouragement had laid the groundwork for validation and consequent adoption of faith agency - having liberty to own and advocate for one’s faith development.

Furthermore, the sense of being affirmed and accepted gave two participants the freedom to be who they wanted to be - themselves:

The different spiritual directors I have had have been very with me, very affirming, and allowed me space to be, which is just wonderful. (0801)

Having ‘space to be’ is referred to as one of the benefits of spiritual direction in which freedom to express feelings and experiences without judgement is influential in bringing transformation. The second participant contrasts condemnation and grace, reiterating the problem of encountering judgementalism.

It’s her acceptance of me, of my struggles, the times of neglecting spending time with God intentionally and there is no condemnation; there is grace in that place. So I can be who I am. She is one of a few people who let me be who I am. What a spiritual director provides is to be accepting of where you are at. (0912)

When considering the idea of a broad place for spiritual engagement, encouragement, affirmation and acceptance are recurring concepts in many of the participants’ transcripts. The environment of the broad place is consistently noted as one in which liberty of self and affirmation of faith is made possible.
Non Judgemental

As referred to in the chapter on Shadow Issues, the theme of judgement appears once again in reference to the attitude of the spiritual director:

*She was an older woman – very gentle, calm, understanding, accepting, no judgement.* (0804)

This comment combines all of the previous attributes already listed and is a cameo of the character attributes that were deemed by many to contribute to a positive approach to the conversation space. When asked to reaffirm her feeling about a lack of judgement, her response was emphatic:

*Absolutely! I really did feel very accepted, loved and not judged.* (0804)

One participant contrasted her experience with seeing someone for counselling where she felt,

*She was clinical, there was nothing between us. I went back two more times but each time I came away feeling I can’t talk to this woman. She doesn’t understand. There was just something about her I didn’t feel comfortable with. She didn’t seem to be relating to me at all, she was over there and I was over here and there was nothing between.* (1006)

The intersubjective assessment that ‘there was nothing between’ the two in the counselling interaction is noteworthy. This woman experienced considerable judgement in her faith-life, as noted in the previous section on Calmness. Her comment highlights another aspect to her feeling accepted; being able to relate to the practitioner:

*In spiritual direction you have to have someone who accepts you and who you relate to. The relationship is important.* (1006)

The ability to ‘relate’ to another raises a complex interweaving of different character attributes between the two people, however, in the light of this comment the participant has a clear sense that what she felt was missing in her prior encounter with the counsellor. Her narrative changes in tone between speaking about relationships with church connections and the relationship with her spiritual director. Her voice is sharp and dismissive when recounting her church experiences, but is softened when she speaks about a spiritual director who was very significant at a crucial time in her life:
I think it is the confidentiality and the acceptance by the director. She accepts me as I am. She doesn’t have any preconceived ideas or expectations of me. She accepts that this is the way I am, she doesn’t tell me I shouldn’t be like that or I shouldn’t think like that. That’s what you get in the church. (1006)

It would seem that, for this participant, being able to ‘relate’ includes the perception that she is accepted as she is, which also carries the sense that she will not be judged according to other external criteria.

Life Example

As this chapter continues to record the comments from participants about their perceptions of their spiritual director to create openness and liberty, the individual characteristics of particular spiritual directors have been noted. However, more generalised perceptions are also in the transcripts. Some of these generalities are similar and refer to characteristics that were not defined. Comments have been grouped together that refer to the life example set by the director, for example, living as an examplar for the pilgrim, being real or grounded and the appreciation of wisdom.

i. Exemplar

A few women summarised their impression of their spiritual director in terms of being an exemplar: someone whose being impressed them by their holiness, strength and integrity. It was expressed as a lifestyle that they admired:

So she modelled something more Christlike for me – she seemed to be more holy. That’s what I’ve been brought up with – I guess in my head I have a picture of what it’s like to be holy! (0803)

But it also included strength of character that was appreciated because it reinforced the connectedness to a possible aspiration in their own lives:
And a lot of it is about her being as well, like it was with [the others]. It’s their being and it adds a richness to my life to know people like that. Connectedness with people like that rubs off on me. It’s magnificent. It’s a real blessing. (0803)

For one woman, having integrity is described euphemistically:

Yes, but also someone with integrity – someone who walks the walk. I could only go to someone I chose through seeing what they say and how they are living. I couldn’t just go to someone out of a book or from a list of directors. I guess its trust. (1003)

When this participant relayed her hesitation about how to select a spiritual director, she raises another dimension to the role of a spiritual director that could prompt further study: how do women intuit qualities in a director that invoke their trust, and, therefore, their willingness to share their faith journey? Perhaps this is what the following comment is alluding to where the language of respect is connected with trust.

I think if I didn’t have that respect for them I wouldn’t hear what they said. It’s because I really respect them that I can trust what they say. (0909)

A different comment gave a picture of warmth and companionship that came from sharing the ordinariness in life:

She was a really beautiful woman; her work was in the laundry. So every morning she would go down to put out the sheets and towels. She was in her 70's and she would fold the laundry every day. I used to go down there and fold the laundry with her – it was a delightful time. (0907)

Although there was no further information from this participant and no explanation of her feelings toward this woman, to describe someone as ‘a really beautiful woman’ again suggests a demeanour or qualities similar to those noted above. Her experience came during a Benedictine retreat and when pressed about what it was that impressed her, she responded,

I think it was a deep listening to me. Not telling me what I needed to hear, but trying to find out what I was hearing and then exploring that with me. . . . She was inviting me to share and then listening, and listening to help me make connections, maybe with a little word or suggestion clarifying what I meant. (0907)

The exemplar that this woman experienced encouraged her to believe that she was going to be heard, as she wished to express herself.

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An associated aspect of being an exemplar is the capacity to be real; to live a life that is grounded in everyday reality:

When I look at the directors I have had, the directors that worked best for me, both male and female, have always been people who have been strongly engaged in the community. They have had a ministry outside of spiritual direction. [My spiritual director] encouraged me to be involved in activities outside the church as well as in the church. (0906)

When the interviewer asked, “What do you think that brings to their direction?” the participant referred to the sense of being grounded, an attribute that is described as a mode of feminine spirituality:

I think it brings both a breadth and depth and I think, for me, it seems to bring about a sense of reality, a groundedness. (0906)

For the participant quoted above, her inclusion of the words ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ speak about how deeply this connects with her way of accepting, and therefore, trusting her director. One way in which women intuit whether they can trust their director is to hear or perceive the person in ways that connect with their mode of faith expression. Feminine spirituality interprets events or experiences in the light of how they are grounded in real life contexts, as noted in Chapter 2. It is not a feminine preference to interpret experiences in respect to schema, concepts or ideas that do not have an immediately applicable location within their life frame. 38

A similar connection with the feeling of groundedness is expressed by a woman who appreciates her director’s qualities that result from her life experience:

But it was a very important relationship for me to journey, and because of who she is; she comes very much out of her own woundedness in her spiritual direction. I feel at times her vulnerability is her strength. (0703)

38 Evidence to demonstrate this preference will be presented in Chapter 10, “The Journey toward a Feminine Spirituality,” p.234
Far from ‘woundedness’ being a detriment, this attribute is perceived as a positive that has been useful in her life. The ordinariness of real life is similarly seen as a helpful aspect in the following quotation:

*One of the other staff recommended a spiritual director, an Ignatian lay person, who was very non-threatening, very ordinary and has been very helpful. (0802)*

### iii Wise Women

A final attribute that is grouped under the section on Life Example is the quality of wisdom. Two participants referred specifically to *wise women* who have been helpful in their spiritual journey. Each of these comments mentions the life experience and example of the director brought to the encounter. Quite often there were comments that appreciated the wisdom of a spiritual director, both male and female, but those words were not used and would require reinterpretation of the transcript. The following quotations name the quality of wisdom.

When asked if the nature of the spiritual director was important, one participant responded,

*Oh, very much. I have been blessed to have two very good, intelligent women – they have been such a gift. They have both been educated and they have both had a lot of life experience. It’s this ‘wise woman’ thing. They are wise women, not just fluffy people. . . Good honest, real people. (0909)*

The attributes of honesty and being real are connected with wisdom and life experience and each of these attributes are significant to a grounded feminine approach. Another participant also named wisdom as part of the richness she received from her spiritual director:

*So there was a richness she offered me, there was a belief in me and my gifts that she continued to foster. Our spiritual direction sessions were a bit random, often for two or three hours. We would have a cup of tea and chat and then go into our session. So I would say part of it was her personality but her own wisdom - she is a very wise woman and had lived it for years and years. (1004)*
If wisdom is defined as knowledge that comes from life experience\textsuperscript{39}, then this description of a spiritual director concurs with an historical model of the wise elder. The model of the \textit{abba} and \textit{amma} from the early centuries of Christian writing sets the model for spiritual eldership referred to in the literature. (Sommerfeldt 1982; Allen 1994; Sellner 2001; McCarty 2012)

Wisdom was not only mentioned in the context of being a wise woman, nor do these quotations imply that only the female spiritual directors were wise. Wisdom was also attributed to a male spiritual director by one participant:

“[My spiritual director] asked me what I wanted to get out of this time; I want to not act the way I’ve always acted, I want to not act so people will like me. I want to be able to forgive. That’s very freeing and healing. I don’t think I could have done that without [my spiritual director], his wisdom. Even asking what I wanted to get out of the experience; I don’t think I would have thought about it as much. I guess that’s an aspect of the director to open up possibilities of how to process things. To ask those questions that are right for the time.” (1003)

In summary, when participants were asked whether the nature and personality of the spiritual director was important to them, both individual characteristics and general attributes were named by participants. Their spiritual director was

- gentle
- calm, patient
- hospitable
- encouraging, accepting and affirming
- non judgemental
- an exemplar, real and a wise women

Listening Skills

In response to questions about how a spiritual director had aided a pilgrim’s capacity to engage with their spiritual journey, some comments referred to skill sets or a capability in the director rather than personality characteristics. The one skill noted most often was the listening skill of the director. As a core skill in the training of spiritual directors, to listen in full attentiveness to the speaker offers respect and gives credence to what the person voices. It helps the directee to validate their spiritual experiences if they believe they have been truly heard by another. Listening is perceived as having a different quality in a spiritual direction context from other faith environments and some of the quotations used show the participants’ awareness of this difference.

The following participant is mindful of her prior experience of ‘going to talk to someone’ in her congregation. Her comments begin with a preamble about her first encounter with spiritual direction:

*I was very suspicious when I first learned about it. I felt that as a young independent Baptist, whenever I considered going to talk to someone about a problem I felt the first question they would ask me is, ‘Have you prayed about it? Have you asked God about it?’ So I always went to God first. So I was very suspicious. But the semester helped me to lose those suspicions, and [my spiritual director] was fantastic. (0802)*

Her suspicion of the ministry is then contrasted with a statement about how her experience of her spiritual director was ‘fantastic’:

*A warm friendly face, independent of everything else I was doing. A really good listener and an affirming person. (0802)*

The interviewer queried the effusive language that she used when calling her spiritual director ‘fantastic’ and ‘wonderful’ (in an earlier section of the transcript). She was asked, “What did that create for you?” She responded, “It created a safe place for a sense of accountability.” So for this participant there was a clear link between the skill of listening she experienced in spiritual direction and her prejudice about what happened when she spoke of faith issues in her former contexts. Spiritual direction created a safe place for accountability in her spiritual
journey and, through implication, was quite a different experience to the confronting, maybe judgemental, stance in former congregations.

For another participant, the mode of listening connects her with a significant psychological process, one that helps her achieve a desired goal:

> And they listen to you. There is something about the way people listen in spiritual direction that enables you to listen to yourself and to listen to God. (0809)

In this quote, the participant connects three inter-related aspects of the listening stance:

- being listened to, thereby giving external expression to her inner experience,
- hearing herself voice her experience and
- enabling her to be attuned to God’s voice in her life.

This latter aspect is reiterated by another participant:

> “He was there to help me listen to how God was working in my life.” (0906)

The earlier comments in this chapter about a spiritual director offering an hospitable space in which to be heard sets the scene for the work of listening. These are two complementary attributes which enable directees to achieve their desired outcomes.

Another participant refers to ‘deep listening’ and puts it in contrast to a previous experience where the theme of judgement reappears:

> I think it was a deep listening to me. Not telling me what I needed to hear, but trying to find out what I was hearing and then exploring that with me. When you asked that question I actually remembered another experience I had when I did a thirty day Ignatian retreat in daily life with a priest – he told me what I should be thinking and I got really annoyed. I found it so unhelpful. He was saying, ‘Now, you should be listening to this, and you should be doing that.’ It was all the ‘shoulds’. (0907)

Some of this excerpt appears in an earlier section on being an Exemplar but here the transcript continues, comparing a different spiritual director with a prior negative experience. The ‘shoulds’ again raise the feeling of being judged in order to do the right thing. The perceived ‘deep listening’ capability of the spiritual director implies that there was little listening by the priest who only wanted to correct or realign the faith practice of the participant. The
contrasted experience of being listened to by her spiritual director is expressed in a more positive mood:

She was inviting me to share and then she would listen, and listen to help me make connections. (0907)

As in previous quotations, the listening capability is linked with an advantageous outcome for the spiritual journey of making connections. As a feature of the feminine spirituality, making connections is a positive process that enables meaning-making in a woman.

A different participant, who began spiritual direction at a retreat, was profoundly moved by the experience:

It was certainly not just the place, but the person I connected with in that experience of listening to my life and listening to God. (1002)

This is the second reference to listening to God working in life. She uses the word ‘connected’ or ‘connection’ several times in her narrative. For example, in various places she says, “My nature wants to connect with God” and “Part of the role of a spiritual director is to help you connect and hear the voice of God and what is happening in your life” and “Through my connection with myself, in relationship to God and within community.” The importance of connection for her is clear, allowing ‘listening to my life’ and ‘listening to God’ to occupy a significant place in her spiritual growth. She continues,

I know it doesn’t matter on the situation because you are still listening to God or depending on the Holy Spirit, but my sense of connection with God is partly enabled through that spiritual director. If I have had good work with God in spiritual direction it has been with a particular person. Also it is not just that I like that person, it is about the quality of the work or what is happening in my life.” (1002)

The repeated juxtaposition of listening and connecting implies that the spiritual director is facilitating an important mode of feminine meaning-making through using appropriate listening skills.
Summary

This study has been considering the spaciousness of a meeting place that facilitates deeper spiritual engagement for women. The ministry of spiritual direction is referred to as a calling by Eileen O’Hea: “The call of Wisdom addresses the mind and the heart. . . The response to this call always leads to truth and interiority, to the acknowledgement that divine love is the ground of being.” (O’Hea 2000,5). Participants intuited characteristics of their spiritual directors that were significant in furthering their spiritual growth – gentleness, understanding, acceptance and non-judgementalism. Participants also referred to the exemplar of their companions and there is an overall resonance with what Engel refers to as ‘a way of being’: “Calling was not a specific set of responsibilities given to each individual . . . Calling was a way of being, a way of living with God. The calling is the road we travel through the marvel of the world.” (Engel 2008,144) From the quotations used above, there is strong evidence to support that the way of being of spiritual directors contributes to the spaciousness of the encounter.

In Chapter 2, it was suggested that another way of being female could be embraced by women living in a conservative faith group. This was not a descriptive argument but, rather, suggested a paradigmatic shift away from how women have been cast within a conservative faith model. A question arises as to how such an identity might appear to others sharing the faith journey and by what descriptors one might consider the authenticity of the newfound way of being. The characteristics of the wise guide offered by these participants might be a starting place for giving substance to the ‘truth and interiority’ that empowers women to be who they truly are.
### Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appreciated Qualities of a Spiritual Director</th>
<th>Gentleness</th>
<th>Calm, patient</th>
<th>Hospitality</th>
<th>Encouraging, accepting and affirming</th>
<th>Non judgemental</th>
<th>Life example - exemplar</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certainly my spiritual director helps with that space because she is gentle. (0910)</td>
<td>The spiritual director was very loving, and very gentle and quiet. (0702)</td>
<td>Incredibly gentle and incredibly perceptive. (0907)</td>
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<td>This was really the first time I really experienced the gentle strength. (0906)</td>
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<td>My spiritual director is very calm and that helps. (1001)</td>
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<td>She had a peace and demeanour that I had never met in anyone else. (1006)</td>
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<td>She has been very patient. (0806)</td>
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<td>She showed me hospitality. (0802)</td>
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<td>Being held in the hospitality of spiritual direction. (0801)</td>
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<td>It was just her being. She encouraged me.&quot; (0803)</td>
<td>I felt so encouraged, affirmed.&quot; (0702)</td>
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<td>I found him encouraging. (0904)</td>
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<td>She constantly believed in me. She expanded my vision of myself and what I could do and be. (1004)</td>
<td>Very affirming, and allowed me space to be. (0801)</td>
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<td>She is one of a few people who let me be who I am. (0912)</td>
<td>Someone who accepts you and who you relate to. The relationship is important. (1006)</td>
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<td>She accepts me as I am. She doesn’t have any preconceived ideas or expectations of me. (1006)</td>
<td>Positive connection... I think both personality and environment are important. Having similar backgrounds. (0808)</td>
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<td>She modelled something more Christ-like for me. (0803)</td>
<td>It’s their being and it adds a richness to my life to know people like that. (0803)</td>
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<td>Someone with integrity – someone who walks the walk. (1003)</td>
<td>It’s because I really respect them that I can trust what they say. (0909)</td>
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<td><strong>Real people</strong></td>
<td>People who have been strongly engaged in the community. (0906)</td>
<td>It seems to bring about a sense of reality, a groundedness. (0906)</td>
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<td>I feel at times her vulnerability is her strength. (0703)</td>
<td>Very non-threatening, very ordinary and has been very helpful. (0802)</td>
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<td><strong>Wise women</strong></td>
<td>They are wise women, not just fluffy people. . . Good honest, real people. (0909)</td>
<td>Part of it was her personality but also her own wisdom.”(1004)</td>
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<td>So there was a wisdom she offered me and there was a belief in me. (1004)</td>
<td>I don’t think I could have done that without [my spiritual director], his wisdom. (1003)</td>
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<td><strong>Listening Skills</strong></td>
<td>A really good listener and an affirming person. (0802)</td>
<td>There is something about the way people listen in spiritual direction. (0809)</td>
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<td>To help me listen to how God was working in my life. (0906)</td>
<td>She would listen to help me make connections. (0907)</td>
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<td>The person I connected with in that experience of listening to my life and listening to God. (1002)</td>
<td>My sense of connection with God is partly enabled through that spiritual director. (1002)</td>
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Chapter 9

Benefits of Spiritual Direction

A feminist methodology was intentionally used to capture the experiences of women who had engaged in the spiritual direction process. The core intention is to allow women’s voices to be heard, to recount the significance of this ministry in both the development and the validation of their faith. Accounts of the life course take their pattern from the organisations and institutions in which they are embedded, but they must still be actively composed. As participants in this study recounted their stories, they sorted through a nearly infinite supply of biographical items that might have been included. Their candour and wording has been taken to represent an authentic attempt to give meaning to their story. They have forged the narrative linkages that tie disparate aspects of experience into a coherent life story, providing it with its distinctive narrative horizons. These, in turn, reflexively frame the particulars they chose to include. (Gubrium and Holstein 2000,199)

The last interview question asked participants to comment on their overall experience of spiritual direction: “Can you summarise the benefits of the spiritual direction experience?” The intention was to hear how each participant constructed their sense of the benefit of spiritual direction from the narrated story of their encounter with the ministry. The evidence supporting any conclusions that might be made about the benefit of spiritual direction is found in the synchronous nature of comments, one participant’s reflection being supported by other similar sentiments, rather than by constructing an in-depth explanation of the meaning or innuendo contained in individual comments. The analysis of the transcripts looked for corroboration between participants’ stories that touched upon common themes.
General Impressions

A few comments that affirmed the experience of engaging in spiritual direction were stated in more general terms, rather than selecting specific aspects of the process that were beneficial.

For example,

_So as a summary, spiritual direction has enabled me to articulate my experience of God and own my own experience of God in a much fuller and deeper and more real way of any other things I have done on my Christian journey. It has been a place of amazing encounter with God at times._ (1004)

Two elements of a constructing-meaning process are present in this response. Firstly, articulating her experiences has helped to clarify and embed the participant’s faith stance. Secondly, the authoring of her faith is founded upon the validation of personal spiritual experience through that articulation. There is both ownership and responsibility for the personal spiritual journey.

Similarly, the following response reflects an ownership and maturing of the participant’s approach to spiritual development:

_I had done well at becoming less erratic and more measured in caring for my own spirituality and my own walk and that’s been through supervision and going to spiritual direction. Just in helping me keep fresh I suppose._ (1005)

In these generalised summations, the reflexive frame is about individualised, authentic journeying with God. Referring to Gubrium and Holstein’s framework above, the narrative horizon is seen from a different perspective than that of someone looking to assess faith in terms of obedience or compliance within frames of reference set by external entities. This individualised ownership of the faith journey is one significant outcome of women being engaged in a spiritual direction process, what is being termed as faith-agency: having liberty to own and advocate for one’s faith development. For two other participants, continuing to see a spiritual director is an essential part of her spiritual journey and their commitment to choosing to continue with this discipline is a further expression of faith-agency:
Relationship with God is so important to me; I can’t imagine living without spiritual direction in one form or another. (0703)

She has been involved in spiritual direction for a long time and I enjoy and benefit enormously from the direction she gives me. (0808)

Apart from these generalised comments, more specific responses to the summary question have been grouped under the following themes:

- Part of the Spiritual Journey
  - tensions
  - discovering the contemplative
- Hearing God
  - a different voice
  - intimacy
  - identity response
- Affirmation and Value
  - being heard
  - getting it right
  - role of the spiritual director
- Reflecting on Past Church Experience
  - dealing with judgementalism
  - struggling with change

**Part of the Spiritual Journey**

**Tensions**

At the outset, it should be noted that many women spoke of spiritual direction as one of a number spiritual practices they accessed in order to ground their spiritual realities. None spoke of spiritual direction as the one way in which to grow spiritually or that spiritual direction was the sole ministry supporting their spiritual development. Embracing spiritual direction as a place to speak of unfolding faith was one of a number of parallel spiritual disciplines that were used by participants, often discovered in the unfamiliar tradition of
Christian contemplative spirituality. This is a shift from a conservative faith stance that is based on a Calvinist view of *sola fide, sola gratia* which espouses that no human cooperation is necessary because God alone forms and directs us. (Baker 1985; Conn 1999,87; Scott 2012) As one participant shared,

_I was very suspicious when I first learned about it. I felt that as a young independent Baptist, whenever I considered going to talk to someone about a problem I felt the first question they would ask me is, “Have you prayed about it? Have you asked God about it?” So I always went to God first. So I was very suspicious._ (0802)

The patriarchal imprint of controlling the believer masquerades behind an unassailable position that asserts God is the only ‘companion’ we need in our spiritual journey. The shadow effect that is created is a wariness of anything that may be construed as mediating the direct action of God. It is viewed as betrayal to seek counsel outside and may cause group members to suggest that those who seek spiritual direction are suspect in some way. Consequently, the desire to share personal spiritual experience is jeopardised and defensiveness about participating in any alternate spiritual practices may result. Contrary to this position, participants in this study felt that they had found a place where they could be open to their spiritual experience, even though there often remained a background unease.

Several women lived with the tension of wanting to access spiritual direction as a help in their spiritual journey but felt bound by cultural shadow behaviours when in their congregation. When asked why she didn’t talk about spiritual direction to her church friends, one woman said,

_You just keep these things under your hat. I don’t say too much about what I do now [in my fellowship]. They wouldn’t show you the door, just probably show you disappointment._ (0701)

Disappointing others infers that one is not meeting their expectations and may be intuited as disapproval of the actions that were disappointing. Another woman felt the disapproval of church folk more keenly:

_I still have the sense of being a little careful of what I do say in church because of the very conservative style. I have mentioned that I was going to spiritual direction and I have had_
eyebrows raised! I sense that it is a wondering, “Why does she need spiritual direction? Is there something wrong with her?” I don’t know if it’s something in me or just the conservative nature of the church. I can’t mention meditation either! (1006)

This reserve to disclose anything about one’s inner faith life was mentioned in Chapter 1. The more conservative the group, the less confidence there is to tell one’s story. Streib speaks about the meta-story “into which the standardized personal fate has been integrated,” and which defines the group paradigm, framing the way spiritual stories are recounted. He believes, “To fundamentalists, life history, biography, and autobiography belong, as it were, to a foreign language.” (Streib 1998,317) Not only is it inappropriate to reveal intimate aspects of one’s relationship with God but it becomes culturally normalized to lose contact with the value and worth of one’s own story in that setting. Bakke comments that evangelical Christians often feel their prayer is inadequate or not very spiritual: “There is a reticence to talk [to others] because then others will see I’m not so spiritual.” (Disney 2001,88) The underlying fear of being exposed implies one will be disapproved of and results in feeling some dissonance from the community. Such unconscious fear is characteristic of a conservative model. It generates defensiveness and is a significant obstacle to seeking out alternative spiritual companionship from that sanctioned by the fellowship. So for all of the participants in this study, to have found benefit in spiritual companionship already speaks of something happening in their lives that enabled them to overcome such fears. All participants remained in a faith congregation (See Table 3, p.91) which implies they were able to hold a different form of faith expression in tension with their congregational faith paradigm.

Discovering a Contemplative Paradigm

Comments about discovering the contemplative approach are expressed using a different style of language from that used to speak about theologies or ecclesial styles. Discovering a contemplative spirituality introduces the seeker to a wider scope of ways to engage spiritual awareness. Renowned contemplative writer Thomas Merton defines a contemplative
approach as “the keen awareness of the interdependence of all living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another under God.” (Fox 1978) The move towards such an integrative stance challenges any position which holds boundaries and norms designed to exclude. One way to describe the change in religious orientation from conservative to contemplative has been referred to by Salsman and Carter as a shift from an institutional religious orientation to a personal-devotional orientation. A personal devotional style of religiousness is characterised by an internalised, “intrinsic religiousness, emotional attachment to God and devotional intensity” and was found to have a “consistent correlation with less psychological distress.” (Salsman and Carlson 2005,202) Their study found that this style of religiosity was associated with greater freedom from anxiety, guilt, and worry. Others have categorised this style of religiousness as a “Quest” style which is characterised as an open-minded struggle with questions about faith. (Glover 1997,248) It concurs with the sense of a journey narrative for the faith-life, but also suggests a metaphor through which one can hold the tensions of uncertainty. A contemplative style of spirituality would support both descriptors: a personal devotional style and a quest style of faith orientation.

Many of the transcript quotations used support the adoption of a Quest style of spirituality in which the Divine is seen in all aspects of life in the pilgrim’s journey. The interviewees embraced their new discoveries and verbalised the positive aspects of their experience. One woman referred to having ‘embraced’ the new spirituality:

> It was the whole contemplative approach to life. That’s what I embraced and spiritual direction was part of that. (1004)

Another reflects upon the challenges in embracing a contemplative style that is not founded upon a fixed set of tenets, noting the variousness of what contemplative spirituality means:

> So it’s an inner journey of discovery: I take two steps forward and one step back. The more I seem to learn the less I know. The more you think you are getting a grip on this contemplative form of spirituality, it’s like vapour. Really interesting. (0910)
There is also the sense that not ‘getting a grip’ on a fixed set of ideas did not deter her from pursuing this style of spirituality. A similar comment by another woman reflected that it was not an easy transition:

*Other people have had a similar spiritual journey where what used to satisfy no longer satisfies; where there is questioning and feeling very scared and fearful and insecure in that. Following the Christian journey is not out of fear that I’ll be punished if I don’t. It’s out of a graced place.* (0912)

Another participant felt that spiritual direction brought things together for her and had given her a way to bring focus to her practice:

*I think it’s what the name says – it’s spiritually directed me. Otherwise I think I would be scattered all over the place, particularly in my own prayer life. That’s been one of the big benefits. It’s gently challenging me how to think about my faith and my God.* (0808)

Holding the tension between a new found spiritual practice and the former ways of expressing faith meant that some participants wrestled with the integration of the new and the old, often feeling a time of inner confusion. The discovery of new ways of faith engagement, or practices that were previously unfamiliar, often marked the beginning of the change of perspective. Sometimes it felt foreign:

*It’s a different language; it’s a different way of being.* (0910)

For another, she recognised that something felt very welcoming:

*The move to spiritual direction for me has been absolutely transformative. It’s my home. I have had times when I have felt my heartbeat and feel ‘this is my tribe’.* (0801)

Another women discovered contemplative spirituality and the spiritual disciplines it espouses. As one of the disciplines, she mentioned the role of spiritual direction in relation to discovering meditation and silence:

*I suddenly found the contemplative lifestyle; meditation, meditating on the scriptures . . . It started off in the experience of Christian meditation, lectio and Ignatian prayer. But it has been enhanced and enlarged through spiritual direction.* (0702)

But learning new spiritual disciplines also provided a way for another participant to achieve balance between the old and the new. For example, one participant became aware of the
balance the contemplative offered while remaining in a worship environment that seemed to be noise and activity focused:

Coming to quiet days and guided meditation, to come apart has been good for me. Learning more of the contemplative helps balance the action. (0803)

She reflects a desire for something more rather than something else, widening the scope of what enhanced her spiritual growth. In this place, the participant is managing the tensions through her embrace of the contemplative practices, not through rejection of her faith community. For some a change in their church affiliation, or even withdrawing from any engagement with a church fellowship, had been the outcome of their new awareness. However, at the time of the interview only eight of the thirty interviewees had changed their denominational affiliation from their early church affiliation.\(^{40}\) It seems that the majority did not feel that their new awareness of a different faith stance meant they needed to reject their congregational attachments. Rather, many seem to have moved toward integration instead of disintegration, which supports the conclusion that the openness, which has been referred to as an outcome of engaging in the broad space of spiritual direction, provided an avenue for embracing alternate forms of faith expression, each offering a different entrée into a relationship with God.

Openness to something different began the shift toward alternate practices for one participant who sought help through personal growth work. The daughter of a minister, she described her home life as ‘very confined.’ When asked how she felt her early home life shaped her faith, she replied,

Vert restricted. Very. I was in my early forties before I started to realize there was something more than what I was experiencing. I went to [some courses] because I felt I needed some help to get out of the trap I felt I was in. (0701)

Her use of the word ‘trap’ is reinforced by earlier references in her narrative to doing the right thing: her narrative contains the words ‘right thing’ twelve times, often in the phrase ‘the right

\(^{40}\) See Table 3 of Chapter 4, "Methodology", p.91
thing to do.’ She believes being constrained, trapped or driven to do the right thing originated in her family of origin’s strict conservative faith environment. So it is noteworthy that she called her entry into spiritual direction ‘huge’:

I feel I had to be ready to do spiritual direction in some way and if I hadn’t done [the other contemplative courses] I probably wouldn’t have even thought of going - so it’s been huge. (0701)

It is difficult to extrapolate further on the significance of entering a different style of spirituality for this woman without further exploration of her affective responses to her experiences. However, it is clear from her story that the opportunity to experience the open space of spiritual direction impacted her relationship with God:

My image of God has changed, because my initial image of God for a long time was him sitting up there with his finger pointing down at me. I now can imagine God embracing me. So, I mean, its huge, the change. It’s huge. That’s a safety issue – it’s not a pointing, accusing finger, but hands and arms that hold me. That’s a huge change. (0701)

Here again, her repetition of the words ‘it’s huge’ emphasises the significance she give to the change.

The new approach to spirituality also challenged a conservative expectation to belong-through-compliance. Belonging took on a broader aspect for the next participant, widening the scope of what she envisaged as belonging to the Body of Christ:

It was really about saying I belong. I don’t have to be evangelical to belong. I can be contemplative and belong because we need all this richness in the Body to make it what it is. (0909)

A self-motivated faith agency lessens the need to belong through acceptance by an externalised authority. It gave this participant the liberty to use contemplative disciplines alongside the more familiar ways of worship. Some remained in their fellowship context and found ways of accommodating the contemplative alongside their community faith experience.

For example,

Being in both worlds supplements it. My heart is in the contemplative; my body is in the church. . . . It’s only the last 6-7 years that I have found a contemplative style that suits my personality; it’s what I need. Even though I am sociable, as an introvert I need time by myself. (0912)
This participant continues,

> For me I’m most comfortable in the contemplative, living with the questions. . . The whole spiritual direction and contemplative way is not limiting God, it’s allowing God to speak through whatever. It’s so different. (0912)

This woman’s recognition that her faith is multi-faceted has released her from compliance issues that formerly made her feel she belonged in her faith community. She described a significant benefit as having enlarged her capacity to hear God.

A summary comment from the following participant also refers to the place of spiritual direction within her wider development:

> It has never been in isolation. It has been a part of a bigger journey I have been on at the time. I don’t know if it could have happened just with spiritual direction, but one feeds into the other. (1004)

The word ‘journey’ was used often and was language indicative of the willingness to see the spiritual path fitting into a more comprehensive framework. Another participant continues,

> So there was the whole journey for me. . . Somehow it has all come together so I can listen to God in my life. I can confirm the voice of God. There was an empowerment; it was spiritually empowering for me. (1002)

So these comments show a shift from a framework with the referent in fixed tenets to the looseness of sitting with questions and openness, something that is more indicative of a contemplative style of spirituality. It is also indicative of a feminine spirituality evolving within their narratives, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Consequently, ideas about the nature of God also shift giving newfound freedom in the perception of who God might be. Comments related to changes in perception and images of God are also included in the next chapter. The last quotation above speaks of ‘an empowerment’ coming from an integrated approach to her spirituality and is testament to the benefits that have occurred through discovering the contemplative faith paradigm.
Hearing God

When participants summarised their feelings about the question “What has been the benefit of spiritual direction?” respondents showed significant movement in their sense of the Spirit of God working intimately in life. Being in an open space to process inner spiritual experiences involved taking the risk to converse with God and *hear God*. Sometimes this was a new dimension in the relationship with God that was not familiar in past ways of engaging in a faith relationship.

Participants were attracted to the possibility of an authentic interface with God in an intentional space. The intentionality of the discipline created opportunities to listen for the prompting of the Spirit. For example,

*I probably use spiritual direction as a way of talking to God or relating . . . because I rarely talk to Him during the week, it’s almost like that is my way of talking to God.* (0804)

The regular discipline of attending to what has been happening in the midst of life’s events, however busy or chaotic life may be, was a valued process for one participant:

*I think it is just taking the time once a month to sit down and saying, “OK! What’s been happening in my life?” My life has been busy and crazy and I find I always get there and say, “Just stop. Listen to God.” So having someone to help me do that has been good.* (0908)

Honouring the genuineness of the desire to relate to God enhanced the capacity to ‘listen to God’ and, if Merton’s definition is taken as a measure of the contemplative, then it seems there is an awakening to hearing God in all of the interconnectedness in life circumstances.

One respondent says,

*I experienced spiritual direction with her as quite a broad path - not narrow or controlling or directive; invitational in the sense of trying to hear or see where the movements of God were in my life.* (0907)

To be invited into relational exchange requires a measure of openness to the possibility that the Other also desires to be in relationship, rather than demanding a particular type of
response. For example, the demanding inner voice is replaced by the desire to be receptive to hearing God speak:

All of a sudden this spiritual direction I experienced with [two different spiritual directors] was not about getting it right. It was about hearing what God was saying. (0907)

Similarly, the next participant saw her spiritual director as an accompanist in her desire to hear God:

“He was there to help me listen to how God was working in my life.” (0906)

These references to listening to God invite further exploration of what it meant to each participant to stay attuned to God’s voice, particularly when past experience has focused on using more limited strategies or scripturally based approaches. One can conclude that something different is being intuited when in the spiritual direction conversation space.

A Different Voice

The spaciousness of the spiritual direction place is one in which there is freedom from shadow fears about what is appropriate to link to God’s presence and what is not. The past shadows, in some cases, were related to maintaining what was correct thinking or divinely sanctioned behaviour. The change of paradigm has confronted what was disabling and allowed the pilgrim to verbalise their awareness of God in a grounded, existential context.

For one participant, the past shadow was about an authoritarian and disapproving God with whom relationship was equated with perfectionism:

I suppose from going along to spiritual direction I have been presented with this fact that God isn’t this strict, authoritarian person and God doesn’t expect me to be perfect, and in fact, God loves me when I am imperfect. That was so dynamic and real to my life. Everything seemed . . . it’s as though you see the truth in yourself for the first time. (0702)

The issue of self-judgment was raised by another who knows how difficult it is to hear God’s promptings above the over-riding unconscious voices:
What I experience in spiritual direction all the time is to place oneself first as important. . .
For most women, and some men, the prevailing thing is self-diminution and not having any power. It’s learnt. . . Self-judgement, that voice of judgement of a judging God. [In spiritual direction] I can ask “How do you hear God?” (0903)

The internal standards set by past detrimental experiences are projected as God’s voice of judgement and circumscribe a very limited means by which one may encounter or hear God.

One participant is aware of this tendency when she says,

The whole spiritual direction and contemplative way is not limiting God, it’s allowing God to speak through whatever. It’s so different. . . There are completely no expectations; just encouragement and acceptance. (0912)

So the counter to a judgemental voice demanding perfection and compliance seems to be the freedom that is possible when those old voices are brought into a place of openness, where the context of the conversation is broadened to reflect the wider reality of all of life’s experiences. Judgement implies limitation, assessing everything against a standard.

One participant reflected on her experience in a conservative fellowship that did not support the contemplative practices. She parodies their words:

‘You believe in listening to God rather than talking all the time’ That’s very dangerous – listening – silence is dangerous! (0801)

For another, she signals her disengagement from a former church fellowship through her resonance with the silence offered in a contemplative setting:

A real movement, as opposed to the church experience of being spoken to and being told, having everything full, everything happening – there is no silence. There is also no listening to God in an unstructured way. (0809)

Her comments were followed with a litany of rebuttals from a new, more conservative minister in her congregation and his opposition to a spirituality that she had found to be helpful. The clash of ‘voices’ speaking into her spiritual journey made her cynical of him when he used contemplative symbols as vehicles of disapproval.

[He] couldn’t be more conservative; the Cloud of Unknowing was bad and the dangers of that sort of stuff. He thought Taizé was dangerous because it was repeating over and over again.(0809)

Against this background, she speaks of spiritual direction in more inviting terms:
And they listen to you. There is something about the way people listen in spiritual direction that enables you to listen to yourself and to listen to God. (0809)

Her experience of ‘being told’ is contrasted with ‘people listening’ and was transformative in her ability hear God’s movement in her life. It highlights the different voice that is expressed in as gentler, less demanding environment that makes room for being attentive to God.

**Intimacy**

The interplay between hearing God and intimacy emerged in some of the narratives where the spaciousness of quiet attention brought a sense of closeness to God. Participants felt that the spiritual direction space gave them an opportunity to experience an intimate relationship with God:

*By the end I could have sat there for an hour and not noticed it. There is an intimacy with God . . . again it was a space where nothing was asked of me. A space where God just sat there next to me; we were just there together. That’s all I went for, to just sit with God.* (0809)

This is a comment from an experienced directee who is comfortable in this style of spiritual reflection. Another woman comments upon the difference of this style of faith engagement from previous experiences in her religious associations:

*I haven’t ever experienced it in a faith community - maybe there are faith communities to be discovered . . . yet! That hasn’t been my experience in faith communities, of journeying intimately with God.* (0703)

Her comments about this being an unfamiliar devotional style suggests that intimacy is not often seen as a descriptor of faith relationship in conservative contexts. (Fiorello 2011) One woman expressed surprise at the type of relationship that was on offer. Intimate relationship with God does not seem to have been part of her prior religious experience, even though it was within her intellectual grasp:

*And I got really stuck on this thing about God being intimately involved in our lives - I realised that I agreed with it as an idea, but I didn’t feel like that at all.* (0806)
Reflecting in a somewhat cynical style, the sense of absence of intimacy with God from her worshipping tradition has been complemented by accessing the spiritual direction space where her experience of ‘presence’ is significant:

> For me, since that time, over the last six years, I have grown into attending to God’s intimate involvement in my life. . . Attending to the presence; the idea of God being intimately involved in our lives sounds good, and in [our tradition] we say stuff like that all the time but we hardly believe it. (0806)

Another added a different perspective to the idea of an intimacy with God, that of feeling a lightness in the relationship:

> God is lighter; God is freer to transcend boundaries; God is intimate and beyond at the same time. (0801)

In contrast to the judgemental image of God which weighs heavily with expectation, being able to verbalise how much easier and lighter it feels to be in intimate relationship with God comes with a renewed image of God that transcends the barriers. These reflections are attributed to the character of God, one that is more expansive than previously envisaged. Yet the reflection may be viewed as a projection onto God of a changing inner ability to engage differently in relationship. As noted at the start of this section, the interplay between psychological changes and perception of changes in the relationship with God are complex, but the sense of intimacy is a catalyst that has been enabled through the spaciousness of spiritual direction.

**Identity Response**

Opening a vision of God’s intimate participation in all of life then changes the associated notion of personhood – who I really am and the permission to attend to the intimate self:

> I think that there’s something in spiritual direction about really attending to who we really are, who God is in us - taking away all those things that get in the way of it. . . One of the shifting points has been, after this intellectual heritage of intellectually exploring ideas, a quote by Margaret Guenther. She says, ‘Spiritual direction is about paying attention to God’s intimate involvement in our life.’ (0806)
There is a complementary movement from being available to listen to God intimately to being able to listen to oneself and express what is one’s own intimate truth. For example,

*So, spiritual direction started me on the way of being reflective; looking at who I am and where I am, and what God wants to say to me in this situation as who I am. Not just this message of ‘You’ve got to be good.’ I came to appreciate God’s presence in my life. And God has something to say to me, to the real me.* (0702)

The value of this realisation was expressed by another as,

*Spiritual direction really was a saving grace for me. It was the thing that really helped me to honour who I am and that it was really OK to be me.* (0906)

An outcome of a space where it was possible to freely verbalise any interaction with God is the realisation that self-knowledge is one condition of intimacy, finding ‘the real me’, and that the relationship between intimacy with God and intimacy with self is core to growing one’s faith life. This was the essence of another participant’s reflection:

*So faith in this period has been a much more intimate experience.* (0703)

It seems this becomes an attractive, self-affirming process:

*Spiritual direction is a commitment to wanting to know more about God; I want to go further. . . In having spiritual direction it is that desire for God that you name and you follow.*

*The thing that I found in spiritual direction, the naming of my own experience for myself, was the self-knowledge-awareness of God continuum. That I could actually name what I understood God to be doing, or saying or whatever.* (0809)

For this woman, her spiritual growth was related to her self-understanding. Growth in a more intimate sense of faith, with a God who journeys in life with the believer, has been realised through accessing a place to hear and re-engage with deeply affective experiences.

Challenging past influences that mould how to think about faith is possible if there is no sensitivity to judgement. It creates a surprising and alluring desire to be attentive to the perceived voice of God. One participant summarises these observations:

*It wasn’t that I didn’t have a faith before, because I did. When I heard about spiritual direction it was like I was looking for that my whole life; I have always looked for the deeper way into God. The naming of the desire and the way God honours that and holds that.* (0809)
These comments are reminiscent of Hosea 2:14\textsuperscript{41} where there is an allurement to enter into a deeper relationship with God. It is important to note that this is not a conversion experience or a new discovery of faith that was previously unknown. It is the deepening of the desire to know God, intimately, which was not previously familiar or encouraged in other places.

Recognising the desire to deepen relationship is akin to the desire for intimacy – it is a progression in the faith journey:

\begin{quote}
Maybe that’s just what I’m ready for in my journey; reaching a space where I can get into the real deep things of God. (0910)
\end{quote}

One participant found that opportunity to engage that inner desire in a spiritual direction space had become essential to responding to the Divine:

\begin{quote}
I don’t know quite how I would have survived without spiritual direction. I still do think that God is completely central and key, and that there is meaning and order but I don’t know how I would have found it and related to it. (0805)
\end{quote}

Relating to God in such a personalised way, one that implies reciprocity through naming the experience of intimacy, has enabled ownership of the faith journey and consequent adoption of a spiritual direction space as a place to authentically further the faith relationship with God:

\begin{quote}
I was in a different place and it became evident that spiritual direction was going to be an ongoing part of my life. (1002)
\end{quote}

It becomes a spiritual practice supporting faith development.

\textsuperscript{41} Hosea 2:14 (TNIV) “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.”
Affirmation and Value

A third significant response from participants in regard to their perceived benefit of the spiritual direction encounter was that of personal affirmation and a consequent sense of value:

But since the 90’s my experiences of spiritual direction has actually been incredibly affirming. (0907)

For one who attended spiritual direction regularly, affirmation was expected as an outcome of the process:

I guess that spiritual direction is there to affirm people. (0909)

In the following sections, affirmation is spoken of in terms of being listened to, as well as a fillip to the syndrome of having to get it right. The role of the spiritual director concludes the cameo on affirmation.

Being Heard

As a starting point, the process of affirmation begins with being listened to – having one’s voice heard. Being listened to is a significant characteristic of the process and there is a particular quality to the listening in a spiritual direction space that is enabling:

There is something about the way people listen in spiritual direction that enables you to listen to yourself and to listen to God. (0908)

However, it is not simply reliant upon the spiritual director’s listening skills. When one participant was asked if the spiritual direction process was helpful because it allowed her feelings to be listened to, the response came back to this more basic link with affirmation:

Feelings, yes, but also it’s the being listened to. Going to a spiritual director and being affirmed. (0909)

This is contrasted by another participant’s reflection of being in a different faith context in which not being listened to affected her sense of value:
It was very much dominated by male leadership, and I often used to feel like I was never really listened to, never really heard. (0907)

One of the outcomes of not being heard is being left feeling that you are invisible or insignificant, or worse, that you somehow epitomise what is not acceptable by being ridiculed for what you do contribute:

Yes. I don’t feel I’m ridiculed or minimalised. (0904)

In a faith context where faith-experience is always about searching and struggle, to have one’s endeavours affirmed contributes positively to the desire to keep on the journey.

So there seems to be an initial psychological trigger to feeling affirmed that begins with having been heard; it facilitates inner receptivity to new possibilities. This was felt by the following participant:

To me, having a listener brings me to new understandings of who I am. (0802)

As in the earlier paragraph dealing with hearing God and the impact on the sense of personhood, being heard by a spiritual director who listens in an affirming manner facilitates self-affirmation:

They’re affirming. It’s just the affirmation and acceptance. . . They affirmed that I’m OK just to be me. I’m OK; there was nothing to prove. (0910)

So there is a sequence of movements in which being listened to helps to embed belief that one is heard which, in turn, results in personal affirmation.

Getting It Right

In a listening environment, one comment consistently arises throughout many of the transcripts and is linked to different facets of spiritual direction outcomes. It is the perception of not being good enough and not getting things right, without any precise explanation of what that means to each woman. As an outcome of a bounded faith perspective, internal sensitivities are cogently honed to measure oneself against what is perceived to be perfection
or right thinking. Although this is often referred to it is rarely explained and there doesn’t seem to be any concrete or rational explanation of what constitutes being right and good. For one participant this seemed to be a particularly relevant struggle in her tradition:

*I think that is one of the key things I have found in spiritual direction – the sense of affirmation. I feel that my experience of the church has been, “You’ve got to do better; you’re not good enough.” That’s a constant message in our tradition.* (0909)

The sense of this response conveys a covert understanding of the standards that are expected in order to be an approved member and there is a measure of surprise and self-affirmation resulting from her spiritual direction experience:

*To come to see that other people actually think you are a person of value and you are doing well and are faithful and true and good . . . I think that was the most transforming thing. Being accepted, loved valued and listened to. Affirmed. You come away thinking, “Well, I’m not so bad after all!”* (0909)

This intense response links affirmation to the struggle to be approved and the pivotal mechanism is being listened to as a person of value.

**Role of the Spiritual Director**

Being affirmed in itself occurred through several aspects of the spiritual direction process. The openness of the space allowed freedom to verbalise what was held as significant spiritual experiences and brought self-affirmation. The attitude of the spiritual director supported the process. The interaction between the director and directee was a catalyst for encouragement and self-affirmation. For example,

*I felt so encouraged, affirmed. Even when I felt I had nothing to take to him, I hadn’t reflected much or nothing much has happened, he always managed to bring out something to affirm me on my journey. It encouraged me to continue on.* (0702)

The ability of the spiritual director to enable affirmation was not simply a personality trait. It was a skill that contributed to the creation of an open listening space. One respondent noted that her male spiritual director was able to hold a listening space and enhance her sense of affirmation, even though the topic of conversation was not within his sphere of experience:
Even though it was not his own experience or his own preference, he really affirmed me to see that this was the gifting and that this was the gifting I brought to others as well. . . . What I heard was the affirming of the feminine and I heard the affirming of the role of the feminine in the spiritual life – that had not been my experience. (0906)

Encouraging new spiritual insights through attentive listening brought personal affirmation, but it also affirmed ways of engaging in the spiritual journey. One respondent spoke of deepening her experience of God as a complement to affirmation:

The experience of prayer at depth. The first spiritual director who affirmed and named some things allowed me to depth my experience with God and others. . . . the different spiritual directors I have had have been very with me, very affirming, and allowed me space to be, which is just wonderful. (0801)

The term ‘very with me’ implies more than simple listening. Affirmation implies being alongside another as a supportive companion in the quest to find greater significance in a relationship with God.

Similarly, another woman finds both confidence and confirmation of her own spiritual journeying through dialogue with a spiritual companion:

Maybe confirmation of what you are thinking – someone to walk with as you are growing in this new way of thinking about faith. It encourages me to not doubt, in a way. You can talk to God, but by talking to your spiritual director a lot of confirmation comes on things you are experiencing. (1001)

For another woman, the practice of journaling as an aid in her session with the director helped her to embed her faith through the process:

So I’d take my journal to my spiritual director each month and he would help me to see things in there. So that was the start of me finding out who I was and finding my real God. It was through those experiences that I felt that God, Christ, really did live in me. Before that they had only been words, but now I knew that Christ was in me. (0702)

In each of these selections participants have valued their spiritual director because of that person’s role in affirming faith practices that help to enrich relationship with God. Affirmation plays a key role in helping participants to find depth in their spiritual experience, enlivening their beliefs and self-validating their faith.
Reflecting on Past Church Experience

Dealing with Judgementalism

The last of the benefits of a spiritual direction encounter to be summarised in this chapter is the space given to reflecting on differences between spiritual direction and past church experiences. Inevitably, it is a comparative voice that is heard in the transcripts and once again the issue of judgement rises. The impact of judgementalism on a person’s spiritual journeying seems to be a repeated theme in transcripts regardless of what point is being made about the benefit of spiritual direction. For some it is a more objective comment about the conservative system, for others it is personalised. One participant was keenly aware of a personal interaction with her priest in which she received any communication as judgement:

But I can’t go to my parish priest - I feel judgement from her, and I can’t tell her that... the parish priest, being more fundamental, will tell you what to think and then asks you for a reply. If you give a comment, her response will often come over as a judgement. (0904)

In this case, the fact that she has encountered a female priest doesn’t seem to have any bearing upon the feeling of being judged. The priest is a symbol of the fundamentalist system referred to in the comment, one who espouses an evangelical approach in her denomination.

As referred to in an earlier section, judgement is often internalised as the need to try harder and be better or get it right. Previously, the comments were summarised in relation to the voice of God one hears that portrays a judgemental, demanding God with high expectations of holy behaviour:

That’s the huge difference between the church and spiritual direction and who God is in that space. In my head I need to solve things and I solve them by trying harder, which I think is what the church always asks us to do. Push a bit more, try harder, be a better Christian by working harder. Pull yourself by your bootstraps. (0809)

In many of these reflections, the nature of God becomes the victim through the projection of the patterned voices. To discover a different image of God in this other space that is not
‘church’ has been liberating. The thought of returning to such a confined image of God is made less possible after being exposed to a different way of being with God:

*It’s almost uneducated . . . there is no longer a striving to grow or to find life or to explore or for God to get bigger. God seems to get smaller for me in that atmosphere.* (1003)

Issues related to judgementalism have been addressed in other chapters of this study. When hearing participant’s reflections on the overall benefits of attending spiritual direction, the issue is still brought into their summary comments. The impact of the constricted nature of past religious experience has left a lasting mark and it remains the background canvas against which other spiritual practices are measured.

**Struggling with Change**

Spiritual direction is only one of a variety of practices that may be embraced to fulfil the desire to expand the boundaries of a known faith-view. By embarking upon the journey of spiritual maturity it is soon realised that in many ways change is inevitable and authentic spiritual development is life changing. Giving voice to one’s personal spiritual experiences and frustrations that arise from past religious encounters can often result in greater clarity of both the positive experiences and the less welcomed aspects of those changes. Within the openness of a spiritual direction space a person is temporarily removed from both the confines of the shadows of judgement and the emotional attachment to groups. However, the clarity can also bring significant personal change, as has been noted elsewhere, that can be disenfranchising and comes with personal cost. A change in worldview or in faith perspective may be seen as a benefit through liberating the spirit but it may also bring other changes that create difficult personal circumstances. The role of spiritual direction includes being able to companion people through times of dislocation.
The following series of comments demonstrates the tension one woman felt between a new discernment of who God might be and the institutional image of God advocated in her faith fellowship. The expectation to be with a husband in ministry who supported that earlier conservative paradigm placed her in a difficult position. Her experiences of discovering a different image of God, through dialogue in her spiritual direction sessions, was at variance with concepts of God held by her husband and church fellowship:

I think the initial thing was separating church and God. And then just seeing God in my life; seeing God’s there even though I don’t sometimes feel or think he is. To some degree spiritual direction has become my ‘church’ where I get more in spiritual direction than going to church. More encouragement, more relating to God. Seeing where God is in my life – when I go to church I don’t see God in my life there, it is just form and system. (1006)

This comment reflects one of the outcomes of engaging in a new spirituality that is not sanctioned by the home community and has the potential to cause estrangement. This respondent continues,

Without spiritual direction I would be beating my head against a brick wall at church. Frequently on Sunday’s I struggle with just getting myself motivated to go. I would rather stay home and listen to a tape or read a book, but when you are [the wife] you are expected to go! (1006)

For some involved in spiritual direction, the struggle is between a love of God that is internalised and enacted through contemplative practice, and feeling trapped or constrained by past religious systems. Liberation and freedom are words that are used by many to capture the shift from a system-based religious engagement to a spirit mediated transcendent experience. Such was the experience of the wife who felt compelled to join her husband on a Sunday morning:

I may not be physically free but I feel free in my spirit, because of spiritual direction. I am no longer bogged down in the church and the system. (1006)

In conclusion, past church experiences have left wounds of judgementalism and a fixed set of ideas about the nature of God. The benefit of accessing a spiritual direction space included being companioned through the hard choices that came with changes in faith orientation.
Openness in a spiritual direction encounter helped participants to confront the shadows of judgement and the implications of reorientation.

**Summary**

As noted in the Methodology, the last question in the interview schedule for this study asked participants if there were benefits in accessing a spiritual direction space to speak of intimate spiritual experience. The question was open ended and gave participants the latitude to speak about whatever aspect of their experiences they wished to share. No participant objected to the question or conveyed a negative response. To the contrary, the responses collated above provide substantial evidence of the positive nature of the participants’ memories.

Some of the benefits quoted above have summarised the support role that a spiritual direction space offered while the pilgrim was experiencing a change of faith paradigm. The experience of dislocation or disorientation was buttressed by the affirmation of being heard and being taken seriously, and the outcomes took the individual into an authentic space where shadows could be confronted and true selfhood could be liberated and assimilated. Female conservative experience often encounters disempowerment because of the dismissal or muting of a woman’s voice. So it is noteworthy that being heard, hearing God and hearing a different voice come together as a reflection on the benefit of having a place in which to speak freely. It implies that empowerment or personal agency will result if one has a voice. This is supported by the capacity of participants to experience greater intimacy, particularly with God, and the liberty to engage a different sense of identity.
## Table 12

### General Impressions

| Spiritual direction has enabled me to articulate my experience of God. (1004) | I own my experience of God in a much fuller, deep and real way. (1004) |
| I am more measured in caring for my own spirituality. (1005) | Helping me keep fresh (1005) |

### Part of the Spiritual Journey

| I was very suspicious when I first learned about it. (0802) | You just keep these things under your hat. (0701) |
| I still have to be careful of what I say in church because of the very conservative style. (1006) | “Why does she need that? Is there something wrong with her?” (1006) |

### Discovering the Contemplative

| It’s a different language; it’s a different way of being. (0910) | It’s been absolutely transformative. It’s my home. (0801) |
| Learning more of the contemplative helps balance the action. (0803) | I had to be ready to do spiritual direction in some way. (0701) |
| My image of God has changed from a pointing, accusing finger to hands and arms that hold me. (0701) | It was the whole contemplative approach to life. (1004) |
| So it’s an inner journey of discovery. (0910) | What used to satisfy no longer satisfies and I feel scared, fearful and insecure in that. (0912) |
| It’s gently challenging me how to think about my faith and my God. (0808) | It was really about saying I belong. (0909) |
| It’s allowing God to speak through whatever. It’s so different. (0912) | I can confirm the voice of God. There was empowerment, spiritually empowering for me. (1002) |

### Hearing God

| It’s almost my way of talking to God. (0804) | I just stop and listen to God. (0908) |
| Not narrow or controlling or directive. Invitational. (0907) | It was not about getting it right. I was about hearing what God was saying. (0907) |
| He was there to help me listen to how God was working in my life. (0906) | It’s as though you see yourself for the first time. (0702) |
| There are completely no expectations, just encouragement and acceptance. (0912) | |

<p>| There is an intimacy with God. We were just there together. (0809) | I haven’t experienced that in faith communities . . . journeying intimately with God. (0703) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Finding who I am</strong></th>
<th>I have grown into attending to God’s intimate involvement in my life. (0806)</th>
<th>God is lighter, freer to transcend boundaries. (0801)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>It’s about attending to who we really are, who God is in us.</strong> (0806)</td>
<td>It was the thing that really helped me to honour who I am and that is was OK to be me. (0906)</td>
<td>I could name my own experience for myself—I could name what I understood God to be doing. (0809)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have always looked for the deeper way into God. (0809)</td>
<td>Reaching a space where I can get into the real deep things of God. (0910)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Affirmation and Value</strong></th>
<th>Spiritual direction has actually been incredibly affirming. (0907)</th>
<th>Spiritual direction is there to affirm people. (0909)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The way people listen in spiritual direction enables you to listen to yourself and to listen to God. (0908)</td>
<td>Feelings, yes, but also it’s the being listened to. (0909)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It was dominated by male leadership, and I feel like I was never really listened to, never really heard. (0907)</td>
<td>I don’t feel I’m ridiculed or minimalised. (0904)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having a listener brings me to new understandings of who I am. (0802)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Getting it right</strong></th>
<th>My experience of the church has been, “You’ve got to do better; you’re not good enough.” (0909)</th>
<th>Being accepted, loved valued and listened to. Affirmed. You come away thinking, “Well, I’m not so bad after all!” (0909)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He always managed to affirm me on my journey. It encouraged me to continue on. (0702)</td>
<td>Even though it was not his own experience or his own preference, he really affirmed me to see that this was my gifting. (0906)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different spiritual directors I have had have been very affirming and allowed me space to be. (0801)</td>
<td>Someone to walk with as you are growing in this new way of thinking about faith. (1001)</td>
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| **Reflecting on Past Church Experience** | | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Dealing with Judgementalism</strong></th>
<th>But I can’t go to my parish priest - I feel judgement from her, and I can’t tell her that. (0904)</th>
<th>That’s the huge difference between the church and spiritual direction and who God is in that space. (0809)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing where God is in my life – when I go to church I don’t see God in my life there, it is just form and system. (1006)</td>
<td>I may not be physically free but I feel free in my spirit, because of spiritual direction. I am no longer bogged down in the church and the system. (1006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transcript</td>
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<td><strong>25</strong></td>
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Chapter 10

The Journey toward a Feminine Spirituality

Proposing a feminine spirituality that is validated by women’s faith experiences has been discussed in earlier chapters. It was noted that feminist writers in spirituality and religion speak of women being unconsciously authored by a patriarchal hegemony that sets the paradigm of being ‘female’, and consequently, an ‘acceptable female’ in the conservative context. Consequently, speaking about a feminine spirituality requires some recognition that descriptors of spirituality have been formed in patriarchal systems using masculine modes of spiritual engagement. The styles of language and imagery used by the women in this study were examined to see if there was support for a feminine mode of engagement by which women construct their feminine spirituality, and through which they enhance the validation of their own truth.

Because the initial parameters of this study included participants having a prior association with a conservative style of religious fellowship, the transcripts often show a movement away from what has previously been owned as a faith stance within that paradigm and toward an exploration of other viewpoints. The conservative faith stance operates within a more objectified discourse on what faith and relationship with God entails. It is proposed that the freedom to express a relationship with God in alternative language, particularly in the open space of a spiritual direction conversation, can expand the varieties of ways of speaking about God, and therefore, encourage a directee to envisage alternate perceptions of being with God. When women validate their own truth about their spiritual encounters, it helps to shape their
style of feminine spirituality because of the freedom to use language and metaphor that make
the encounters meaningful.

Spiritual development is founded upon experiences of the Divine, however they may be
envisioned. Recognising and acknowledging one’s transcendent experiences as the basis of
perceptions about God has not been a significant part of the historical development of
rituals and doctrines as carriers of the faith has meant inner spirituality has played less of a
role in the validity of what faithfulness represents. (Nelson 2009,99) Images of God have been
determined by doctrinal and intellectual ideas rather than by intuitive connection with an
internal awareness through numinous experience. The patriarchal preference for using
intellectual, abstract and ideas-based information has dominated the development of Christian
faith. A feminine form of engagement that is primarily experienced-based has persisted largely
in forms that have been peripheral to orthodoxy and have often been seen as eccentric or, at
times, heretical. (Jantzen 1995; McGinn 2005)

Indications of feminine spirituality that emerged in this study have been identified by
examining the women’s conversations about their faith experiences, dialogue that has been
made possible through accessing a broad space which is hospitable to alternate ways of
speaking about God. The proposed schema of how a feminine spirituality is engaged
differently from the predominant masculinised tradition is offered with the understanding that
a Jungian approach is assumed: both the masculine and feminine modalities exist within each
individual. It is the gender preference for accessing information that makes one style or
another more observable in women or men. (Brannon 1999) The focus of this discussion is
based upon what has been observed in women’s narratives and how that reflects the
suggested schema. An equivalent study that observed men’s preferences for validating their
faith, or how men exhibit traits of what is being described as a feminine spirituality, would be
helpful but is not under consideration here.
All participants spoke of changes in their faith journey throughout their life story. There have been schemas and descriptions of how the spiritual life develops since early Christian times. (McGinn 1991,151; Chadwick 1993) In recent literature, contemporary faith development theory has established patterns of movement in faith life stories that are influenced by aged-related contextual shifts, where many changes in faith stance are linked to life crises. (Helminiak 1987; Fowler 1996) The influence of Fowler’s work is well documented (Brelsford 2004) and has an application to both male and female faith journeys. However, Nicola Slee focused on women’s faith development and asserts, as referred to in Chapter 2, that there is a common pattern to the development of the woman’s faith journey that takes her from paralysis (alienation), through awakening to relationality. (Slee 2000) Beverley Lanzetta has devised a similar schema based upon the ancient notion of healing requiring “deconstruction or letting go of old beliefs, wounds and traumas, followed by an intense period of reintegration and soul healing.” (Lanzetta 2010,23) Recording the architecture of participants’ spiritual stories in order to track their faith development was not the intention of this study. However, feminine faith development theory can form a framework against which one can evaluate the way women responded to shifts in their spiritual perception when facilitated by the broad space of spiritual direction.

Slee’s schema will be used in this analysis as the framework of modalities by which women tend to make sense of their spiritual experiences. The feminine faithing process uses different epistemological routes to establish the validity of what women eventually accommodate into their meaning-making of spiritual experiences. Using Carol Gilligan’s earlier work, Slee demonstrated that the women in her study employed particular ways of owning faith, concluding that these preferentially connect with women. (Slee 2004) The modalities are different from the ways of knowing God or faith that has dominated male-authored

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42 faithing is a term used by Nicola Slee to mean the “strategies employed by women by means of which they discerned and embodied shape, pattern, meaning, intentionality and coherence in their life experience.” Slee, N. (2000). “Some Patterns and Processes of Women’s Faith Development.” Journal of Beliefs and Values 21(1): 5-16.
theology. Women employ conversation, metaphor and narrative to language their perceived spiritual encounters, often using emotive or affective language. They also personalize engagement and hold conceptual connections between events as a significant part of making sense of things, particularly in terms of grounding encounters in the actuality of the experience. The term *groundedness* is used to refer to an earth-based existentialism that uses both physical and emotional sensitivities. Lastly, the willingness to adopt a more mystical approach to spirituality seems to be embraced more readily; women are more able to hold divine encounters as mystery without needing to measure the experience against the certainty of a philosophical affirmation of truth in order validate the experience as meaningful.

These suppositions about faiting are the descriptors that will be used to observe the formation of the women’s feminine spirituality. How each woman formed her faith within her faith-life narrative was not the focus of the enquiry. Rather, the transcripts were examined for ways in which the women’s language paralleled these themes. Listed in Table 14 are some of the observations from the women’s narratives that support Slee’s descriptors.

### Table 14

**Slee’s Descriptors of a Feminine Mode of Faith Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Trends Observed</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>Judgementalism interpreted as indicating a lack of personal acceptance. Awareness of relationships is significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational</td>
<td>A willingness to seek conversation to explore their spirituality and employ new language to express themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphoric</td>
<td>Using imagery and metaphor to symbolise the affect of an experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Able to express emotional engagement through verbalising the affective aspect of the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Perspective gained through seeing the narrative unfold, often in the metaphor of a journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded</td>
<td>Meaningful experiences are often nature-based and a sense of connectedness and relatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apophatic</td>
<td>A sense of the unknownness or mystery of God and an unnamed intuition about God being with you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Meaning-making by recognising connections in the faith story, sequentially and chronologically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Giving credibility to the style of narrative that evolves through accessing these modes of engagement is a crucial aspect of the validation of a woman’s faith story. A spiritual director can embrace the style and language in a narrative through offering gentle encouragement to a woman who is sensitive to being dismissed for incorrect modes of expression. The act of hearing one’s own voice articulating spiritual experience using these forms is part of the validation process, and can be enabled within the hospitality of the spiritual direction space.

Chapter 10 summarised responses to the question, “What do you feel have been the benefits of spiritual direction for you?” The quotations reiterated in this section highlight the implications of those responses and what was verbalised as beneficial. Throughout the narratives, three general movements can be discerned: a changing perception of faith, a reimaging of the perception of God and a changing relationship to God.

The following list refers to the themes that were recorded in the narratives:

- moving from a severe God of judgement to a gentle, loving God
- recognising an internal tendency to self-judgement, often deflected onto God
- recognising an expanding notion of God – ‘God out of the box’
- sanctioning Unknowingness – including perceptions of God as impotent or mystery
- engaging a maternal imagery for God
- recognising an identity shift that has facilitated a new relationship with God
- being companioned by God on a journey, rather than being observed by God
- being aware of God-in-relation interacting with a person’s being
- having the freedom to employ earth-based metaphors to express connectedness
- personal validation of spiritual experiences using own language

These movements are taken from verbatim references in the transcripts. Throughout this section of the study, although it is the movement toward a feminine spirituality that is being highlighted, the previous comments about the role of the broad place, the shadow effects and the attributes of the spiritual director remain in view.
Quotations have been listed as follows:

- Affective engagement with God
  - a gentle God
  - being loved by God
  - self-judgement
- Changes in the image of God
  - movement away from a contained image of God
  - open to unanswered questions / God as impotent or powerless
- God companions the journey
  - God as companion
  - God-in-relation
- Connected with nature and the maternal metaphor
  - nature metaphor
  - maternal imagery
- Valuing feminine identity

**Affective Engagement with God**

One significant issue that seems to rise when moving away from a conservative stance is naming the judgementalism that has left its mark on the personality, including the disillusionment or hurt arising from being judged by a person or fellowship to whom allegiance was given. In the patriarchal paradigm, to participate in the passion of the corporate vision requires a measure of judgement as to whether someone adheres to the norms and vision of the group stance. Apart from any sociological outcomes, the theological outcome has meant adopting an image of God which reinforces the group’s need to keep others accountable. Some studies have lead to the conclusion that people tend to create a divinised image based on their own image and that they perceive gods as they perceive themselves. (Demoulin, Saroglou et al. 2008,237; Morewedge and Clear 2008) The anthropomorphic characteristics assigned to God then become the means by which emotional interaction is verified and if one
has a tendency toward judging the compliance of other group members, then it seems that such tendency would be transferred onto an image of God. Accordingly, if there is a tendency to judge others, then God is also portrayed as a judging God. If this is the case, shifts in faith development would then be evident in the changing emotional perceptiveness of the individual about the nature of God, with a consequent shift in the affective attitude toward others around them.

One surprising shift was recorded where women spoke about discovering a warmer, gentler relationship with God.

**A gentle God.**

The word gentle is used in counterpoint to what is experienced as judgement. In the following quotations there emerges a perception that God is gentle or is dealing gently with the pilgrims. There idea of gentleness engages a softer, more receptive aspect of the personality which invokes a more affective tone to references about the experience. The responses show it has not been a sudden realisation, but a gradual growing into a new awareness. This is different from simply grasping a new idea about God. For example,

> It was like one step at a time and felt like God was very gentle with me in that period. . . . Less and less of the harsh, judgmental God and more of the gentle God. I think the judgmental God is the one I learned about in my childhood, as I understood it. (0703)

This participant tells of growing up in a local ‘evangelical Baptist church.’ Because her account of her parent’s faith affiliation and family home environment does not indicate a harsh, judgemental situation in her early home life, one can imply that her harsh, judgemental image of God was a legacy of her religious affiliations. Her early adult years were spent working with evangelically orientated organisations. Sometime later in her story, after some significant life experiences, she says,
And whilst it had changed over time, the experience [later] felt more like the gentle God. . . new and re-discovered. God the provider, the gentle God I discovered in ways I hadn’t known before. (0703)

God was welcomed into a different kind of relationship that touched the affective level of her emotional damage. It brought a change in perception to a more caring, compassionate sense of God. As a stage of spiritual growth, the feminine affective engagement is opened to the advances of the Divine that speak in a form that connected with her needs.

A shift to a gentle image of God was narrated in another woman’s story who also contrasted her experiences of a formal church structure with something less demanding:

For me one of the main things in spiritual direction is that I have met a gentle God, and that is very different from any God I have met in the church. There is that structural sense in the church of imposition with God in the church. Someone tells me what God thinks and I need to fall into line behind that. (0809)

The ‘imposition’ of God infers a form of engagement that was not useful for her spiritual connectedness. In the transcript of this narrative, there is often resentment and cynicism in the way the story is told that reflects her rebellion against a structured faith. She speaks cynically of the way her church experiences have forced her into compliance and left her feeling judged because she did not acquiesce to the expectations:

The God I met in spiritual direction is just not like that; God never obliges me or forces me. (0809)

The space in which she met a gentle God facilitated her desire to meet God on her own terms. In this case, the gentleness of God represents a non-masculinised mode of engagement where she felt freer to be herself.

A third example of engaging the gentleness of God is found in the process of spiritual discovery using imagery and metaphor. After an experience of deep hurt from working with a ministerial colleague, this woman’s spiritual director invites her to stay with the feeling of being hurt:

The invitation was to stay and let myself feel that I have actually been injured by somebody and it wasn’t fair to attack me like that. (0806)

She speaks of a visual image:
The image that came to me is like this tiny little child, all curled up, all on my own in a very dark place. Letting myself stay with that long enough to deal with it gave me a beautiful image of God just coming and picking me up and holding me closer to God’s chest. (0806)

In a place of hurt, her feminine need perceived a compassionate advance from God. It was in sharp contrast to the judgemental relationship with her fellow ministerial colleague that had left her wounded. She reflects upon the process that welcomes this mode of engagement:

The thing in spiritual direction is about affirming those images as gift. This is the gift that I would let myself remember even as this wounded child who felt completely alone. This God comes and picks me up and holds me so gently. (0806)

Subjective reciprocity between the believer seeking care for the soul and a compassionate God is an important part of feeling connected. The outcome of a different sense of God allowed another participant the liberty to see God as freer and lighter, even intimate, a somewhat unusual way to express an image of God:

A contrary voice came – slowing down, hospitable, the image not having to be endlessly formed in a shape that wasn’t of my making. It was a much more understanding God. . . It’s a lighter voice. God is lighter; God is freer to transcend boundaries; God is intimate and beyond at the same time. Hard to put into words – yet very hospitable at the same time. (0801)

The lightness of God is intuitively welcomed as an offer of hospitality, something that may be implied as a characteristic of a gentler God. Joung speaks about the role of attachment theory in women’s faith development and critiques the reliance on cognitive development in other versions of faith development theories. Joung believes it is the affective dimension that has been missing and considers that attachment theory views “development as moving from a secure, trusting dependence to a mature interdependence with a capacity to tolerate intimacy.” (Joung 2006,146) If this proposal is accepted, it may be appropriate to conclude that the use of the word intimate indicates a marker of a shift in faith development, one that signals a deeper engagement with the affective aspect of the inner being. One participant said,

I have grown into attending to God’s intimate involvement in my life. (0806)

Another observed someone in the congregation and recognised something significant:
[He] had a huge impact on me. He was what we would call one of our saints, and would have been 80 or 90, and shared his faith as a very intimate relationship with Christ. His prayer life was amazing. That put in me a desire to want that intimacy. (0803)

When this principle is applied to a relationship with God, it may indicate a deeper embedding of the relationship within the psyche, one that may become a significant and generative attachment. Unhealthy attachment is recognised within psychological studies (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007) as detrimental to appropriate adult development and it must be acknowledged that there are many possible anomalies which caution against making a simple positive correlation between the participants’ use of the word *intimate* and a maturing faith. In this study we simply note the use of the term as part of a range of changing perceptions voiced by the participants and suggest that the movement toward a perception of intimacy with God may be viewed as indicating a deepening spirituality.

**Being loved by God**

For others, an awakening to *being loved by God* was realised through conversation in spiritual direction and represents another shift from the image of a judgemental God. Grey (2001,115) notes that the transformation from “the *threatening* other, to the *beloved* other is a concern at the heart of feminist theology.” The difficulty here is to grasp that this is a different response to the theological assertions that ‘God loves us.’ It is not an intellectualised reaffirmation of a core tenet, something that would be very familiar to most women listening to sermons in their conservative fellowships. These comments indicate an affective engagement that is open and vulnerable to an alternate sense of the Divine. It is a further example of a growing intersubjectivity that requires openness and vulnerability in order to ground meaning, affective characteristics of a feminine mode of engaging with spiritual experience.
A lack of intersubjectivity is evident in the next woman’s memories of a deep sense of fear and punishment in relation to God. It had been ingrained in her early church and family situation and she describes the environment as ‘very, very judgemental.’ She narrates part of her story:

> To me it didn’t seem a faith in a loving God; it was more a faith in a God that was going to punish you . . . My memory of faith is something you had to do, it was driven by fear and I was always fearful. God was not a loving God, he was a God to be feared. It wasn’t anything about a relationship with anyone. (1001)

The idea of ‘being loved’ captures what is referred to as an intersubjective relationship - two entities in open and vulnerable relationship, both sensitive to the nuances and emotions of the other. (Benjamin 2004) The woman continues her story about how spiritual direction brought a new perspective to her relationship with God:

> [Spiritual direction] got me on the path of God as a loving God and not about punishment. It’s about relationship, it’s not about rules and regulations and have-to’s or shoulds. That was quite new to me. (1001)

A similar shift from the judgemental voice is heard in the next series of quotations. This participant’s mother was a dedicated church member whom she felt she could never please and she speaks of a consequent view of an authoritarian God:

> I was never good enough. I never did things good enough for Mum . . . So I felt in me that part of God was this strict authoritarian person - if you stepped out of line you were in big trouble. (0702)

Discovering that God loved her regardless of her imperfections was discovered in the open space of spiritual companioning:

> I suppose from going along to spiritual direction I have been presented with this fact that God isn’t this strict, authoritarian person and God doesn’t expect me to be perfect, and in fact, God loves me when I am imperfect. (0702)

The experience of hearing that God loved her, without having the precondition of being perfect, opened up new connections with her own identity. She reflects,

> It’s as though you see the truth in yourself for the first time. (0702)

So an important link is made between the realisation of being loved by God and shaping identity.
The impact of self-Judgement

For some, early exposure to a judgemental environment has left a pattern of self-judgement in response to the overseeing judgement of a God who is ever watchful of one’s behaviour. If the desire for a more open, subjective relationship is viewed as a core expression of feminine spirituality, then self-judgement restricts openness and emotional availability to engage holistically in the faith relationship. One participant felt this was a common experience of those in most faith communities:

Self-judgement, men and women; that voice of judgement, of a judging God. . . . It’s consistently in the woman’s story. Consistently. No matter where women are coming from, that’s a fallback position in crisis. (0903)

For another participant, the impact of her mother’s strict faithfulness to her congregational expectations left the woman with a self-accusative voice that was projected onto God:

I never felt good enough. It’s been some journey. . . all my life I thought if I did the right thing, I’d be accepted by God, I’d have a happy successful Christian life . . .but that doesn’t work. When the traumas come along you feel devastated because it doesn’t work. . . . Even though I had realised God wasn’t an authoritarian, it still lives with you and you still find yourself going back into that mindset - got to do the right thing and do all the rules and regulations.” (0702)

Yet another participant took the blame for her own self-judgement, setting impossibly high conditions upon herself for the reciprocal love of God:

Lots of angst around my own self-esteem feelings. I was not really sure where church fitted into that. Again I felt that if I was doing the right thing by God and if I was really, really trusting Him and loving Him then I should feel better about myself. I should feel better about myself, I should feel loved and that should change everything. (0804)

A final stage of the self-judgement is a perception of outright failure:

There was me in this situation being in this church thinking I’m such a failure here, I’ve got to leave. I’m angry and unhappy, and she [my spiritual director] talked about my faithfulness to God! (0909)

The gradual movement from self-judgement to acceptance, for women of faith, is most effective when congruent with their relationship to God. For one woman, who felt “I was too guilty to face God,” the final authority was the voice of God:
So over the years God has been trying to tell me, “I want you to do this a different way. Step into freedom; freedom of experience between you and me. We’re OK. You don’t have to be good. If you are just as you are we can do this thing.” (0702)

Not all of these movements were entirely due to engaging in spiritual direction, however having a place to speak openly about a changing awareness of God was central to the courage needed to explore alternate feelings about faith. A fundamental shift occurred in the following participant’s faith paradigm, something she attributed to the freedom to voice doubts to her spiritual director:

*I guess she opened me out. She validated my own experience, opened me to other ways of being with God. . .

*Slowly it was an awareness of being God in the world and looking and believing that God is in the other . . . fundamental shifts in my theology. My theology moved from needing to be saved to we are essentially good and there is good in everybody. (1004)*

A final quotation notes the outcome of dealing with self-judgement. This participant grasped the deeper meaning of compassion once her self-judgement waned:

*I think learning to serve and love includes living contemplatively; learning simplicity. To be there; present to what you are doing. That’s how I want to live, prayerfully. But it’s not easy.

*It feels gentle to me, and it feels as though it brings me into community. I think I can love other people better now than I ever used to, probably because I am less judgemental of myself. If I am more able to embrace myself then I am more able to embrace other people. To see their life struggles and their lives as sacred too. (0901)*

At the introduction of this section it was suggested that a more affective perception of a relationship with God was an indication of a feminine modality being embraced. The movements noted in the above quotations support a softer, more companionable sense of being with God that can be named as an aspect of feminine spiritual engagement.

**Changes in the Image of God**

An often quoted metaphor for previous perceptions of God was the idea of a box, a bounded space that *contains* God and fashions the Divine into a particular model. It implies a sense of smallness or fixed nature. There were no explanations offered in the transcripts as to how the
box-metaphor was to be interpreted. It was used as a way of holding the experience of a fixed notion of God’s character that was later transformed into something more expansive.

Three different aspects to this were found in the transcripts. A movement away from the view of God being bounded in some way, the movement toward perceiving a more mysterious aspect to God and a willingness to sit with challenging life questions.

**Changing an image of God that is contained or bounded.**

In some transcripts, the theme of ‘God in a box’ is contrasted with the mysteriousness of God. There is a perception of a different standpoint for appreciating who God might be. For some, this was new:

> I felt as though it helped me to see God in a new way. God wasn’t in this little box that I had had all those years, and I didn’t have to be the good little Christian I thought I had to be. So he [my spiritual director] opened up a whole new way of looking at things. (0702)

Another recognised the freedom to engage God as she wished, not as was prescribed in other environments:

> I could think about God the way I wanted to. That was the freedom – suddenly God was out of the box. (1003)

The following quotations succinctly described one woman’s journey of discovery when listening to a colleague speak about their experience:

> God was much bigger than the box. [Someone said], ‘if they want to stuff God back in the box that was fine, but I needed to be outside the box and I needed God to be outside the box as well.’ That was my experience; outside the box God is much bigger and there are no boundaries to God. That was extremely significant for me. (0912)

The metaphorical description of moving to the edge of God’s hand captures the change in perspective and a consequent realisation of the damage that her constricted view has caused:

> One of the beautiful things when we are free to worship God is to be real. But when there is a container with walls around it you have to actually pretend because the standards are beyond what is natural in our broken state. (0912)
Living a faith life on the basis of pretence is a disturbing reality of the female experience of this participant.

Another participant acknowledged the contained, and sanitised, aspect of her faith experience. The freedom to explore brought greater vulnerability to her image of God:

*When I was in the evangelical box it was about the goodness of God and the good things of life. Now it is expanded and it’s not just about the good things of life. God is about the suffering, the difficulty and the struggle. When I was in the box, God was there with me. But if I’m outside the box, which I feel I am now, God’s there with me too, so there is no limit. It’s an open vista on what I can explore.* (1005)

Similarly, another participant gave an intuited response to being liberated from her narrow view of the nature of God:

*I was no longer in this narrow, right way of seeing things. I just thought it is much bigger than that; I have just broadened out. I haven’t left it behind, it’s just bigger.* (0905)

This woman has had the experience of hindsight, gaining a perspective on the changes that occurred and their significance to her relationships. There were different reactions, or consequences, to moving on from one image to another. The next quotation shows how one woman’s changing awareness brought a sense of compassion to those who she sees as a spiritual director, speaking out of an awareness of past struggles she had encountered:

*I have a heartfelt compassion for those who have felt an invitation of the Spirit beyond what they know and yet they still struggle with the containers of what they know.* (0801)

As has been noted elsewhere, a part of the female experience of patriarchal, institutionalised faith is a tendency toward dualism where the reality of living in the faith environment means having two aspects to oneself: the public face that concurs with the language and dogma and a private faith that knows (and lives out of) a different experience. For one participant, separating God from the negative experience of congregational life meant wrestling with the inner turmoil of such a split:

*Even though I have divided God and church, within myself I don’t feel quite so divided. I know that without the church I can still have a relationship with God. God is still there and interested in me; I can still pray and talk to God without the negative feelings I have about the church. I could very easily get frustrated on a Sunday morning. I have done in the past. Now I can let that go because God is over here, he is not just tied up in the church.* (1006)
For this woman, the outcome of persevering in conversation with a spiritual director has been a tentative acceptance that God is still available and trustworthy:

The accumulation of all these things has really become disillusionment with the church. In my upbringing God and the church are the same. I have really had to work hard to separate God from the church – I remain somewhat disillusioned with the church, but I think I still trust God. (1006)

There is a very real sense that God has been liberated from the projections of negativity acquired from such a restricted understanding of the nature of God. The feminine attribute of being able to comfortably hold mystery is at stake. From the above quotations, the movements noted have enabled participants to hold a broader, more vulnerable view of God.

Open to unanswered questions.

When one adopts a doctrinal approach to understanding faith, there is a framework available for addressing questions about spiritual encounters. The use of the word mystery is commonly espoused in contemplative theology to express the unfathomable involvement of God in our existential reality. It is also metaphorical for an unknownness about the nature of God, symbolising an apophatic style of spirituality. The shift in paradigms, from relying on what is known to embracing the wilderness of what is unknown, may cause distress or even disenfranchisement. Yet God as mystery sits comfortably in a feminine engagement. One woman commented,

In recent years, it was like a freedom but it was also scary, it was scary not to have all the answers; in fact it was scary to have any that really questioned my faith... For me I’m most comfortable in the contemplative, living with the questions. (0912)

Another comment reflected the intuitive embrace of an alternate way of viewing God:

I couldn’t really explain it. What happened was a movement of God from friend, lover, Father, protector and security to a position of God is mystery. So I couldn’t argue it; all I

43 Apophatic theology acknowledges the limitations of language to speak about the nature of God. (Davis, B. M. “Apophatic Theology and Masculinities.” CrossCurrents 61(4): 502-514.)
could say is this is my experience. It was like a whisper of the experience, but I had to stay true to that. (1004)

A third participant expressed the way she came to hold the tension of not having the answers:

For me there are no answers to those questions, you just have to live with the tension, and when I meet people what is more important is that, because they are angry, the questions come out of confusion or disorientation - their spirituality, the sense of meaning in life, has fallen apart. That’s what is more important than answering the questions. You just have to live with the tension of not knowing answers . . . the mystery. . . I think it is a shift. I don’t understand the reason for the powerlessness of God - I think it is about mystery. ‘Life is like this’, and not having to have an answer for everybody’s question. People expect you to have an answer . . . well the answer is “This is a mystery”. (0703)

This participant continues with her sense that God is impotent or powerless in dealing with the brokenness of our existence. Feminist writers have spoken of an image of the Divine that is an involved or embodied God, one who is expressed within the existential reality of contemporary life. (McFague 1993; Grey 2001,88) The shift indicates some disillusionment with the overarching patriarchal belief in absolutes that is found in a contained system. The reality of the now, and the pain, tragedy and dysfunction that it entails, is not a reflection of a dysfunctional God, but rather indicates a wider perspective on the temporal nature of creation. The language that this participant used reflected her struggle:

“The concept of God being powerless was not one I had ever heard anyone talk about ever. It was only really through discovering it myself. I remember a friend asking how to explain his sister dying of cancer and leaving a young family – how do you explain that? I can’t explain it, but my own experience is that God is powerless at times. I think that was the beginning of living with those contradictions; the poverty of Christ and the power and powerlessness of God. They were quite pivotal experiences.

So faith in this period has been much more this intimate experience.” (0703)

What seems important is her coming to associate ‘the poverty of Christ and the power and powerlessness of God’ with a more intimate experience of faith. It implies the shallowness of knowing answers or having explanations is replaced by a deep sense of trust despite the contradictions. Similarly, the following quotation rather obliquely refers to the same resolution. This participant has deepened her awareness of the affective aspect of God in the midst of tragedy:
"If God can fix things, then God is a God who can make things happen and then God’s a bastard! . . . If God lets things happen then God is either a bastard or impotent. I really have a very strong sense now of God travelling the journey to the cross." (0806)

This final esoteric comment connects the theological realities of a tenet of Christian faith to the grounded meaning and gravity of that tenet. It starkly postulates the vulnerability of God. This is characteristic of women exhibiting a move away from the sculptured answers of a philosophically based patriarchism and toward embracing the possibility of not knowing.

**God Companions the Journey**

Another aspect of the image of a judgemental God is the view of a watchful God who observes from ‘outside’ in order to find the believer worthy. The participants’ responses to speaking about personal spiritual encounters in a safe space indicate their transformation of a static image of God into a companioning presence who shares the journey.

An outcome of this shift was the sense that they experienced a God-me relationship founded upon an affective intuition that God responded to the uniqueness of each personality.

**God as companion**

Some spoke of a companion-image of God rather than a Divine observer of the journey who stands apart waiting to correct. The first participant captured the companionship aspect of a relationship with God:

> There was more focus on my journey and with God in my journey. (1002)

Her comments are reiterated by another woman who spoke calmly about how the journey had been for her after some significant disappointments in her life:
It was a profound experience of journeying with God, knowing I was safe and I was healed. I have walked in darkness but I haven’t walked alone. I’m very grateful for that. I’ve experienced the presence of God very much. I am very faithful to pray every day and I’m very sensate and I experience God’s presence around me. That bush experience of the little kid comes to me when I see the mountains and am caught up in the grandeur of God. (0907)

Several elements of a feminine expression of spirituality are melded into this comment: the grounded, sensate awareness that intuits the presence of God, the nature-based memories that stimulate her reconnection with God and the wider perspective of having God’s companionship on the journey with her, regardless of the outcomes in life. These elements are also found in the next quotation:

I guess I developed a very strong inner world, a very strong sense of God with me on my journey. A strong sense of God as a nurturing presence - the image of the shepherd was very important for me for many years, and being looked after as a sheep who was a bit out on the edge and needed special care. (0801)

In each of these comments, the idea of companionship seems to bring a peaceful approach to the unfolding events in life. The final participant selected a central idea for the year that was ahead, one on which she could meditate. She contrasted a more structured approach to learning about peace with her intuitive aspect that brought a more serene, accepting approach to God journeying with her:

I remember at the end of 2007 I had chosen the word peace – I choose a word at the beginning of the year to dwell on for the year – and I had a sense that peace was the word. That was good. But then I started going into the headspace, which I have been in the past, of ‘how am I going to learn about peace – what steps will I take and in what programs will I enrol?’

But then talking it all through with [my spiritual director] I found a real sense that I actually didn’t need to do anything, that I was going to get to the end of 2008 and look back and say ‘I’ve experienced the peace of God this year – I know a lot more about peace and I’ve experienced peace and I didn’t actually have to set out to achieve that. I could just trust God would take me on that journey. (0908)

This cameo gives an insight into a woman’s awareness of her learnt pattern of taking a more objective, intellectualised approach to dealing with the spiritual journey and a new desire to follow a more intuitive, existential awareness of being companioned by God.
**God-in-relation**

For some, an affective intuition that God responded to the uniqueness of each personality created a rising awareness of God-in-relation and the subsequent perception of God’s gaze upon them. This again reflects the movement toward intersubjective relationship and acknowledges the responsiveness of God noted earlier when considering comments about the gentleness of God. It represents a particular theological viewpoint about the nature of God that intuits the subjective response of God. One participant became aware of God’s perception of her:

> And during that time, God continued to broaden my view of the world - my worldview and also the way I looked at others. . . That’s what helped me to broaden my view of God, and to broaden my view of how he saw me. (0902)

This section of the woman’s narrative is quite complex and touches upon past turmoil that came through tragedy. In her story she repeats several times that her experiences broadened her from the initial conservative, religious upbringing of her family home. The reality of life’s experiences brought her to see God in a different light due to her exposure to different environments and emotional chaos. In terms of an indicator of a growing feminine spirituality, being broadened has been congruent with being grounded in the chaos of life and came with a different sensitivity to her relationship with God.

A similar movement was mentioned by another participant. She spoke about a definite change toward a subjective, responsive relationship with God:

> For me, God has been freed from the confines of institution. . . I guess my understanding of God moves and transcends any kind of defined institutional one. I am really more at home ecumenically in recent years. I think it is part of a maturing faith. . . the God who is bigger than any particular form. In the last few years I have connected with images of the God who sees, knows and mystery. Less defined pictures of God and more of the character of God. I have had images in prayer of the God who gazes at me. (0801)

The phrase ‘God who gazes at me’ carries an affective tone that again signals an awareness of an intersubjective relationship. It is quite different from describing a characteristic of God or
assigning attributes to God. Gazing upon another implies an affective interaction and this participant connected her change with a maturing faith.

The final comment again refers to growing into a relational awareness of the affect of God:

_{I can remember at one time feeling like I could not look at God - I felt ashamed. It was all about ‘God has done this thing to me’. . . I remember my spiritual director saying, ‘Well, if you did look at God, what would God look like?’\_}

_{I realised that God was crying, reaching out to me, and wishing that it had never happened and not wanting me to have ever been hurt. (0806)\_}

The desire of a believer to be in an affective relationship with the Divine may be viewed in terms of the projection of one’s own image upon the image of God, as mentioned previously. The conclusion that people tend to create a divinised image based on their own image may give cause to dismiss the desire for these women to want a deeply responsive relationship with God. But in the tenor of this study, it is the voice of the women that has been brought to the forefront and however the desire has been initiated, the psychological and spiritual significance of seeing God as caring and emotionally responsive indicates a core feminine modality for understanding spiritual experience.

**Connected with Nature and Maternal Imagery**

**Nature metaphors**

One feature of a feminine spirituality is the metaphoric capacity to engage God through earth-based experiences. It was clear that, for some women, these experiences underpinned foundational spiritual truths, even though they were encounters that might have been discounted in conservative systems. Sanford (1978,11) emphasises the grounded nature of Jesus’ teaching that was not “from the world conceptualized and historically conditioned [but]
are drawn from the well of life itself.” He comments, “Jesus did not express himself by means of jargon or concepts but by means of living images, figures, and parables.” (11)

Similarly, the following quotes are from women recalling real life experiences as they remember them. The fact that they are retained memories means they have significance for them. (Sutton 2006) There were three different uses of the nature imagery: finding solace by being in nature with God, having nature as a mediating influence on spiritual experience and using nature metaphors for spiritual encounters. The first comment is quite clearly an experience mediated by nature:

That marks my deepest memories for me of my relationship with God being a reality. I used to ride my pony out in the bush after that and I would sing – I knew I was singing to God. . . . I’m very sensate and I experience God’s presence around me. That bush experience of the little kid comes to me when I see the mountains and am caught up in the grandeur of God. (0907)

A similar experience is recounted by the following participant:

I remember going to do this one day and being on a grassy hill watching the sunlight shining down and just feeling like God was surrounding me. I felt very much the aliveness and the reality of this God who was all around me like these little tiny particles in the air. I can remember that felt like burning and it has contributed to a longing to have God’s love within me. (0806)

A conservative approach to spirituality would normally limit spiritual interaction to an intellectually based, cognitive modality. A feminine approach to spirituality encompasses a far wider range of mediums through which spiritual encounter may legitimately occur. For example, one woman was quite insistent:

Some say God will only speak to you through the Bible, going to teaching conferences, etc. I want to say we can’t limit God – if God can’t speak to us through music, nature, scripture, fiction books, then we are limiting God.

The whole spiritual direction and contemplative way is not limiting God, it’s allowing God to speak through whatever. It’s so different. (0912)

Another expressed her solution to finding different ways of being with God:

So it wasn’t an easy year from the start. I felt like a little tree ripped out of its forest and planted in this desert. I think that’s where my faith journey started. . . I think I was relying on God, or clinging! That is when I would go off and walk, or go to places where it was quiet and talk to God, or listen to music that would feed me. I was in such a foreign
environment. Dad gave me a book about spiritual journey and I started journal writing then. I think that was the beginning of that time of spiritual journeying.

My whole focus on my spiritual journey involved walking a lot in parks; again I was seeking the solace of walking and being in nature. Because I was travelling with working it out myself. I had given myself the time to do that . . . I had time to do that. (1002)

The use of grounded imagery such as ‘a little tree ripped out of its forest’ uses a feminine aspect of expression that encodes past experiences that were difficult. She continues in a nature-based mode of language that reconnects perspective to meaning-making, naming it as spiritual journeying.

Many of the women were comfortable using metaphor to enter into their affect of their experience:

*I can remember lying on my bed and talking to God, and the sense I had, lying on the curved surface of our waterbed, was an image was of me lying on God’s stomach, the rested body.* (0905)

For another,

*I felt so dry; spiritually there was no input and I hated it. At that point, I picked up a brochure . . . there was an advertisement on TV some time ago for a hand cream - a very dry leaf is rubbed with this cream and it comes to life. That was my spirit.* (0912)

One participant had a very intimate response to the emotional chaos at the time:

*It was like crawling up on God’s bosom and snuggling in. My heart would be racing and erratic, and it would just calm in time with His until it settled.* (0902)

And finally,

*I think my early coming to faith. . . I saw visually a small child in a small craft in a rapid going down, and the hand of God which I could take and go upstream, or not take and go downstream with everyone else. And I took that hand and I’ve never let go. And I’ve never let go of that sense of my unique place in God’s plan.* (0802)

In each case, metaphor helps to express what was difficult to capture in the spiritual experience. The above quotations try to express something that has been felt deeply, a captured emotional memory, and bring it into voice in order to validate the significance of that emotive connection. This is a form of expression that is often dismissed in a patriarchal context as being too emotional.
Maternal imagery

A particular style of feminist response to the patriarchal domination of religious language is the use of God-as-Mother. For some feminist writers the change of language is significant for changing the internalised imagery of the Divine. (McFague 1982; Ruether 1983; Grey 2001) While one might have expected this to be a well used pathway to establishing a feminine spirituality, it was surprisingly absent from many of the transcripts in this study. A female imagery of God is developed through engaging the maternal aspect of the female experience and was mentioned as God-as-Mother in only one of the participant’s stories:

*I can specifically remember the sense of coming to God as mother, God as feminine, understanding what that longing was like for me as a woman. . . . But those three were totally entwined – exploring God as the feminine God, I had to do some work on my relationship with my mother and who I was as a woman and then, of course, my relationship with my husband.* (0905)

However, a metaphoric engagement with a nurturing affect was mentioned in two other transcripts:

*When I let myself be there the image that came to me is like this tiny little child, all curled up, all on my own in a very dark place. Letting myself stay with that long enough to deal with it gave me a beautiful image of God just coming and picking me up and holding me closer to God’s chest.* (0806)

*I am much happier with a God who is all encompassing, and perhaps who is more maternal than paternal.* (1003)

In conservative language and theology, the maleness of God is endemic in most Christian paradigms. While feminist writers insist that the language betrays an internal attachment, it seems that the majority of women interviewed did not find the maternal language or femaleness of God a familiar pathway for them. With so few references available to explore this lack of God-as-Mother imagery it is difficult to extrapolate reasons for its absence.

Following a question asked by Grey, “Does encountering God images as female make any difference to transforming the lives of poor women?” (Grey 2001,19), one might ask if encountering female God images has made any difference to transforming the lives of women struggling to escape the effects of a conservative faith community experience?
Valuing Feminine Identity

Fowler’s faith development theories were based upon accepted human psychological development patterns (Fowler 1995) and suggested that a maturing faith is connected to the maturing identity. Our sense of who we are in response to engaging our spiritual awareness, and the encouragement to begin the journey of transformation, becomes vitally important. Given (2008,333) notes that, “The shifting nature of power suggests that knowledge is never static, nor is identity, given that there is always a shifting understanding of identity in regard to various aspects of one's positionality over time.” A change in faith positionality has been reported in the transcripts as one of the influences on identity and which, consequently, impacts the ownership and the outworking of faith. Feminist theology has emphasized that liberation begins with a woman acknowledging that she has worth and who she is, her being and her wisdom. These are acceptable starting points for speaking about the validity of her relationship with God. Encountering the broad space of a spiritual direction environment freed women in this study to face any estrangement from their inner being and find the freedom to speak about their desire to become truly themselves.

Within the transcripts, there are occasions when personal identity changes have occurred as a result of inner awakening, and this has happened when there was freedom to speak more intimately about spiritual experience. The first comment is quite profound and invites a variety of possible interpretations. However, the core issue of the confusion of this woman’s female identity speaks to the concerns raised in this study:

I’ve never considered this sense of maleness in the church and the authority. In encountering maleness, I’ve never been really sure how to be a woman in it all. I think it has affected my view of sexuality and I don’t think it’s been a good thing. It’s very real. (1005)

Her transcript comment was not reported as an insight that came from a spiritual direction conversation, but her awareness of the ‘maleness in the church’ has been as a result of feeling free to critique her early, conservative family foundations within the open space of spiritual
direction. This initiated some profound identity issues within her psychological domain.

Similarly, another woman was conscious of the struggle to be feminine, quoted in an earlier chapter, and she spoke of the value of her male spiritual director to affirm her identity:

I have struggled with my femininity, with really accepting myself and that softer side. What I heard was the affirming of the feminine and I heard the affirming of the role of the feminine in the spiritual life – that had not been my experience. (0906)

Another woman spoke about her female identity using the language of nurture and mothering.

Her spiritual director offered her images in a way that would have been viewed as quite unusual in her former conservative upbringing:

I discovered something about being feminine, being nurturing, being a mother. Finding the lost souls within myself; nurturing and parenting the broken children that live within me. It’s probably only one but expresses itself differently. So I have done that a few times and it has been interesting. Coming from my background it wouldn’t have been on my agenda. (0703)

She continued, later in her narrative, about the value of the synergistic relationship between knowing self and knowing God:

It did answer the question that I had asked many years before: ‘I know a lot about God, but how to I know God?’ Spiritual direction showed me how to know God, how to go about knowing God – and it was as much about knowing myself. I didn’t realise that. (0703)

One aspect of the feminine mode of engagement was reflected in language about being real and being aware of what is ego-performance and what is authentic self:

So, spiritual direction started me on the way of being reflective; looking at who I am and where I am, and what God wants to say to me in this situation as who I am. Not just this message of ‘You’ve got to be good.’ I came to appreciate God’s presence in my life. And God has something to say to me, to the real me, not just this perfect image I wanted to show everybody. (0702)

And a final comment reiterates the affirmation of the identity:

I grew up with a martyr personality, so I could always put myself last. I’ve had to learn to put myself first. . . saying, ‘I am valuable and I am valued by God and I come first.’ Now I can’t do all that I used to do so I have to move to a different place with God. It’s been a restful kind of journey. (0907)

Being ‘valued by God’ is another profound statement for a woman who remains in a conservative faith tradition. It encompasses many aspects of a feminine mode of spirituality, particularly for someone who was so aware of the diminishment of women’s roles within her
tradition: the journey motif that indicates a conceptual perspective of her faith, the
affirmation of female identity and the grounded acknowledgement of the reality of this stage
of life.

A final affirmation of reclaiming the feminine was given by the following participant:

When I was struggling with what it means to be a woman, what is the inner feeling and
how do I express it, she did this meditation with me about going to a ball. It started off
going to buy a dress, new underwear etc, and Jesus comes to pick me up in a limousine to
go to the ball. And it was a wonderful experience for me – just affirmed, or discovered,
something of my feminine side and in the context of my faith and the growing relationship
with Jesus as a partner at this ball. (0703)

Again we can note the way this participant used metaphor to capture something emotionally
and spiritually significant: valuing the female identity and giving it worth is an indicator of the
shift away from the conservative scripting of femaleness that is linked to gender roles.

The comments above reflect the struggle to find what it meant to be feminine by staying
anchored in the ownership of personal spiritual growth. This is a movement toward faith-
agency, referred to previously.

Summary

Based on the quotations used for each of the themes outlined above, the style of language and
modes of expression indicate a shift away from the standard patriarchal, intellectualised
language about faith in God. The participants’ way of expressing their experiences follows the
descriptors outlined as feminine modes of engagement with spiritual encounters. One
participant felt that the process of spiritual direction itself was influential:

So I see that in spiritual direction – an honouring of what is a more feminine way of
thinking. (0905)

Using the word ‘honouring’ may be a way of acknowledging many of the attributes quoted in
previous chapters about the openness and hospitality of the spiritual direction space, a place
that welcomes alternate ways of speaking in order to validate spiritual experience. Does this make spiritual direction a feminine process, as one might infer from her quote, or is it that the quality of the space allowed women freedom to be open and therefore lead them to speak about it as a feminine modality because of the liberty?

From the voices of the women interviewed, the descriptors of their feminine spirituality emerged as:

- embracing God as a subjective entity who expresses care and love in a gentle and accepting way
- an expanded openness to the nature of God as mystery
- a willingness to journey through the vagaries of life believing in a companioning Presence and through witnessing the wisdom of that Presence in others
- accepting one’s faith journey as valid, independent of the sanction of others
- validating one’s own forms of responding to and exploring spiritual experience including an earth-based incarnation of spiritual reality
- acknowledging the responsibility and ownership of one’s own identity in God and embracing the interior journey as pivotal to a maturing faith.

Table 15 below takes key phrases from the transcript quotations used in this chapter and Table 16 lists the number of quotations from each participant used in this chapter.

Table 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affective engagement with God</th>
<th>Quotations about Attributes of Feminine Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A gentle God</td>
<td>Less and less of the harsh, judgmental God and more of the gentle God. (0703)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The experience [later] felt more like the gentle God. . . . new and re-discovered. (0703)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It gave me a beautiful image of God just coming and picking me up and holding me closer to God’s chest. (0806)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This God comes and picks me up and holds me so gently. (0806)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In spiritual direction is that I have met a gentle God, and that is very different from any God I have met in the church. (0809)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God is lighter; God is freer to transcend boundaries; God is intimate and beyond at the same time. (0801)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being loved by God</strong></td>
<td>I have grown into attending to God’s intimate involvement in my life. (0806)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God was not a loving God, he was a God to be feared. It wasn’t anything about a relationship with anyone. (1001)</td>
<td>[Spiritual direction] got me on the path of God as a loving God. (1001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God loves me when I am imperfect. (0702)</td>
<td>It’s as though you see the truth in yourself for the first time. (0702)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The impact of self-judgement</strong></td>
<td>That voice of judgement, of a judging God. . . It’s consistently in the woman’s story. (0903)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt that if I was doing the right thing by God and if I was really, really trusting Him and loving Him then I should feel better about myself. (0804)</td>
<td>There was me in this situation being in this church thinking I’m such a failure here, I’ve got to leave. (0909)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God has been trying to tell me . . . You don’t have to be good. If you are just as you are we can do this thing.” (0702)</td>
<td>My theology moved from needing to be saved to we are essentially good and there is good in everybody. (1004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I can love other people better now than I ever used to, probably because I am less judgemental of myself. (0901)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes in the image of God</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>God who is contained</strong></td>
<td>I felt as though it helped me to see God in a new way. God wasn’t in this little box that I had had all those years. (0702)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside the box God is much bigger and there are no boundaries to God. That was extremely significant for me. (0912)</td>
<td>When there is a container with walls around [God] you have to actually pretend because the standards are beyond what is natural in our broken state. (0912)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I’m outside the box, which I feel I am now, God’s there with me too, so there is no limit. (1005)</td>
<td>I was no longer in this narrow, right way of seeing things. . . it’s just bigger. (0905)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had to work hard to separate God from the church – I remain somewhat disillusioned with the church, but I think I still trust God. (1006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open to questions</strong></td>
<td>For me I’m most comfortable in the contemplative, living with the questions. (0912)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>God Companions the Journey</strong></td>
<td><strong>You just have to live with the tension of not knowing answers, the mystery. . . I think it is a shift.</strong> (0703)</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>God as companion</strong></td>
<td><strong>There was more focus on my journey and with God in my journey.</strong> (1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A very strong sense of God with me on my journey. A strong sense of God as a nurturing presence.</strong> (0801)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>God-in-relation</strong></td>
<td><strong>I have had images in prayer of the God who gazes at me.</strong> (0801)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature and Maternal Images</strong></td>
<td><strong>That bush experience of the little kid comes to me when I see the mountains and am caught up in the grandeur of God.</strong> (0907)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature imagery</strong></td>
<td><strong>My whole focus on my spiritual journey involved walking a lot in parks; again I was seeking the solace of walking and being in nature.</strong> (1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A very dry leaf is rubbed with this cream and it comes to life. That was my spirit.</strong> (0912)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal imagery</strong></td>
<td><strong>I saw visually . . . [myself] as a child in a small craft with a rapid going down, and the hand of God which I could take.</strong> (0802)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In encountering maleness [in the church], I’ve never been really sure how to be a woman in it all. (1005)

I discovered something about being feminine, being nurturing, being a mother. Finding the lost souls within myself. (0703)

Looking at who I am and where I am, and what God wants to say to me in this situation as who I am. (0702)

I’ve had to learn to put myself first. . . saying, ‘I am valuable and I am valued by God and I come first.’ (0907)

What I heard was the affirming of the feminine in the spiritual life – that had not been my experience. (0906)

[It] just affirmed, or discovered, something of my feminine side and in the context of my feminine side. (0703)

So I see that in spiritual direction – an honouring of what is a more feminine way of thinking. (0905)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valuing Feminine Identity</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In encountering maleness [in the church], I’ve never been really sure how to be a woman in it all. (1005)</td>
<td>I discovered something about being feminine, being nurturing, being a mother. Finding the lost souls within myself. (0703)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Looking at who I am and where I am, and what God wants to say to me in this situation as who I am. (0702)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>So I see that in spiritual direction – an honouring of what is a more feminine way of thinking. (0905)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Number of Quotations Used in Chapter 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0702</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0703</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0801</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0802</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0803</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0804</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0806</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0809</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0901</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0902</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>s0903</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>0905</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0906</td>
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<td>0907</td>
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<td>0908</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0909</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0912</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1002</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1003</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1004</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1005</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1006</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 11

Significant Themes

The previous chapters have used verbatim selections from the transcripts to demonstrate how women narrated the merit of a place in which to speak about their experience of spiritual direction. When examining the transcripts, it became apparent that there were recurrent terms and themes. After hearing the women’s voices about their experience in previous chapters, it is now appropriate to take notice of this observation and adopt an inductive approach to looking at the implications of these themes.

Slee’s processes of women’s faith engagement provided an initial construct against which the evidence in the participants’ narratives could be assessed and these processes are listed below in Table 17. Slee’s processes were the result of research into the manner in which a cohort of women fashioned their perceptions of faith. The present study observed how women spoke about spiritual direction and noted any similarities in the ways in which women speak about the perceived benefits of a dedicated spiritual conversation environment for validating their faith journey. The cohort was selected from women who had previous or present connections with a conservative faith fellowship and the reported benefits were specifically examined to observe responses that indicated changes to the lingering effects of patriarchal shadows on their faith expression. The results of this study show that the spiritual direction conversation can be a liberating and affirming place in which women can verbalise spiritual encounters or explore uncertainties, and where patriarchal shadows may be addressed so that they can be examined and have less impact on shaping faith identity.
Significant themes have emerged in the linguistic style of the responses that show similarities to Slee’s schema. By ranking the frequency of terms used in the responses, linguistic patterns in the narratives were observed. These are listed in Table 18 below in sequence from a higher to lower ranking of terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 17</th>
<th>Table 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slee’s Processes of Women’s Faith Development</strong> (Processes)</td>
<td><strong>Emergent Themes in the Study’s Transcripts</strong> (Characteristics of Space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>Openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational</td>
<td>Connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphoric</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Gentleness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apophatic</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The terms used have revealed congruence between what Slee described as women’s faithing modalities and the preferred language used to describe the experience of spiritual direction. Because the themes that emerged in this study are with respect to the benefits of accessing a spiritual direction space, it was the language used by women to describe their experience that was of primary concern in this section rather than the processes that were used to construct their meaning-making during the interview. A similar search for terms referring to a more masculinised form of engagement in the participants’ transcripts did not yield many results. A masculinised mode of engagement uses language indicating a strong connection with ideas, objectivised and intellectual theories that often lack an affective tone. After a brief search for any of these aspects in the women’s responses, no results were found for the terms theory, construct or intellectual (and their derivatives) and there were limited results for descriptions of the structure of or theories about spiritual direction. The term idea was used in some
responses, but often with respect to a changing perspective. It was often more reflective of personal discovery or experiences rather than thinking that engaged ideas from other sources. A deductive approach that applied knowledge to individual experience seemed less prevalent than an inductive approach which started with the grounded base of experience and took the reflection into the rational domain. Table 19 below lists all references using the term *idea* in participants’ narratives.

**Table 19**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quotations using the Term <em>Idea</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0703</td>
<td>That whole idea of God being powerless I hadn’t come across before, but it helped me to deal with my own powerlessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0804</td>
<td>I know it’s a good idea, and I hope it’s true, that you can find God in the chaos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0806</td>
<td>That unlocked something for me about the idea that God sets stuff up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0806</td>
<td>And I got really stuck on this thing about God being intimately involved in our lives - I realised that I agreed with it as an idea, but I didn’t feel like that at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0806</td>
<td>The idea of God being intimately involved in our lives sounds good . . . time but we hardly believe it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0901</td>
<td>I have gone with the idea that I want to live a life that is true to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0906</td>
<td>I love the idea of journey in the spiritual life. The metaphor of journey is very significant for me and it has been for a number of years now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1003</td>
<td>It is why now the idea of a Father-God or calling priests Father is so difficult. I am much more happy with a God who is all encompassing, perhaps who is more maternal than paternal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1003</td>
<td>The idea is to link all things back to God so to ask the right questions is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1006</td>
<td>She accepts me as I am. She doesn’t have any preconceived ideas or expectations of me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These quotations, or lack of other references, did not offer strong evidence for a consistent style of language or engagement in the narratives that supports a masculinised modality. The general tone of the language used in the transcripts fits more easily with the descriptors of a feminine engagement. The interviewees were asked to speak of their experience of spiritual direction and this may be viewed as a predeterminant of the resultant style of language. If this was the case, then a balance between masculine and feminine engagement styles might have
been expected, with equal usage of terms across all transcripts. However, the responses revealed evidence of common descriptors in the language in all the transcripts which skew the mode of engagement toward what is described as a feminine style. Table 20 below lists the number and ranking of transcripts and references using these terms.

Table 20
References to Significant Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Transcripts</th>
<th>Number of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each term in Table 20 is ranked according to the number of transcripts that mentioned the word and it is the number of women who used that term that is of interest in each case. The analysis of the results in this chapter has two goals: to scrutinise the linguistic patterns used by women in their narratives in order to reveal the style of language used and to comment upon the higher ranked terms that are commonly used, particularly with respect to speaking about the benefits of spiritual direction.

44 This approach is used in all tables in this chapter.
The tally of all references to the selected terms in the transcripts, shown in the right hand column above, is used as a way of demonstrating the overall linguistic approach of women to narrating their experiences. Because of the variability in each woman’s preference for using certain terms, the ranking has not been based upon the number of references. In some cases, one participant used a particular term frequently where another used the term only once. Ranking based on references would have inflated the significance of some of the words. For example, *Exploration* and *Freedom* would have scored more highly if ranked according to references in the transcripts rather than by the number of participants that used the term.

When limited to terms used for speaking about the experience of spiritual direction, a similar ranking has been applied to demonstrate the style of language the women used. The results are shown in Table 21 below.

**Table 21**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Transcripts</th>
<th>Number of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45 Each reference is a separate example of where the term is used within a sentence, even if the word appears more than once in the same sentence. Consecutive sentences using the term are counted as separate references.

46 For example, transcript 0702 has ten references to acceptance, while many others only use the word once.
The ranking of each term above gives an overview of how many women used this style of language when referring to the perceived benefits of spiritual direction, but does not include more general references found in other sections of their narrative. The following themes will be discussed with regard to the implications for women finding a space to validate their spiritual experiences:

- Relationship, Love and Connection
- Judgement
- Openness, Exploration and Freedom
- Acceptance and Affirmation
- Gentleness and Listening

**Relationship, Love and Connection**

One striking impression came from the usage of the words *relationship or relate* and derivations of the term *love*. When the references were limited to their use in the context of spiritual direction, these attributes still rate the most highly of all the terms analysed. The tally only refers to terms that were used in the context of an interaction with people or an experience expressed as an affect. Colloquial or adjectival forms of the words were excluded. For the majority of participants, the internalized experience of spiritual direction is deeply embedded in relationship\(^\text{47}\). The relational aspect emerged as an important factor that enabled the women’s liberty to speak openly and the context in which the conversation took place has facilitated that relational conduit. Table 22 below shows both the general references to relationship with God and others, as well as the references to God and others in the context of speaking about spiritual direction.

\(^{47}\) See comments regarding the significance of the spiritual director in Chapter 8.
When speaking about a beneficial experience of being in spiritual direction, the women used an affective style of language that was grounded in an intuitive emotional awareness. Even the type of incidental expression, excluded from the tally, used emotive expressions such as “I just love it!” or “It was lovely!” The high proportion of this type of affective expression is in contrast to the more descriptive language that characterises a theological discourse or rational explanations of faith-life.

It has been noted earlier that there is a difference between language used in a conservative setting which describes an externalized and idealized ambition about faith-life and language which indicates an internalized affective response. Most Christian faith traditions would affirm a relationship with God and a compassionate relationship with others as goals of the faith-life. However, goal orientated constructs do not seem to be what is referred to by the participants when narrating their spiritual life journey. Their language is personalized and relationship is deepened and embedded through the affective domain of the psyche. This is corroborated by the high tally of references to love. Table 23 below lists the general references related to love (including derivations of the term) and the separate references to love in relation to God and love in relation to others.

---

48 See Chapter 1, “Implications of Conservatism”, p.23
The high rank of references to or about love is noteworthy\(^{49}\). This study has not examined the discourse patterns or neurolinguistic connections inferred by the participants’ use of terms, and these tallies are only one source of information that might be considered. Katz warns of making a superficial examination of language that does not acknowledge the deep connections between language and emotion, or “the deep biologically-based structure of emotion—which after all goes deeper in us, in our experiencing, and in our knowing than language does.” (Katz 2009,20) Therefore, the purpose of this examination is only to draw attention to the overarching style of language that has been observed in the process of analysing the transcripts. A patriarchal faith setting would not normally encourage the anthropomorphic projection of an affective aspect onto God and language that features such personalised expressions of emotion is not readily sanctioned. However, the high number of references to the word love spoken of in relation to God indicates that participants used language reflecting a particular quality of intimate relationship with God.

The role of intimacy in faith development has both psychological inferences and implications for spiritual development.\(^{50}\) Fiorello distinguishes between a knowledge of intimacy that is grounded in knowledge about God and a “deep and profound friendship; a close familiarity that affects one’s innermost being, rooted in a sense of belonging which results in

\(^{49}\) The cumulative word tally for love was 231 across the 30 transcripts. Many of these terms were used outside of the parameters set for listing references — “Love in the context of a relationship with another, either God or person.” The tally of 116 noted in Table 23 refers to only those terms that were used in this context.

\(^{50}\) See Chapter 10, p.242
confidence.” (Fiorello 2011,157) His scriptural use of Job as a portrait of an intimate relationship with God is based upon the dialogues, mutual accountability, imminence and authenticity depicted in Job’s statements. When considering the participants’ transcripts, the narratives suggest an equally diverse range of ways in which participants expressed their relationality. For many of the participants, the changing relationship with God that was mentioned was a movement toward a more intimate and embedded connection.

Connectedness was also noticed in the language of the transcripts and underscores the aspects of relationship and love mentioned above. It was not scored with relationship as it was considered that the participants had a more nuanced intent in using this term. The word connection was often used as a prior condition of relationship. Two of the participants explain: “Part of the role of a spiritual director is to help you connect and hear the voice of God and what is happening.” (1002) “My nature wants to connect with God and [spiritual direction] feeds me and allows the freedom to be in relationship with God in whatever form that is.” (0912) Connection was the first of a two-step process that established authentic relationship with God or others. Table 24 lists the references to the term connection, both generally and in relation to a spiritual direction experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Connection</th>
<th>All References to Connection</th>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Connection in SD</th>
<th>References to Connection in SD Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connectedness, mentioned as a benefit of a spiritual direction space, was jeopardised by another common theme that emerged in the transcripts, that of judgement.
Judgement

The theme of judgementalism was consistently mentioned in the participants’ stories about faith and spiritual experience, and may be viewed as the psychological impact that the women carried from their past conservative contexts. Some participants expressed the affect of feeling judged. For example, “I felt like someone had judged me, even though I was a faithful follower. (0703) and “It irks me to be with conservative women because many of them are judgemental. I wouldn’t tell them that I enjoy red wine; I wouldn’t divulge to some of them my history; I wouldn’t divulge the depression I’ve had and how I have had to pull myself back from the brink because I would feel judged.” (0904) Some narratives expressed a more general sense of judgement (i.e. those that did not specifically speak in terms of feelings) that implied the women were speaking from past personal experience. For example, “I think you grow up in a framework of ‘this is how you need to behave and need to believe.’ If you go against that in any way there is condemnation and judgement.” (0912) Table 25 shows the tally of different references to judgement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Judgement</th>
<th>References to Judgement</th>
<th>References to Feeling Judged</th>
<th>References to No Judgement in a SD Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word judgement was used in reference to judgementalism from parents and congregation, hearing God as a judging God and hearing the scripture as judgmental, as well as appreciating people who were non-judgmental. There was also mention of self-judgement that affected some participants. Judgement as a social tool keeps the symbolic boundaries of the group intact and acts as a constraint to maintain the social boundaries of the group. (Lamont and Molnar 2002) For the women interviewed in this study, there were sufficient references
scattered throughout the transcripts to make it a reasonable implication that compliance with either group or family conservatism had left a wariness. Several participants specifically referred to non-judgementalism as being important when speaking to a spiritual director: “I really did feel very accepted, loved and not judged.” (0804) and “I feel very open to say what I need or want to say. I don’t feel like I am going to be judged.” (1001) and “She was so non-judgemental. She didn’t try to fix me up.” (1006) The open attitude of the spiritual director indicated to the directees that there were few, or different, symbolic boundaries in the spiritual direction space. This counter movement toward non-judgementalism was also cited as a quality of the spiritual direction process. One participant sums up this experience: “The fact that it is a space where you can sit without expectation; there’s a freedom in that space for you to explore your own spirituality and where you are on the walk without any judgement or condemnation.” (0910) All of the references to non-judgementalism or not being judged were found in the reflections about the experiences of the spiritual direction encounter; no other sections of the transcripts used the term.

Openness, Exploration and Freedom

When reading the transcripts, the impact of judgement on the participants is recorded in quite direct terms. One quotation used above\textsuperscript{51} indicates the hesitancy to speak about even commonplace experiences, implying that the spectre of judgement closed down the potential for conversation, and therefore, relationship. In contrast, the high ranking of the attribute of openness indicated that women valued the liberty to engage without constraint and desired to be as open as possible. However, openness in spiritual directors was also affirmed, both as a personal attribute and in their capacity to support directees who wished to explore unfamiliar

\textsuperscript{51}“It irks me to be with conservative women because many of them are judgemental. I wouldn’t tell them that I enjoy red wine; I wouldn’t divulge to some of them my history; I wouldn’t divulge the depression I’ve had and how I have had to pull myself back from the brink because I would feel judged.” (0904)
spiritual experience or wider questions of faith. Where judgement is based upon keeping symbolic boundaries secure, the expression of openness may represent a reaction to the repression of a bounded space. Table 26 lists references to openness and shows the high number of references that were cited in the context of the spiritual direction encounter.

Table 26

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Openness</th>
<th>All References to Openness</th>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Openness in SD</th>
<th>References to Openness and SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Openness was referred to as having one’s view of the faith world expanded; being open to the broader questions of life; being opened up internally, including the freedom to imagine oneself in a different way; being open to alternate ways to read and interpret the scriptures and being open to new ways of experiencing God. The responses of the women in this study demonstrate this was an influential benefit of spiritual direction that aided their spiritual journey.

The sense of openness was linked to the liberty to venture into areas of difficulty or uncertainty in the faith life, without judgement or retribution. The spiritual direction space as a place for exploration was another highly ranked reference in the transcripts. For many, life events precipitated change, often verbalised as an ‘eye-opening experience.’ Yet the opportunity to reflect upon the changes required a place in which they felt a lack of judgementalism encouraged them to be open, particularly when the eye-opening experiences were about new ways of faith expression. Table 27 summarises the references to exploration in the transcripts.
Women from a conservative fellowship may not have been encouraged to ask questions that push the boundaries of the paradigm. As described in Chapter 1, the definition of conservative being used in this study includes the notion of a bounded space, ideologically and theologically, one that is limited by statements of faith that succinctly express an understanding of the faith stance of the fellowship. The liberty to explore is limited; it is viewed as irrelevant or dangerous when the truth has been clearly stated. From the references tallied in the transcripts, offering openness and freedom to pursue whatever is challenging the pilgrim’s faith was a valued attribute of the spiritual direction space. Exploration scored as the second highest ranked benefit of spiritual direction mentioned by the women.\textsuperscript{52}

The references to exploration were accompanied by a sense of freedom in which to explore. For example, “The fact that it is a space where you can sit without expectation; there’s a freedom in that space for you to explore your own spirituality and where you are on the walk.” (0910) and “That was very significant for me too – the freedom to explore outside the box again.” (1005) Table 28 below summarises the references to freedom and those mentioned in relation to the experience of the spiritual direction.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Transcripts Referring to Exploration & References to Exploration & Transcripts Referring to Explore in SD & References to Explore and SD \\
\hline
19 & 43 & 11 & 29 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Table 27}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{52} See Table 21 above.
References to being free or freedom, when spoken about in the context of a benefit of spiritual direction, were often linked to finding the freedom to express an authentic identity. For example, “Whereas now, I feel so much freedom in who I am. I’m OK. I’m real and my God is real. Before it was just a big sham, because it didn’t work in the hard times. Because it wasn’t real it became shattered. But now I’m not shattered.” (0702) One participant referred to being free to be who she was while still within her conservative ministry: “I guess it’s a place where I’m free to be who I am and no one is going to say, ‘Well, you should think this’ or ‘you should think that.’ So there is a real freedom to be yourself in that, and then to learn how to be yourself in this other, more constrained environment that I live and work in.” (0909) This woman’s response addresses the issue of whether it is possible to offer the facility of spiritual direction, as a space for authentic, personal spiritual journeying, in a conservative environment while keeping the conservative nature of the group intact. The qualities of openness and freedom she experienced in spiritual direction encouraged her exploration of her inner self and wider faith concerns and validated her personhood.

**Acceptance and Affirmation**

The attributes of acceptance and affirmation were two noticeable themes in the transcripts and may well be reflections of a similar inner movement. Most references that were tallied referred to either acceptance or affirmation. The following quotation is one of only two...
instances where acceptance and affirmation were mentioned simultaneously: “They’re affirming. It’s just the affirmation and acceptance.” (0910) If the two attributes are combined, representing two expressions of a similar affect for the directee, then the majority of participants referred to feeling either accepted or affirmed as part of their perceptions of the benefits of spiritual direction.

Table 29 below summarises the references to acceptance and affirmation and those mentioned in relation to the experience of the spiritual direction.

Table 29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptance and Affirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts Referring to Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts Referring to Affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two thirds of the women referred to one or all of the following: need for acceptance of their faith journey, feeling accepted by God, accepted by other people and accepting of oneself. Acceptance enabled a series of other affective responses: being loved, valued and listened to; affirmation; warmth and encouragement. Feeling accepted for who they were, including some who felt the process furthered their feelings of acceptance before God, was a powerful outcome of the spiritual direction encounter. For example, “It’s her acceptance of me, of my struggles, of the times I have neglected spending time with God intentionally. There is no condemnation. There is grace in that place so I can be who I am. She is one of a few people
who let me be who I am.” (0912) Once again a contrast is made between experiencing condemnation (judgement) in another context and a beneficial attribute of spiritual direction.

A significant impetus for acceptability within a conservative faith group comes from complying with the doctrinal stance. Definitional boundaries of religious groups have historically led to the distinction between what one perceives to be Christian and what is not, and doctrinal standards have become a way in which a group affirms itself as “the only faithful guardians of true orthodoxy.” (Grenz 2002,309) Complying with these standards creates a reticence to speak freely of alternate spiritual experience or experiences that may not be acceptable to those who are seen as authority figures in the group. When participants spoke about the benefits of spiritual direction, language about the spiritual director was often couched in terms of affirmation. One participant said, “She accepts me as I am. There aren’t any preconceived ideas or expectations of me.” (1006) and another said. “There was an acceptance. I still remember the day I met her and this beautiful hug she gave me. It was like she was overjoyed to see me.”(0910)

Affirmation was referred to as: being affirmed on the journey; encouraged and affirmed; affirming myself, my gifts and my value, and affirmed to be me. The term affirmation was used to deepen the sense of acceptance, giving it an authenticity and depth that moved beyond acceptance for doing the right thing or compliance. For example, one participant who had the highest number of references to judgement in her transcript recounted that her spiritual director had given her a sense of credibility: “He has been able to confirm, and affirm, value with me, so I can see where I have been journeying. I have felt he has taken me seriously.” (0904) In her story, this woman spoke about the judgementalism she felt from many significant people in her life, so her sense of being taken seriously had moved beyond her ready defences and allowed her to value herself. A number of other participants reported feeling affirmed on their spiritual journey, using phrases like, “He is incredibly affirming of this journey I am on.” (0907) For the participants in this study, to be affirmed to explore new
spiritualities seems to be a valued aspect of having a safe space in which to speak openly and is compatible with other studies about advantageous learning environments for women.

(Debebe 2011, 680)

For the women in this study, acceptance and affirmation were important outcomes of their spiritual direction experience. The combined references to acceptance, affirmation, openness and freedom bring together attributes that take the directee deeper into themselves, even though each attribute engaged a different psychological facility. One may speculate that the heightened awareness of these attributes indicates a reaction to the shadow effect of condemnation and judgement that remained a present reality, possibly from having previous attempts at spiritual exploration devalued or closed down.

**Gentleness and Listening**

The last group of themes noted in the transcripts referred to the attribute of gentleness and the skill of listening. Participants reported gentleness as a quality of the spiritual director but also became aware of gentleness as an attribute of God. Table 30 below lists the ranking of this term, including the number of transcripts referring to gentleness with respect to spiritual direction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Gentleness</th>
<th>References to Gentleness</th>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Gentleness in SD</th>
<th>References to Gentleness and SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

53 See Chapter 8, “The Spiritual Director”, p. 182 for quotations referring to gentleness in the spiritual director. See Chapter 10, “The Journey Toward a Feminine Spirituality”, p. 239 for quotations about gentleness in the image of God.
Over half of the references to gentleness were in the context of the spiritual direction experience. The reference to the characteristic of gentleness in a relationship with God connotes a more feminine stance than that expressed in patriarchal images of God. It engages an affective aspect to God that is not characteristic of an objectified, intellectualised or exacting God. Experiencing gentleness requires receptivity and vulnerability and imputes value upon the other. (Swanton 1997, 500) Aspects of relationality are significant in a feminine stance and authentic relationship is intuited when there is a subjective reciprocity between both parties. Awareness of the quality of the affective response by the other party is spoken of as a feminine sensitivity, so hearing this expressed in women’s stories with respect to God is seen as a shift toward a more grounded feminine spirituality. It may also signify the changing value that the women imputed to their relationship with God.

The theme of listening was mentioned often in the context of spiritual direction. As Graybar and Leonard (2005, 3) state, “Listening and being listened to are the cornerstones of psychological development and psychological relatedness” and having one’s inner spirituality validated by another listener similarly depends upon deep psychological connectedness. The significance of being listened to is emphasised by the number of references found in the participants’ narratives, shown in Table 31 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Listening</th>
<th>References to Listening</th>
<th>Transcripts Referring to Listening in SD</th>
<th>References to Listening and SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listening was referred to as: being with a good listener; taking time to listen; listening to what is happening in life and having someone help the directee to listen and understand or make connections. Two people in an intersubjective relationship listen idiosyncratically, using
mutual reflection and response in the conversation. Myers speaks about this as characteristic of empathic listening. She observed clients with their therapists and found that, “careful listening, attendance to and remembrance of details, and nonjudgmental acceptance” were significant in developing the therapeutic relationship and contributed to the sense of being heard, as well as being “essential for [clients] feeling cared for and safe.” (Myers 2000,171) Speaking about spiritual directors as skilful listeners does not only refer to technique. Graybar and Leonard refer to listening as the mortar of any therapeutic relationship, but warn against the style of listening that uses a structured approach: “Accurate empathy conveyed through listening transcends theoretical orientation. . . It also involves suspending one’s own assumptions, beliefs and biases.” (Graybar and Leonard 2005) The subjective engagement aspect of the listening stance brings a sense of presence to the conversation, as noted by the following participant: “It was always about her listening and helping me to listen, and being very present.” (1002) For Myers, the outcome of empathic listening is “to feel valued, listened to, and understood.” (p.171) The high rank of this attribute affirms its importance in the spiritual direction space for those who were interviewed.

When both gentleness and listening are taken in concert, there is a broad picture of empathic relationship that engaged the deeper, more vulnerable aspect of a directee and was beneficial to their sense of validation.
Chapter 12

Discussion

Patriarchal religious systems are characterized by a particular mode of engaging with spiritual life. The dominant rationalized, theological approach in a patriarchal paradigm processes information using objective systems and intellectual frameworks. It remains affectively aloof from the subject matter through abstraction and ideology. Carl Jung names this as a masculinised approach to information processing. (Storr 1983) However, Jung’s model of identity proposes that even though gendered characteristics result from men and women each using a preferred mode of engaging with the world, both masculine and feminine traits are present in each individual. Rockwood Hudson summarises the gender difference as follows: “In the feminine part of ourselves we partake of nature, reality, and specificity, while in our masculine part we stand above nature at the level of objectivity, abstraction, and ideal.” (Rockwood Hudson 1998) Using this model of information processing, it may be assumed that an epistemology of faith will similarly be founded upon different modes of engaging with sensory experience, and the nature of feminine spirituality will be different to the nature of masculine spirituality. (Ranft 2000) Patriarchal systems, however, have been shaped by a description of faith based almost exclusively upon masculine modes of engagement and one would expect feminine spirituality to be operationally different from masculine spirituality. Consequently, what may be deemed as feminine modes of spiritual engagement have struggled for legitimacy in patriarchal systems.

In response to the struggle, this study has focused on the benefits of a spiritual direction space that offers spaciousness for a woman to express her intimate spirituality free from the repressive shadows of past conservative faith experiences. The outcomes have highlighted the
importance of the affective aspect of feminine engagement in spiritual exploration and the long lasting impact on women of some of the processes that sustain a conservative faith environment. The women in this study accessed the broad space of spiritual direction and experienced openness and non-judgemental relationships. These aspects facilitated a deeper engagement with their spiritual encounters in a way that validated their intimate faith story. In this chapter, three facets of the results will be discussed:

- Coping with the shadow effects of conservative faith environments and the subsequent impact upon spiritual identity.
- The impact of secondspace frameworks brought to the conversation space that limit the willingness of a directee to be open.
- The high ranking of terms that indicated both affect and relationship are significant in the descriptions of the benefits of spiritual direction for women.

Coping with the Shadow Effects of Conservatism

One of the motives for this study was the author’s anecdotal evidence of the disempowerment of women in conservative faith congregations, particularly with regard to speaking openly about personal spiritual experience. The metaphor of a broad space was used to capture the sense of spaciousness that draws women to reveal their intimate experiences when they perceive the environment to be a safe place. The results of the study support the belief that the openness and freedom reported by the women is significant for exploring the foundations of their belief and spirituality by enabling them to verbalise their inner awareness of transcendent encounters. They became agents for their own spiritual condition, claiming a sense of responsibility for their faith that resulted in the women feeling empowered to open themselves up to exploring new avenues in their faith-life.

54 See Chapter 1, “Bounded Space”, for a discussion of the difference between revealing one’s spiritual story and discussing spiritual ideas. p.25
It has been noted that fear of self-disclosure often leaves women voiceless in patriarchal systems and it was proposed that this has an impact on their sense of identity within conservative faith groups. This study examined how a space to openly voice intuitive responses to spiritual experience enabled women to visualise their identity in a different way. For many of the women, what was named as true identity was often connected with freedom, and it implied a freedom from the wariness developed because of inhibitions around being truly themselves in an environment they perceived to be judgemental. Kiesling, Sorell et al. addressed the relationship between developing identity and spirituality and refer to a typology of individual spiritual identities. One category was labelled “foreclosed” in which spiritual identity is enacted through ascribed roles. (Kiesling, Sorell et al. 2006, 1271) These authors characterise the predicament of foreclosed identities which parallel the experience of women in conservative faith settings in this study:

“Because spiritual identity was formed via intersubjectivity with significant others, others retained enormous sway over these respondents’ sense of self. For some respondents, moving through adulthood brought a growing sense that their spiritual identity was overly constrictive or over endowed. Some respondents, embedded and entrenched in ideals formulated by someone else, felt that individual expression and authenticity would be discounted or purchased only at the price of alienation and loss of continuity.” (1272)

Two issues noted in this quotation resonate with the responses examined in this study. Firstly, the women who were interviewed described similar characteristics of their past conservative faith communities that were restrictive, using the metaphor of a box to convey their feeling of enclosure. Secondly, the individual expression and authenticity that is limited by the need to conform or risk disassociation was reflected in narratives where women used the terms getting it right or doing the right thing. The need for compliance was confronted when the women had a place to explore their changing spiritual landscape, with consequent changes in

55 See Chapter 1, “Psychological and Sociological Issues”, for comments about the need for a healthy soul identity. In psychological terms, the willingness to reveal one’s inmost thoughts and feelings depends upon the internal resilience of the identity to the potential for destruction from those scripts that have the greatest authority over an unconscious sense of self-worth. p.27
56 Examples were cited in Chapter 5 with regard to the participant’s perception of the spiritual direction space as a safe place in which to speak freely. p.109
their sense of self. There were references to valuing themselves\textsuperscript{57} and connecting with their more authentic self\textsuperscript{58} as part of the journey toward authenticating identity. For example,

“The freedom is the biggest thing. My identity in Christ, believing in my identity in Christ, has been the biggest thing and the freedom it has brought . . . instead of that fear and shame.” (1001) and

“Spiritual direction really was a saving grace for me. It was the thing that really helped me to honour who I am and that it was really OK to be me.” (0906) and

“It’s her acceptance of me, of my struggles, the times of neglecting spending time with God intentionally and there is no condemnation, there is grace in that place. So I can be who I am. She is one of a few people who let me be who I am.” (0912)

The comments listed in the earlier chapters support the women’s growing empowerment to recognise authentic aspects of themselves and it was often referred to when they were asked about the perceived benefit of their spiritual direction.

However, there was also evidence of the disempowerment that affected the sense of authentic selfhood in the transcripts. Reactions to being disempowered were manifested in two ways. Firstly, some women were aware that living out what is required in the patriarchal faith setting remains in the realm of knowledge and implied action. This was rarely integrated into the interior world of meaning-making that connects motivation and passion to reality. The effect of this was described as learning to play the game. This type of coping strategy suggests that the injunctions to believe and act are somehow kept at arm’s length from living with integrity. Bendroth refers to a similar observation: “At best, conservative women were capable of a fairly obvious ‘ploy’ of appearing to be submissive in order to manipulate their unwary husbands.” (Bendroth 2001.47) Several comments by women showed they were cognisant of the deceptive stance they took in order to preserve their reputational position while still remaining in the conservative ethos.

\textsuperscript{57} See Chapter 10, “The Journey toward a Feminine Spirituality”, Valuing Feminine Identity, in which the following comments are quoted: “knowing God is as much about knowing myself” and “God has something to say to me, the real me” and “I am valuable and I am valued by God and I come first.” p.258

\textsuperscript{58} See Chapter 9, “Benefits of Spiritual Direction”, Identity Response. p.221
A second response came through participants speaking of a dichotomous spiritual life, knowing that their faith community experiences were separate from deeply held personal faith-experiences, some of which were experienced in other settings and in spiritual direction sessions. For some, there was an underlying sense of knowing God despite the church environment and often this was when they were intu refining something transcendent through immersing themselves in the natural environment. Fiand refers to truth emerging from within. “One does not receive the truth, nor does one give it. One stands in the truth as experience, as it emerges, and one surrenders to that wherein one is held.” (Fiand 1987) This description of the rising of an intuitive sense of God through existential life replicates a similar progression in the experiences recounted by women in the study. Several of the transcripts narrated memories of surrendering to the truth of nature-based experiences that connected the participant with their faith in God. The metanarrative dominating many conservative doctrines omits, or is even dismissive of, intuiting God’s presence through nature, so the affective engagement with nature-based intuitions remains in the private domain. (Lee 2004) Participants referred to secretly knowing that God was always with them, even if they had difficulty explaining what they meant, or that they simply found different spiritual needs fulfilled by different faith contexts. In itself, this may be a reality for many believers, however, the women in the study spoke as if it was a clandestine activity or had an otherness to their spiritual experience which was not spoken about in their faith group.

The women spoke about each of such ramifications of not being true to their authentic spiritual awareness by contrasting the benefit of being in the open space of the spiritual direction conversation. Spiritual direction gave liberty to women to be candid and honest, giving them a sense of authenticity in the way they could speak about faith. The outcome of sensing their authentic faith position was a capacity for faith-agency or the capacity to advocate for what best supports and develops personal faith. Faith-agency is countercultural to a conservative approach in that it empowers the faithful to hold different experiences as
true in their own right. The experience of women in this study showed development of faith-agency and a movement away from faith-conformity with its consequent dualistic faith life. There is firm evidence that this growing faith-agency was facilitated through having an open space like a spiritual direction conversation in which to negotiate the developing spiritual identity.

The Significance of Secondspace Subtexts

One reason why faith-agency could be facilitated was the non-judgemental environment encountered in spiritual direction. Many participants in the study referred to people or places where they felt they were not going to be judged. Words like refuge, openness and freedom were used in talking about benefits of spiritual direction, whereas words like closed, boxed, set or rigid were often used to characterize earlier church contexts. The spiritual direction space was perceived as safe from judgement, and spiritual directors were often categorised as being non-judgemental. The issue of judgement clearly had implications for the willingness of a directee to speak openly and is one of the factors that affected the secondspace aspect of a spiritual direction conversation. Critical space theory59 was used as one way of assessing the dynamics of a conversation space. It offers a way to understand the possible unconscious awareness that overshadows those in dialogue in a conversation. The secondspace aspect of the quality of a conversation space included the formal and logical conceptual understanding about the space that encompasses the two companions. For example, the leader of a conservative group will bring the ethos and framework of what the group believes to be the required nature of personal development for group members to a conversation space about spiritual growth. Conversation is framed by the goals and understanding being imparted to the

59 See Chapter 3 - discussion on critical space theory, p.57
group member who sits within the faith paradigm in which the overarching theology and ideology set the secondspace environment of the conversation. The consistent reference to judgement by participants in this study reveals something of the conceptual framework of conversations that have been experienced in the past in which the secondspace priorities for maintaining the boundaries of the conservative group have diminished the opportunity to speak of the thirdspace which is the lived experience of the pilgrim.

In using critical space theory, it is helpful to observe that spiritual direction conversations are subject to the same general principles that may result in both positive and negative outcomes. Some of the women told of experiences that were reminiscent of a secondspace impact on spiritual direction and which resulted in the closing down of the space for the participant. These examples of first hand reactions by the women are concrete cases of how a lack of familiarity with subtexts can bring undesired outcomes. For example, one woman shared that she felt reticent to speak openly with her current spiritual director:

“The person I see at present is OK, but I know there are things I can’t talk about. If it had been [my previous director] I could have talked openly.” (1004) In her narrative she feels, “things she has said have told me of her predisposition toward a particular mind as to what spiritual direction is all about.” (1004)

This is an example of a secondspace encumbrance in a model of praxis that was brought to the conversation and predetermined what was going to occur. The few other examples were related to the language used by the spiritual director. For example, one participant found herself rebelling against what she felt was a prescriptive approach:

“Her method was such that I really didn’t gel. She was always asking me, ‘Where do you feel Jesus is in relation to you now?’ and that’s not me.” (0911)

For another participant, a scripted approach appears to have affected her sense of connection:

“I went to a very elderly [director] whom I liked very much but was really doing it according to a script - I didn’t feel very much soul-connection. She had a program she was going through.” (0808)

The sense of connection that is diminished by the personal practice of the spiritual director was also found in the following quotation:
“I can feel myself getting a bit defensive when people suggest things. She suggested an icon and I would agree with her even if it didn’t click with me and I couldn’t quite get beyond it. I didn’t really know what the issue was but I didn’t feel like I was moving forward.” (0804)

Connection scored highly when participants spoke about the benefits of spiritual direction, so there is something to note when lack of connection is linked to intrusive practices or language. It seems that the array of what might intrude upon the secondspace milieu of the conversation is quite broad and requires keen sensitivity on the part of the spiritual director. While a strong response from women about male spiritual directors might have been expected, this does not seem to be the case in this cohort. The gender of the spiritual director did not emerge as a condition for the quality of the space or the process and there were very few references to the gender of the director in any sense. One participant intuited that gender created a limiting factor and demonstrates the impact of secondspace prejudice carried by the directee:

“Interestingly, when I tried to talk to male priests about [my marriage difficulties], they could not cope with it. They didn’t know what to say. . . . The men seem to set up barriers or they speak platitudes to you. Of course some men are different.” (0911)

This example indicates the directee’s intuitiveness of what was going to be possible in the conversation space and of what reinforced her own prejudices she brought to the situation. Her unspoken intuition was effective in quashing the potential outcome of the process.

These cases highlight the need for spiritual directors to be aware of slipping into a framework that conditions the secondspace of the conversation in a way that is not necessarily helpful. Similarly, the directee will bring their own subtext into the shared space, creating a subconscious milieu that gives that space a certain dynamic, and the movement between director and directee is influenced by these subconscious frameworks. The discipline of a conscious awareness that keeps the secondspace aspect free and open has allowed participants to explore areas of spirituality, a discipline that requires constant alertness to the director’s own inner stance.
The majority of reflections from participants affirmed that when spiritual directors maintained a praxis of secondspace openness and freedom to explore without limits, the participants consistently rated the benefits highly:

“It gives me freedom and encourages me to be where I am spiritually with God and to allow freedom to grow in that. And to explore my faith without any boxes or perimeters.” (0912)

Spiritual directors who may not be familiar with the premise of critical space may find this theory gives them a way to gain an overview of what can shape their praxis.

Profound and intimate spiritual experiences belong to a thirdspace lived reality and the study found participants were encouraged in these experiences by a perception of openness that lacked any predetermined structure to the conversation, particularly anything that masqueraded as judgementalism. It was clear from the transcript references that the perception of being judged left a long lasting imprint, particularly in the case of many in the cohort who were in their mature years and were recounting their memories long after their experiences actually occurred. It may be reasonable to suggest that the impact of judgement perceived by these participants is an example of how a secondspace intuition about the nature of the conversation space can be formed. In contrast, the high rank of the attribute of openness in the results underscores the benefit of spiritual direction as a listening space that espoused a judgment free openness. One may conclude that non-judgemental openness offers something that is capable of embracing the thirdspace lived experience of corporate shadow effects from past conservative contexts and gives to participants the confidence to explore where once there was a fear of self-disclosure.

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60 See Table 20 in Chapter 11. p.268
The Significance of Affect in Engaging with Spiritual Experience

When speaking about the benefits of a spiritual direction space, another consistent characteristic of the women’s stories was the way they predominantly described their experience using affective language. The feminine modality by which women engaged with spiritual experience was more easily accessed in a dedicated spiritual direction conversation space than in a traditional church context. If spiritual direction is a free space in which women can openly engage their spiritual experience using processes that are intuitive and natural for them, then it is a place in which verbalising natural responses to spiritual experience can contribute to their faith development. It is a place for *faithing*. This form of faith development is not willingly accepted by a doctrinally based faith group founded on a coercive masculinised mode of engagement. The verbatim selections used from the women’s narratives showed some negativity to former experiences of being judged as less-than-acceptable in their conservative environments, although the particular reasons for the feelings of judgement were varied.

Following Carol Gilligan’s work (Gilligan 1982), British theologian Nicola Slee found that women’s modes of faith development use different *preferred processes* for integrating information into their cognitive faith frameworks and that this is significant in women’s faith formation. Females will be drawn into a relationship with the Divine by validating emotive spiritual experiences and using relationship as a key focus in feminine spiritual life. The work of Gilligan and others demonstrated that a feminine mode is more likely to be situated within a care and nurture framework that is dependent upon relationship, rather than the control or justice framework that is more prevalent in masculine engagement. (Taylor, Gilligan et al. 1995) The intuitive tendency in women to express their spiritual relationship with the Divine in affective terms was evident in the narratives.

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61 See Chapter 11 for the table of feminine faith processes. p.266
This affective language is clearly seen in the summary of the narrative linguistic patterns, generated through ranking common terms in the transcripts, and shows in the style of language used. The terms are highlighted in order to demonstrate a way of speaking that indicates how the experience was processed by the women. Slee’s processes for engaging with perceptions include the affective and conversational modes which rely heavily on relationship. The terms that have been extracted from the transcripts propose that not only relationship and affective engagement are key benefits but also the openness of a space in which to explore without fear. In the transcripts, openness referred to having one’s view of the faith world expanded, being open to the broader questions of life, being opened up internally, including freedom to imagine oneself in a different way. Furthermore it meant being open to alternate ways to read and interpret the scriptures and being open to new ways of experiencing God.

This openness develops best in a nurturing environment. It was noted in Chapter 1 that being open to experience requires compromise and encouragement to embrace a subjective engagement with transcendent experiences. McCrae’s Five Factor Model of Personality Traits was cited in Chapter 1 in reference to one of the traits, that of Openness-To-Experience. (McCrae 1996) It is also a key element that has been often been missing from the female experience within conservative faith fellowships. To be open invites risk and vulnerability to being less than acceptable and women consequently tend to remain silent, or without a voice. If McCrae’s model is taken as one of the anchor points for the discussion of the responses in this study, then there is something immediately notable in the high response level for women welcoming openness in themselves and in the environment of spiritual direction. The women demonstrated a desire to be open to their experience, a condition of advancing their spiritual journey and liberating aspects of personal identity that have been suppressed. It supports

\[62\] Chapter 11 presented the summary of terms referred to in the transcripts. See p.270
McCrae’s proposition that openness-to-experience, and the freedom to engage the spiritual journey in this way, will have an impact upon the personality of the individual.

To capture the openness and liberty that facilitates embedding a deeper relationship with God, the biblical metaphor of a broad place (Psalm 18:19) was chosen for this study. Such an open space is in contrast to the closed environment often experienced by women in a patriarchal setting (See Figure 1, p.79). The characterization of David encountering the allure of God to come into a spacious place is as one seeking refuge. In the broad space depicted by the psalmist, a deep spiritual encounter with God is made possible and David’s identity is affirmed as one who is loved by God. The hermeneutic of this passage is in a context of conflict and struggle, escaping from enemies who threaten to overthrow him. A story that is recorded as a man, David, interacting with a male God (He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. Psalm 18:19 NRSV) may seem an anomaly to the story of feminine spirituality. If the passage is interpreted using a masculine modality (which has been described earlier as an achievement-orientated approach and is observed as a task-orientated and dominating role), then the interpretation would be related to David’s rescue and the succession plan for his future. A salvific act of God ensures that the metanarrative is played out. However, an interpretation using feminine modalities distances the metanarrative from the story of encounter and is more present to the actions within the moment, resulting in a focus on two actors who are part of a subjective interaction. The focus of the record shifts from a masculine objective construct of rescue and succession to the immediacy of the grounded reality of each party, where the relationship encounter and the experience of delight become central to the chronicle. Both of these interpretations have legitimacy and provide a balance between the feminine and masculine modalities available to the reader.

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63 See Chapter 1, p.28
If spiritual direction is thought of as a broad space, the language used by women in this study described the qualities of spaciousness that may parallel David’s experience. Women reported finding enjoyment in their spiritual experiences, often using the terms “love” or “loved” with respect to their spiritual encounters, both in church contexts and in personal spiritual practice. This was a style of language used for many descriptions of spiritual experience at different times in their religious history, not only in a spiritual direction context but consistently in their story of spiritual direction. For example,

“It was an experience, a real ‘something happened-experience’ of love. It wasn’t anything else.” (0803) or

“Even though all through the years I knew God loved me, I think it had conditions on it. For the first time I found real love without any conditions.” (0702) and

“Being in love with the life and the world and God.” (0907)

The tendency to speak in affective terms should not be discounted as typical of a woman’s way of speaking, but rather be affirmed as a feminine modality available to both men and women, but which is preferred by women as a significant way for a woman to express the deepest connection that she is experiencing as she tells her story and as she does her faithing.

Up to this point, the metaphor of a broad space invokes qualities of spaciousness and openness that have been examined on several levels.

- Spaciousness within the conversation that allows the lived experience freedom of expression without the shadow of a pre-existing framework for the conversation.
- Openness within the directee to engage the uncertainties and queries in their faith life.
- Freedom to express spiritual experience without judgement.
- Openness that allows a woman to engage in language that is intuitive, largely in affective tones.

The last of these qualities arises from the observation that the women used affective language in their responses to the benefits of spiritual direction, particularly in terms of love, loving or experiencing love. Love, as a primary affect, is a core modality of feminine engagement that is
expressed in the care and nurture paradigm for approaching problem solving. The tone of the responses using this language conveyed a sense of delight or enjoyment in their faith journey.

“I think that there’s something in spiritual direction about really attending to who we really are, who God is in us - taking away all those things that get in the way of it and I just love it.” (0806) and “I love the idea of journey in the spiritual life. (0910)

Love in this sense of exuberant enjoyment is not a word that is often used in relation to faith in a conservative setting. *Enjoyment* may be dismissed as an emotional or psychological response to what is essentially a cognitive domain or is used in the context of the benefit of fervent adherence to the espoused doctrine.

For example, a conservative website that is entitled “Enjoying God Ministries” is underpinned by a twelve point doctrinal statement that includes extensive biblical referencing, taken from what is stated as the ‘inerrant’ Bible, which narrowly defines a conservative evangelical framework. (Storms 2012) A more apologetic reference to enjoying God is made in an editorial by E.T. Charry, who implies that the lack of enthusiasm in the contemporary culture for anything Christian is remedied by intellectuals having a better vision of the truth. There is a difference, however, between a descriptive reference to joy, easily supported by biblical referencing64, and the affect of *enjoyment* as an experiential coherence that is an expression of the personality.

Piedmont, for example, refers to joy as an essential outcome of a spiritual life: “Spirituality allows individuals to find a new personal centering that binds them with a higher reality and creates an experience of joy and security. Such a unitive experience provides coherence to our existence.” (Piedmont 1999,1009) From the evidence in women’s narratives, women are using

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64 For example, an excerpt taken from a web post by a Reformed Theology pastor speaks about joy:” Joy is both an outcome of our relationship with the Lord and our source of strength for our obedience of Him. (John 15) The Joy of the Lord is our strength. (Nehemiah 8:9) God desires for His people to be strong in Him so He graciously gives us joy as we cooperate with Him in our sanctification. (Philippians 2:12-13) The joy of the Lord is the source of our fulfilment. As we experience fulfilment in the Lord this way, we work out our salvation in ever-increasing levels of refinement.” [http://mikeratliff.wordpress.com/2006/01/10/what-is-joy/](http://mikeratliff.wordpress.com/2006/01/10/what-is-joy/) Accessed 21 Nov, 2012
a spiritual direction space to rediscover their enjoyment of their faith-life in ways that allowed
them to connect with their authentic expression of who they are. Is it reasonable then to draw
the parallel more succinctly between David’s reported experience, and what the women were
seeking as a place to validate their spiritual experience?

The final phrase of the Psalm 18:19 pericope reports David’s sense of being drawn into a broad
space by God, “because he delighted in me.” The final statement is a causal phrase alluding to
David’s belief in God’s desire to enjoy his presence as the reason that “[God] brought [him]
into a broad place.” Such affective reporting of the memory of a spiritual encounter helps the
writer to make meaning out of an experience that was significant to David’s relationship with
God. While this pericope is an excerpt from the Psalms, it may be argued that many of David’s
psalms are written from an affective perspective. Indeed, there are many instances of David’s
account of his actions before God that are reported in highly emotive language, such as the
bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The celebration on the road to Jerusalem
captures David’s delight in the fulfilment of the cultic goals of the people of God, and it may be
argued that this symbolises a relationship with God that was validated by experiences such as
that in Psalm 18:19. Reciprocating to the perceived delight of God has left a life changing
effect.

Such passages provide a scriptural precedent validating an epistemological modality that
includes the affective aspect. This observation implies that the emotional memory resulting
from the affective aspect of a spiritual experience is a significant aspect of knowing God. The
consensus of subjective reports of the participants in this study paralleled the affective
reporting found in Psalm 18:19. It validates the claim that this was an essential epistemological
route for a deeply embedded and transformative knowledge of God for these women.

65 1 Chronicles 15:28-29
The intuitiveness of the feminine mode of affective engagement is grounded in a holistic integration of spiritual and body perceptiveness. Norris describes the religious experience as primarily a body state “in the sense that it cannot be learned through merely thinking, reading or reflection.” (Norris 2005) Validation of spiritual experience needs an environment which supports open expression of all facets of the encounter, not just the cognitive or rational. Suppressing emotional or organic responses to transcendent states removes these aspects from the possibility of being validated and one loses the affirmation inherent in the interaction. The psychological implications of such invalidation are well researched showing results that lead to impoverished emotional development. (Krause, Mendelson et al. 2003; Bradley 2010) A feminine spirituality which is using the tools of grounded, bodily reality that engages emotively with experience cannot develop fully if encultured in a masculinised, intellectualised environment where the emotional content of faith experience is seen as invalid. Those who perceive the emotion of their faith as important are consistently invalidated by the conservative environment (referred to as ‘dismissal’ or ‘ostracising’ by some of the participants).

Levine and Pizzaro (2004) summarise the significance of emotion on memory, stating “that the event occurred, the gist of what occurred, and the implications it had for the individual” is remembered better for emotional events than non-emotional events. (Levine and Pizarro 2004, 533 Original emphasis included.) Even though they also stress that emotional memories fade over time, emotion makes memory better. Furthermore, Sherman and Kim have offered some preliminary studies designed to examine the tendency of affective responses to persevere, despite invalidation by cognitive means. They suggest that “cognitive invalidation of affect is largely ineffective in changing an affective response. Affect perseveres even when the cognitive basis for the affect is invalidated.” (Sherman and Kim 2002, 235) They speculate that affective perseverance may have significance for belief perseverance. In an environment in which faith is constructed primarily through cognitive engagement, these researchers offer
support for the significance of emotional content on an epistemology of faith. When such a proposition is applied to what enhances autobiographical memories of faith encounters, the emotional content of a spiritual encounter is likely to elicit a more long-lasting memory of the event which, in turn, stimulates the embedding of belief. The corollary holds that should the emotional content of the event be disregarded, not only is the memory likely to be less available but there are fewer mechanisms to deepen engaging with the transcendent.

Throughout this study, the role of the intimate aspects of personhood have been referred to within the private domain of the inner psyche and that the affect connects with what is intimate and central to an individual’s perceptions and actions. Gorton states, “our actions are guided not just by what we think but also by how we feel and our bodily response to feelings.” (Gorton 2007,345) It should be noted, however, that psychological theories on emotion and affect are divided as to whether they are interchangeable terms. (Hill and Hood 1999; Gorton 2007) Some theorists refer to emotion as a social or cultural expression and affects as more biologically based while others prefer to view affect as incorporating other components such as emotion and moods. (Batson, Shaw et al. 1993) Gorton’s work referred to the sociological significance of minority groups finding a voice in the public arena, and assessed the political significance this had in changing the social consciousness. She makes the generalisation that what is important is not the difference between definitions of emotion and affect, but to notice how “feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body.” (p.334) By acknowledging the affective dimension of a bodily experience and its significance in validating people’s authentic life frame, the intimate is brought into the public sphere. It has the capacity to transform political and social domains. She quotes Pearce’s review of Denise Riley’s work who believes that “the structures of everyday language are as – if not more – responsible for the production of our affective selves as our unconscious psyches.” (Pearce 2006) From these contributors, it would seem that observations about affective language used to describe experience are incorporating important mechanisms that bring the intimate into
the social environment. If this is the case, then spiritual direction is creating a space which helps women to connect the intimate aspects of personhood with their empowerment to function well in their religio-social settings.

**Summary**

From the examination of the women’s narratives, the benefit of a spiritual direction space offered a place to explore their changing identity in response to new or different spiritual encounters that were not familiar in their conservative faith settings. The spaciousness provided by a secondspace openness enabled the woman to encounter their intimate spiritual experiences free from judgement. The open space disarmed the defensive response of wariness or prejudice brought by the women to the spiritual direction conversation. The broad space of spiritual direction offered the women in this study a place in which to find their own openness, free from judgement, and gave them freedom to express their spiritual encounters in a way that validated their intimate faith story. The affective modality of a feminine form of engagement was demonstrated to be a significant factor in liberating intimate engagement with spiritual experience. The benefits of each of these outcomes of the spiritual direction experience have enabled the participants to be proactive about their faith-agency and to own a more authentic sense of self.

_When I was in the evangelical box it was about the goodness of God and the good things of life. Now it is expanded and it’s not just about the good things of life, God is about the suffering, the difficulty and the struggle. When I was in the box, God was there with me. But if I’m outside the box, which I feel I am now, God’s there with me too, so there is no limit. It’s an open vista, what I can explore._

_It feels wonderful!_

_It feels authentic and real . . . all those things I wasn’t. I’ve come to realise I wasn’t. There is no separating it out from the rest of life or anything. God’s there in the wonder and the mess and chaos, in all of it and that’s very good. Very good. (1005)_
Chapter 13

Conclusions

Women’s participation in conservative religious fellowships has often resulted in disempowerment and relegation to gender-based roles. It is difficult for women to find a place for an authentic exploration of personal faith experiences within a conservative framework that is driven to preserve the integrity of the group’s faith stance. In this study, the metaphor of a broad place for a deep connection with God has been used as a framework to describe the nature of a space that can support a woman’s desire for personal faith exploration without the over-arching shadow of a masculinised environment shaping how she expresses her experiences. Psalm 18:19 suggests that the freedom to speak openly in a safe place validates and embeds what is experientially known about the Divine and affects changes in identity and faith agency as a result. Such a process is transformative and is couched in a relationship of loving Divine attentiveness.

The experience described in the psalmist’s metaphor has been compared with the experience of women in the study who accessed a spiritual direction space. By listening to women’s narratives, the benefits and outcomes of receiving spiritual direction have been gathered together to assess the validity of such a comparison. The quality of the space has been the focus and the outcomes were related to the nature of what women experienced within a spacious place for conversation that was not ordinarily found within their conservative faith communities. The participants in this study spoke about the perceived benefits of having the freedom to speak openly about their intimate faith life.
The female gender in a conservative context is still largely defined by roles rather than having intrinsic characteristics and qualities of value, particularly with regard to the spiritual capital that women bring to the community. The literature described a conservative paradigm that encouraged women’s participation based upon role, where those roles were essentially gender-based. The challenge was raised as to how to redefine a characterisation of female participation that was not role-based and to find other ways to be female in a conservative faith environment. The literature also described feminine modes of engagement with reality that are significant to the validation of women’s experience. The model of feminine processes that describe the way women construct their faith, particularly as developed by Nicola Slee, underpinned this research. The schema that has been proposed was used as a means of observing what the spiritual direction space enabled within women as they engaged their spiritual experiences.

In the course of analysing the personal narratives of the women interviewed, a non-judgemental open space in which to speak authentically about spiritual experience was important to furthering the women’s spiritual journey. The nature of the space and the nature of the language by which women expressed themselves were both found to have a significant impact. A framework of feminine modes of engagement was evident in the way the intuitive and natural modes of affirming spiritual experience were liberated in the spiritual direction conversation space. The reflexive frame was about individualised, authentic journeying with God and the narrative horizon was seen from a different perspective to their previous patriarchal faith constructs. Obedience and compliance within frames of reference set by external entities were no longer central to the women’s faith development. Participants also spoke of an emergent sense of belonging to a more universal and the contemplative faith community that supported their exploration of a different spirituality.

The safe hospitality of a spiritual director was found to be as important as a non-judgemental space. The women endorsed personality attributes like gentleness and openness, an
encouraging and affirming presence, and someone who was an exemplar that demonstrated a grounded approach to living authentically. They felt these attributes contributed to their sense of safety in a space where the recurrent theme of judgementalism did not trigger their patterned defensiveness. When the shadow constraints patterned by patriarchal conservatism were brought into the spiritual direction space, the drive to get the faith life right became a filter through which the conversation took place. This exemplified the influence of a secondspace level of critical space theory in which the shadow effects of a conservative environment patterned unconscious behavioural responses. The women reported experiencing the liberty to speak about their faith concerns without feeling judged or dismissed, signifying that the openness of the spiritual direction space enabled a deeper connection with their spiritual encounters that was able to get beneath the old patterning of defensiveness or the wariness to reveal intimate experience.

In describing the benefits of spiritual direction, the women’s narratives revealed how some women found ways to re-claim their faith identities, found a new sense of identity or regained confidence in their faith relationship. It was experienced through hearing a different voice of God speaking into their lives and through experiencing a sense of intimacy that came with having been heard by someone who shared their personal story. Many of the women who had experienced disempowerment, or the disillusionment of not feeling acceptable in a patriarchal faith setting, developed a new consciousness of their identity that was freed from the presumption of judgement. The women’s stories demonstrated the long lasting effect of this change through their appreciation of becoming who they felt they truly were, such that a confidence and ownership of personal identity happened in tandem with their faith agency. The individualised ownership of the faith journey was one significant outcome of the women who were engaged in a spiritual direction process, what is being termed faith-agency: having liberty to own and advocate for one’s faith development.
A goal of this study was to observe if women can reclaim a normative perception of their feminine spirituality based on their own spiritual experiences, one that allowed them to re-vision a more holistic relationship with God that may differ from the accepted forms of their patriarchal religious culture. What emerged was a way of recognising an innate feminine spirituality through the style of language that the women used as they described their changing imagery of their relationship with God, others and themselves. It was identified by specific modes of interacting with experience and was found to be intuitive in the language women used to affirm their story. The affective language that was used was in contrast to the more intellectualised and objective language of a conservative environment. Using an affective mode of engagement was noted as a feminine modality for vocalising experience, and the strong use of emotive language was evident in the expression of the participant’s sense of their spiritual journey.

The characteristics of a feminine spirituality found in the transcripts were summarised as an affective engagement with God who was seen in terms of gentleness and love, an embrace of a liberated image of God which is open to question and uncertainty, a sense of being companioned rather than judged by God. These were supported by a sense of value of the women’s feminine identity which brought confidence in and a deepening of the Divine relationship. By liberating feminine modalities that are intuitive and able to engage a measure of openness to varieties of spiritual experience, a judgment-free spiritual direction space facilitated the transformative development and subsequent adoption of these characteristics of feminine spirituality.

Therefore, a conundrum exists for women who fellowship in a conservative faith community where such personal inner work cannot be voiced. Is it possible for women to have places to speak of their personal faith within a conservative environment and the term conservative still be used to describe that style of community? Or could it be possible that recognising a feminine style of faith engagement need not challenge the leadership power structures but
bring the fruit of half of the membership being empowered to live more authentically within
the community? The desire of the women in this study was to genuinely connect with their
ture identity, and the consequential embodiment of that authenticity is to strive to live
synergistically with the aims exemplified by the life of Jesus. It seems an indictment of the
conservative patriarchy that there continues to be such a guarded response to empowering
the spiritual uniqueness that women can offer, and who generally express little interest in
hierarchical power. It would seem that the intuitiveness of a feminine spirituality could
enhance rather than threaten a faith community.

A similar question arises when considering the responses of the women in this study to their
changing image of God, one that is cast as a gentler and more relationally responsive entity.
Can reimagining images of God according to personal numinous experiences be tolerated
within a conservative, doctrinally driven environment? And at what cost and to whom? The
original thesis of this study was based upon a definition of conservatism as a bounded space in
which the shape of faith experience supported and was conditioned by the core tenets of the
group’s faith stance. A first response would negate the question of inviting a more intuitive
image of God to stand in parallel with the structured and conceptual images of God. It would
seem to create a fundamental challenge to the idea of conservatism. However, offering a
spiritual direction space as an adjunct to the worshipping environment of a conservative
fellowship could bring significant benefits to the female sector of the community, as a place to
connect with their intuitive ways of faith engagement, while reaping the benefits of a more
grounded and authenticated influence on the life of the group.

Throughout this study, a Jungian approach to the nature of the individual psyche has been
adopted. Both masculine and feminine aspects constitute the human psyche, implying that a
feminine spirituality is available to both men and women. In the course of carrying out this
research, incidental conversations with men have highlighted some empathy with the
concerns about personal spirituality and its expression in a conservative faith fellowship. If a
Jungian stance is defensible, then the results of this study would be enhanced by research that surveyed the effect on men of engaging with a feminine spirituality. Would the freedom to engage a relationship with God using a non-preferred mode of spiritual engagement facilitate a similar change in personal identity and faith agency as evident in the women interviewed for this study? And would the spiritual direction space provide a similar space of safety and hospitality to the predominantly non-affective masculine mode of faith engagement?

Is this a way forward for women in the current conservative environment? Rather than a his and hers approach of having different spiritual capacities with the one community as an oppositional tension that hijacks the genuine desire to fulfil the work of the Gospel, might the future shift in the nature of conservatism lie with the ability of the male gender to embrace alternate ways of being male? The spiritual direction space that was experienced by the women in this study facilitated personal faith exploration, awakening them to a deeper inner connectedness with their intimate experiences of God. This facility is available to all people, and the male experience of such a space may be an ally that conservative women can coax into a positive alliance for change.


Appendix A
Consent Form

“Bringing women into a broad place”
(Spiritual Direction with women from conservative religious contexts)

I am a PhD student working on a research project in Theology at Murdoch University, investigating the role of spiritual direction with women who have experience both as a directee with a spiritual director, and conservative religious backgrounds.

You can help in this study by consenting to participate in the survey. Participation is by interview which I would like to record on tape to ensure accurate representation of the views expressed. All taped material will be held by myself only for the duration of the project and destroyed after five years. Audio will not be accessed by any others for any purpose. Data will be stored in SS2. 029 at Murdoch University, a locked room used for storage of research material. Transcribed material may be used in the final dissertation, however, all information given during the survey is confidential and no names or other information which might identify you will be used in any publication arising from the research. At completion of the project, a synopsis of research will available to you.

Participants can decide to withdraw their consent at any time. If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below. If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Beth Roberton, on 9255 4020 or my supervisor, Dr Nancy Ault, on (61-8) 9360 2602. My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

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I have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time. I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Name of Participant ......................................................... Date .........................

Signature of Participant ..................................................

Signature of Investigator: ................................................ Date .........................

Investigator's Name: Beth Roberton