

# Fluctuations of Faith and The Quest for Community

A mixed method study among Millennials in Norway

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic relationship between fluctuations of faith and the quest for community among Norwegian millennials using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from a survey of 585 participants with follow-up interviews. The research reveals that faith is not static but evolves throughout life, and for many, it changes back and forth several times. The study also looks at when these changes seem to happen and elaborates on what lies behind them. The application of McAdams' Life Story Theory suggests that these faith narratives are integral to individuals' broader life stories and identity formation, where one looks back at different vantage points in life, and what you see may be different from how you once saw it. The relation aspect seems to be an important point, where warmth, trust and integrity play a central role, which makes it interesting to look at this also through the lens of the integrative model of organizational trust.

Among the stories of those who have distanced themselves to a greater extent from the faith, an interesting aspect nevertheless emerges. It seems to be a form of longing for the community that once was a part of their life, at least where trust re-emerges, even if the community was perhaps left intentionally at an earlier point in life. Perhaps faith does not stand alone? Perhaps the Christian community has an attraction in itself that should not be underestimated, at least for those who have once experienced it. How can the church meet fluctuation of faith, be experienced as relevant through the different seasons of life, and help the individual with the transition from mere longing to actual reintegration with a community?

**Keywords:** Christian faith, influence, integrity, trust, Christian community, religious socialization

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps faith matures? Like a seed...? As children, perhaps faith is in a sort of dormancy, and then it begins to sprout in the teenage years, and later one might experience adversity. Growth can stagnate. Then you grow a bit. Winter, spring, summer, and autumn in life. God remains the same. Adolescence and the student years provided experience with various Christian fellowships. The realization that people are different, but God is the same. As a parent, one is more tired, with sleepless nights, etc. One doesn't feel the energy to pray as long and 'thoroughly' for everyone and everything. But the prayer is there. The faith is there. Even if it is a weary faith, that has faced some adversity. Not as 'wild'. Maybe more waiting...<sup>1</sup>

The quote is taken from one of the informants in the study, which precisely demonstrates some of the complexity of life, and not least the tension between our life story and our faith. Establishing, keeping, and nurturing faith throughout one's life is a highly complex endeavor. The narrative presented above provides a compelling case in regard to that. Life does not stand still, so why should faith be any different? Perhaps faith is more connected to our life story and the experiences we go through in life than we might recognize, making McAdams' Life Story Theory (McAdams, 1997) particularly relevant. For some, faith is a rock, when everything else changes; for others, negative experiences with the church and its leaders can lead to a detachment from the church, while the personal faith itself remains intact. Often, this is due to dissatisfaction with the institution of the church rather than with the divine, which leads them to a *churchless faith*. (Aisthorpe, 2014, 2016; Jamieson, 2002) For others, faith is completely left behind. In a prior study using the same cohort, I concluded that although certain individuals exert more influence than others, it can be disputed whether this is related to their relational position vis-à-vis the subject, or if it is actually attributable to their character, which has engendered trust and thereby affords them influence in relation to faith. (Bjørntvedt, 2024) This makes it interesting to look at the fluctuations of faith through *the integrative model of organizational trust* (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). What are the dynamics of trust, integrity and warmth, related to faith, and what happens if this bond is broken? These and other questions are set to be explored through the following research question: *What is the relationship between fluctuations of faith throughout life and the quest for Christian community?* This article will first introduce the theories on which it relies, then outline the methodology of the project, before analyzing the results structured around a) a faith in motion, b) the relation aspect, and lastly, c) the longing for community. This will be followed by a conclusion that synthesizes the findings and also outlines consequences this research may have for practical church life. The informants in the study are 585 Norwegian millennials born between 1981 to 1991, predominantly from southern parts of Norway. They provide insights into their upbringing, demographics, church involvement, and the influence of Christianity on family life – as all of them have some church affiliation growing up.<sup>2</sup>

A recurring theme in the conversations with the informants about faith was their frequent compulsion to justify or defend their belief in relation to their participation in, or absence from, the Christian community. Although faith has increasingly become individualized and less tied to institutions in the modern West, the informants in this study still seem to draw a connection between faith and community, maybe because they have experiences with child-/youth ministry growing up. Among the informants who have distanced themselves from the

<sup>1</sup> Informant B6.

<sup>2</sup> The term *Millennials* is in this study not employed analytically, but rather to delineate an age demographic. The term Millennials is defined in line with Neil Howe and William Strauss, who first used the term and defined this to be the generation from 1982 to the early 2000s (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Christian Community, it seems that *the church* still establishes the parameters for what is considered *Christian faith* – the *official model* still influences what is of *ultimate* significance – which they adhere to, despite their faith being individualized. (Luckmann et al., 2022, pp. 45-51) With this background, it makes sense to use the phrase *fluctuations of faith*, and to examine the *quest for community* as a part of this study. I reckon this to be highly relevant given the sample all have experiences with church growing up. The informants appear to possess an inherent need to associate their faith with their relationship to the church.

Among Norwegian studies related to life stories and faith, the work of (Birkedal, 2008, 2020) is particularly relevant. Birkedal followed the same individuals in a longitudinal study from their early teens to their late thirties. He concludes that life stories are narratives that evolve over time, and the stories obtained from informants at the age of 35 are much more insightful and nuanced than those from the same individuals at the age of 15 (Birkedal, 2020, p. 202):

Identity, as it relates to faith and religiosity, is not fixed once and for all. The past does not vanish; new experiences, insights, and reflection continually shape an individual. The journey of self-understanding, one's environment, and existence is ongoing. A person's life story remains unfinished as long as they live (Birkedal, 2020, p. 211)<sup>3</sup>

Theresa May Bulander has studied the interplay between faith and community in her dissertation "Moments that Matter: The Lived Experience of Belonging in Faith Communities", focusing on young adults from 20-27 years of age (Bulander, 2007). She identifies several factors that potentially elucidate a quest for the community: the human need for belonging, the pursuit of meaning and identity that often is constructed in a collective, the need to find a home, the desire for a safe haven, and, not least, the positive experiences and memories that informants carry with them.

There are several studies also from a Norwegian context that delve into the dynamics of faith, how faith evolves through life, and sources that weaken or strengthen faith (Afdal et al., 2013; Birkedal, 2008, 2020; Bjørntvedt, 2024; Engedal, 2006; Kalfoss et al., 2020; Nygaard et al., 2022; Repstad, 1984; Zeiffert, 2023). This study will look at a tension that seems to be understudied, which is the tension between a faith in motion throughout life, and the quest for community that still seems to be there, even if the community was abandoned on purpose.

From a more international perspective, there have been several prominent studies that touch upon a faith in motion (Ammerman, 2007, 2014; Bengtson, 2017; Bengtson et al., 2018; McGuire, 2008; Perrin, 2020; Smith & Snell, 2009; Zuckerman, 2008, 2012). Most of them are qualitative studies, but Bengtson (2017) employs a longitudinal mixed-method approach, primarily examining how religion is passed down, while Smith & Snell (2009) focus more generally on spirituality within a younger age group. Nevertheless, none of these studies focuses on the interplay between a faith in motion and the quest for community. Zuckerman (2012), in an intriguing note, compares the data he has collected from Scandinavian countries with the data from the United States and concludes:

I studied secularity in Denmark and Sweden – two of the least religious countries in the world – where apostasy is literally a nonissue... Most people in honesty, couldn't

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<sup>3</sup> Birkedal 2020, p. 211: «Identiteten, også det som gjelde tro og religiøsitet, er ikke fastlagt én gang for alle. Fortiden blir ikke borte, men nye erfaringer, innsikt og refleksjon er stadig med på å forme en person... Mennesket er underveis også når det gjelder å forstå seg selv, sine omgivelser og sin eksistens. Menneskets egen livshistorie er uavsluttet så lenge en lever.»

even remember when they stopped believing. It was quite the opposite here in the United States... (Zuckerman, 2012, p. 171)

This underscores the need for more data from Scandinavia on fluctuations of faith. While my study does not specifically delve into apostasy, it does examine shifts in faith throughout one's life story. It is still plausible that some of the same elements may emerge, even if the final outcomes related to faith differ.

Espen Gilsvik has made an sociological contribution into this field through a study of apostasy that has focused on Norwegian ex-charismatics (Gilsvik, 2023b). Particularly interesting in regard to this study is how he identifies *phantoms of faith* in conversations with informants who have initially distanced themselves from belief (Gilsvik, 2023a). This pattern was also observed among the individuals I interviewed, regarding *quest for community*. Those who were once very active in church, for various reasons decided to leave, yet still had a longing for that community and in some cases even attempted to return. The informants appear to possess an inherent need to associate their faith with their relationship to the church. The question arises: Are these merely *phantoms* of a past life, or is the longing for community genuine?

This study aims to explore the ways in which an individual's life narrative is interwoven with the development of their Christian faith from a practical theological standpoint. The study is to be understood abductively, as it builds on earlier studies and theories – while also drawing on new data from 30-40-years-olds in Norway, that may lead to new theories.

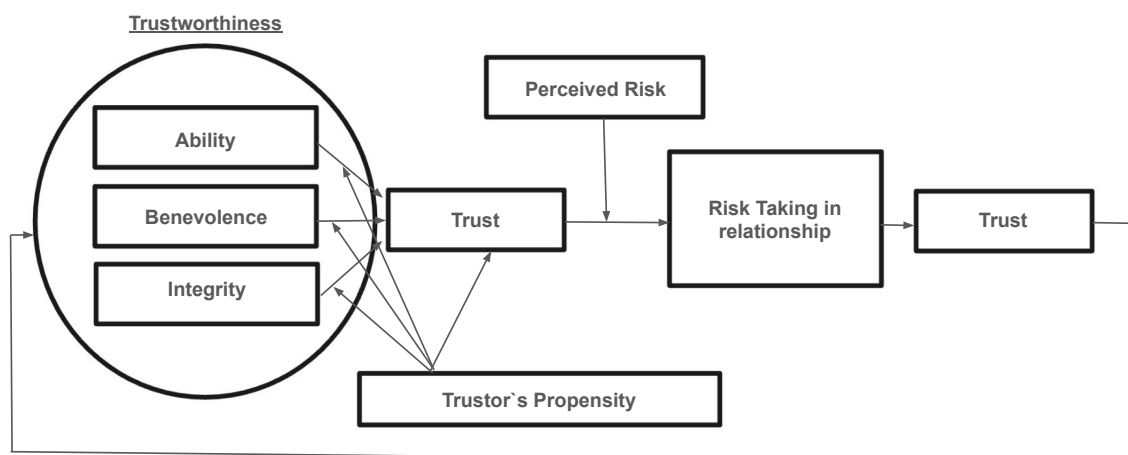
## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study examines individuals' approach to faith in the context of their life stories by applying McAdams' *Life Story Theory* (McAdams, 1997), which posits that “If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am” (McAdams, 1997, p. 11). According to McAdams, individuals become personal myth-makers in later adolescence. Therefore, this study engages with individuals who are well into this process, enabling them to reflect in retrospect on their experiences before and during this developmental stage. Life Story Theory is also intriguing in how it outlines our perspective at various points in life. It illustrates how our understanding of what we see is shaped by the vantage points we occupy and the journeys that have brought us to these points. This concept may be similarly applicable to understanding faith. To comprehend an individual's perspective on faith, it is essential to know their identity, origins, and historical background. The premise is that a person is not merely a collection of traits and roles but a tapestry of experiences, creating a rich, meaningful narrative. This narrative is shaped by a blend of factors including cultural and social contexts, relationships, activities, societal structures, and environmental influences. Additionally, the theory examines the contrast between *redemption* – transforming negative or challenging life experiences into positive outcomes – and *contamination*, where positive or neutral events turn negative, tarnishing once favorable experiences. These dynamics are evident in the narratives of the participants, making the theory particularly relevant in understanding the fluctuations of faith related to personal life stories. This study reveals that for some, these experiences foster a pursuit of community, while for others, the extent of *contamination* within organized religion makes a return inconceivable.

Another theory that together with the Life Story Theory provides a relevant theoretical framework is *the integrative model of organizational trust*. (Mayer et al. 1995, and further expounded by Schoorman et al. 2007) It is a theory that primarily addresses the trustor-trustee relationship within an organizational context, suggesting a potential limitation in its

applicability to other types of relationships (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 730). Trustee attributes such as credibility, integrity, trust, and warmth were identified as having a substantial positive influence on the establishment of trustor's Christian faith (Bjørntvedt, 2024). Within this framework, the trustor's propensity endows the trustee with credibility, derived from their ability, benevolence, and integrity, which in turn fosters a willingness to trust in the face of uncertainty and perceived risk. Søren Kierkegaard equated faith with the audacity to venture into the deep, likening it to standing over 70,000 fathoms of water (Kierkegaard et al., 1992, p. 232). Perhaps it is the case that daring to venture into faith is *the perceived risk*, but the credibility and trust in those who have gone before create a space for trust in the individual to dare the leap of faith. The 2007 follow-up article: *The integrative model of organizational trust: past, present, and future*, incorporates the relational, temporal, and emotional aspects into this understanding to an even greater extent, making it even more relevant to connect it to relational aspects in the scope of this study (Schoorman et al., 2007). By integrating these aspects, the theory acknowledges even more the complexity of management processes, and the expanded perspective allows the theory to be even more suitable beyond traditional organizational hierarchies. I suggest that those individuals who are perceived as significantly influential in the lives of the informants essentially serve as de facto spiritual leaders, regardless of traditional organizational hierarchies, formal acknowledgment, and titles, essentially serve as spiritual leaders

**Figure 1:** *The integrative model of Organizational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 730).*



The feedback loop within the model is of particular interest. This loop elucidates how the consequences of trust-based actions inform subsequent perceptions of a trustee's trustworthiness. A breach of trust diminishes the trustee's perceived ability, goodwill, and integrity. Trust is inherently dynamic, evolving through ongoing interactions and experiences between the trustor and trustee. The feedback loop, therefore, can either fortify or erode trust over time. This research demonstrates that such erosion can indeed occur rapidly.

## METHOD

The methodological approach of this paper is founded upon a triangulated research design from a large-scale quantitative survey among 585 millennials, with a smaller, in-depth

qualitative interview among 10 individuals from the same cohort.<sup>4</sup> This methodological framework is identified as an *Explanatory sequential mixed method*. To recruit informants for the sample, I recruited 93 gatekeepers from various denominations to invite potential participants to the study, with the goal of recruiting 10 informants each. Not all gatekeepers met this target, while others exceeded it, leading to a pool of 810 potential informants. Before launching the survey, I conducted a pre-study with 7 individuals to refine the survey questions based on their feedback. The survey received (N=585) responses, which is a 72.13% response rate. Upon completing the data analysis, 10 participants from the larger quantitative study were selected for in-depth qualitative interviews. These semi-structured interviews were tailored to each participant's responses from the initial survey, resulting in 10 unique conversation starters. The participants were from 9 different cities across 5 counties, which were well-represented in the quantitative study.

The interviews were designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the quantitative data.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the qualitative analysis stands on its own through a narrative thematic analysis (Atkinson et al., 2003, pp. 331-346), which rightly can be said to be thematically structured around faith development, while it is also closely linked to a broader life story approach. Also, the qualitative data from the open-ended question in the survey has been analyzed thematically. I contend that there is a strong link between life experiences and the fluctuations of faith, which does not dismiss the continuous transformative experience of a divine encounter. Moreover, the interviews have revealed findings that call for additional quantitative analysis. Thus, even though the interviews are meant as a deepening of the quantitative aspect, in practice, they also serve to generate new insights, which in turn lead to the need for new quantitative analyses.

The criteria for being informant were:

- You were born between 1981-1991
- You have experiences of attending Christian child ministry and youth ministry growing up
- All or most of your upbringing took place in Norway

To allow participants to self-identify their level of faith, I used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (do not believe in God/not spiritual/not Christian) to 7 (Believe in God/spiritual/Christian). This approach to quantifying faith and spirituality aligns with the methodologies used in studies by Erling Birkedal (Birkedal, 2008, 2020) and Kati Tervo-Niemelä (Tervo-Niemelä, 2020).

The research commenced with a data-driven examination of quantitative materials. Key insights directed the formulation of topics for subsequent interviews, which were informed by participants' distinctive responses to the questionnaire. In instances where qualitative observations were particularly pertinent, the research circled back to reassess the quantitative data. The in-depth interviews aimed to enhance the findings of the quantitative analysis

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<sup>4</sup> This study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of SIKT regarding the processing of personal data protection. The study was approved 11.10.2021 with reference number: 640124.

<sup>5</sup> The interviews were semi-structured, each lasting approximately one hour. Most were conducted in person, except for a follow-up question to one interview, which was conducted digitally. Regarding bias, the vast majority of informants in both the quantitative and qualitative study were unknown to the researcher. Due to the design of the method, the researcher had no control over who became informants, as I was unaware of whom the gatekeepers invited to participate in the study. Although I knew some of the gatekeepers, the big majority also among them, were unknown. Not knowing who became the informants was important me, being a pastor, which obviously creates a bias.

by delving into the participants' personal experiences.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the qualitative exploration maintained its distinctiveness by systematically analyzing thematic narratives. This analysis brought to light elements that were not fully captured by the quantitative approach, prompting a reevaluation of the survey data to integrate these emergent perspectives. The quantitative analysis primarily involved frequency analysis, comparison of means, analysis of variance, correlation, and regression analyses.

## ANALYSIS

### a. "My faith has always been in motion..."<sup>7</sup>

This study demonstrates that throughout life, faith is in motion for many of the informants, and that there are various reasons for this, but for many, it can still be categorized. This issue first emerged when I discussed the variables for a question based on Harbo's study from the 80s (Harbo, 1989), with the group selected for the pre-study. This group found it to be a missing alternative to the question "Have you at any point had a different approach to faith than you have today?", which would prove to be relevant for many in the study: "Yes, my approach to faith has shifted several times throughout my life".

**Figure 2:** Have you at any point had a different approach to faith than you have today? (%) N=585

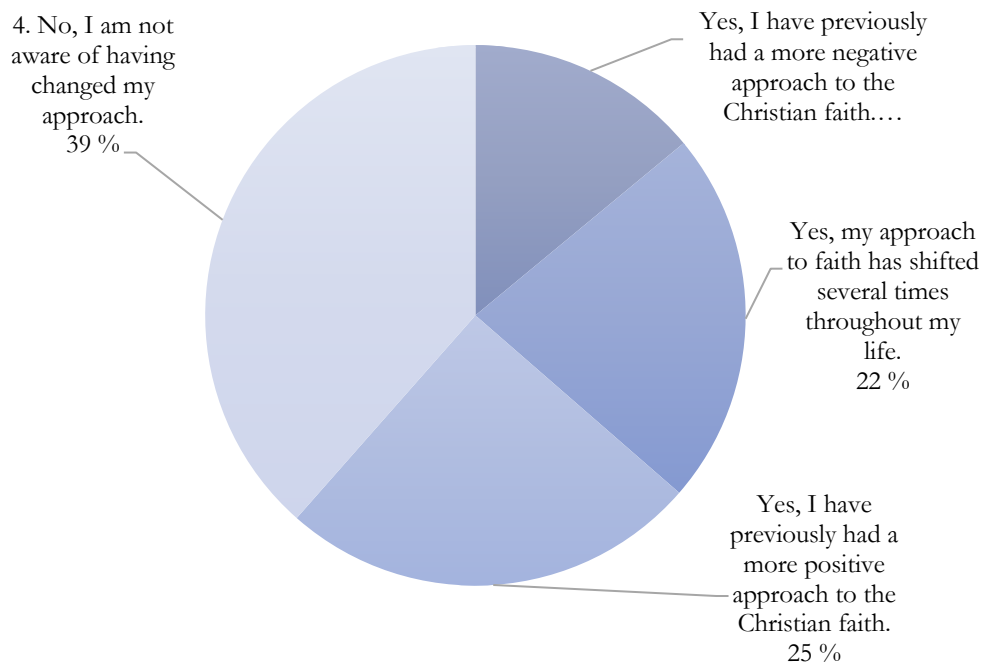


Figure 2 demonstrates that although 38.5% of the informants experience that faith persists throughout life, for the majority (61.5%) faith is in motion, and not surprisingly, this goes both ways. As many as 22.4% of the informants express that this has happened several times so far

<sup>6</sup> Both in the translation of transcribed qualitative data and linguistic proofreading of the article, ChatGPT has been utilized as an instrumental tool OpenAI. (2024).

<sup>7</sup> Informant B5.

in life, which makes it particularly interesting to look more at what this motion is particularly related to. This number increases to 24.5% when only focusing on those in the study who would define themselves as Christians.

The quote from the informants below sheds light on some of this from a subjective perspective. Faith is experienced in the same way as life in general, as a journey, and it is pivotal that the frameworks are broad enough to handle that journey:

My faith has always been in motion. This was something I became aware of in my adolescence, and as an older teenager/young adult, it was particularly important for me to take some new turns with God and in faith, in light of experiences that life is not as black and white as one might think as a child and teenager. My life experiences and relationships shape my faith, theology, and practice of faith - it is very important to me that there should be room for this within the framework of Christian faith.<sup>8</sup>

The informants talk about faith throughout life in a metaphorical way, as one might describe a journey, some also explicitly use that term. The reflection of the informant above express elements of this. Knut Tveitereid and Bård Hallesby found in their ethnographic study that a lack of precision in ordinary theology is not necessarily negative, but can be positive because it allows for a more adaptable and vibrant community, and that theological *wiggle room* may therefore be desirable (Tveitereid & Norheim, 2021). Maybe there must be a theological space within a community that is able to handle the width of theological nuances that appear through a journey of a lifetime?

Some recurring themes in the interviews are relationships and life experience, but also cognitive reflection (which, naturally, changes with age). For the informants that have changed their approach to faith back and forth, about 2/3 of them argue that this is best explained by life- /relational experiences.<sup>9</sup> These two are often difficult to distinguish from each other, since general life experiences, for most of us, are closely interwoven with relational experiences.

All informants who expressed having previously had a different approach to Christian faith were also given the opportunity to express this through a form with predefined variables, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *How did the change (of approach to faith) happen? N=360.*

	Gradually, without me re- membering specific events or experiences that stand out	At a religious conversion at a specific point in time	Through a special experi- ence that led to change	Due to close relationships	After I became a parent myself	Other
N= Valid	208	43	83	62	30	39
N= Missing	152	317	277	298	330	321

As a collective group, it appears, not surprisingly, that motion of faith occurs over time. However, for this group as a whole, it seems that they respond more to specific experiences than to relationships. Perhaps this impacts more strongly on those who move towards a stronger faith rather than where the faith changes several times.

<sup>8</sup> Informant B5.

<sup>9</sup> This statement is based on a categorization of 89 reflections on an open-ended question in the survey on why the informant's approach to faith has changed several times in their life in the survey.



The informants who expressed having changed their approach to faith were also asked about when this change happened.

**Figure 3:** *When (age) did the approach to faith happen? N=505.*<sup>10</sup>

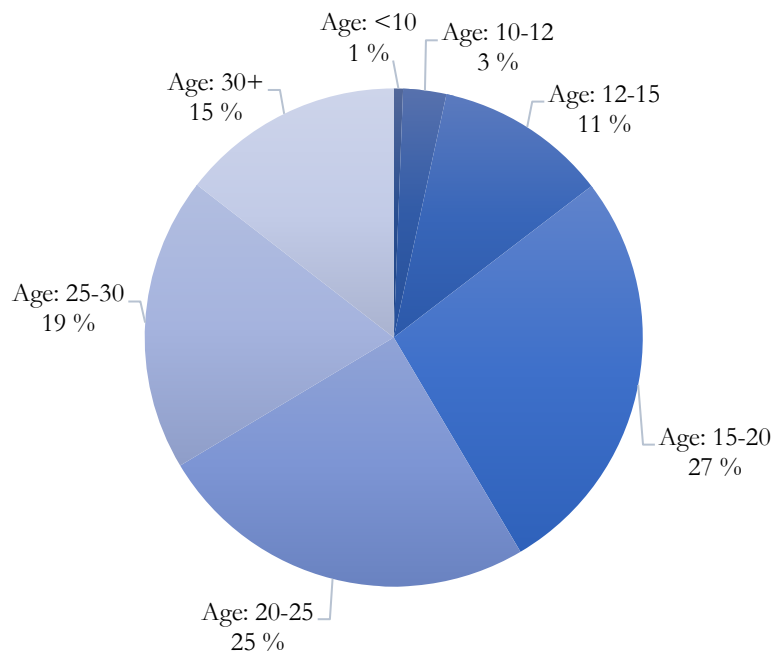


Figure 3 demonstrates that it is during adolescence/young adulthood that the highest number of individuals report changes in their approach to faith. Not surprisingly, previous research shows that the youth leader has an important position, when 30-40-year-olds look back at their life, even though it may be two decades since they participated in a youth program (Bjørntvedt, 2024; Zeiffert, 2023). This is further supported by the result shown in Figure 3. A pivotal question thus arises: is it possible to see any difference in age as to whether that change is towards faith or turning away from faith?

By examining the different constellations individually, a rather interesting picture emerges. Among those who express having previously had a positive approach to faith, 79.2% indicate that this change occurred at the age of 20 or older. Looking at those who previously had a more negative approach toward faith, 65.6% express that this shift happened between the ages of 12 to 20 years old. Furthermore, 50.5% indicate that it happened between the ages of 15 to 20. It thus appears that a *positive* change in approach to faith generally occurs at an earlier point than does a *negative* change of approach. This, in turn, underscores the significance of influential individuals surrounding the informant during this age, including the youth ministry leader.

Another interesting aspect to consider is how the informants themselves evaluate their faith in comparison to their parents' and grandparents' faith during their upbringing. This was a question also explored by Harbo in his 1980s study (Harbo, 1989). This study indicates that for approximately half of the informants their faith is somewhat similar to their parents' faith,

<sup>10</sup> Here, they had the opportunity to select multiple options, and for some, there were several changes of approach to faith.

(N=575) 49.7% vs. their father's faith and (N=581) 55.8% vs. their mother's faith. Furthermore, regarding their father's faith, the data shows that (N=575) 23% consider themselves more negative towards faith than their father, while 10.8% are more positive. The same figures for their mother are (N=581) 25.8% more negative towards faith, while 7.2% more positive towards faith. When broken down by gender, the women are more inclined to perceive their own faith as more similar to that of their parents, whereas more men than women tend to view their faith as weaker compared to both their father and mother. Another intriguing aspect is that a significantly higher percentage of the sample struggles to assess how their faith compares to their father's faith (10.3%) compared to their mother's faith (6.0%).

What is intriguing about these numbers is that the sample for this study is weighted towards what Visser-Vogel would define as *orthoprax* or *highly committed* Christians. (Visser-Vogel et al., 2012) The fact that such a large number of informants consider their parents to be more positive towards faith than themselves rather than negative, given the sample, is noteworthy. It may highlight an ongoing secularization even among the most devoutly practicing Christians, and also that fluctuations of faith appear to be strong also among them.

## b. The relation aspect

Both in the interviews and the qualitative questions within the survey, it is clear that the informants place greater emphasis on relationships in regard to influence than what the quantitative numbers from Table 1 suggest. I interpret this as an apparent contradiction by dealing with such deep questions quantitatively, where one is not able to scratch more than the surface. The significance of the relationships and the characters of the influencer is demonstrated in earlier studies (Bengtson, 2017; Bjørntvedt, 2024; Kallatsa et al., 2023; Mikkola et al., 2007; Nygaard et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2020; Zeiffert, 2023). The quantitative responses, however, bring forward an important point, that these changes are complex. It is usually not enough to just pinpoint one aspect: Often, many aspects over time lead to changes on fundamental levels of life.

For many, their movements in faith are connected to relational aspects, for better or for worse. One of the informants in the study, who became a Christian in their youth, may pinpoint some of the relation aspects, connected to a transcendent experience. She talks about how one of her friends showed some of her dark poems to the friend's mother, likely out of concern. The friend's mother reached out and was closely involved in her life during this period, and at one of those meetings, something special happened:

On February 17, 1999, we were at a bakery. As she was talking about something, I had a vision of a skeleton gaining tendons, muscles, and skin, becoming a complete human being. It resonated with me that a person consists of three parts: spirit, soul, and body, and that the Trinity of God just made sense. I felt that I was met by Jesus, and I knew I had to embrace this. So, when I got home from the café, I sent a message to a girl in my class saying that I had become a Christian and that I needed Christian friends.<sup>11</sup>

For the informant, this was an experience of meeting with the divine, which probably will have significance for the rest of her life. This mother was closely involved for an extended period, and trust was built, when the informant made contact 20 years later to share the significance of that meeting; the mother expressed that she was aware of it and had noticed that the Holy Spirit was at work with her, and she did not want to interfere. They had both carried this with

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<sup>11</sup> Informant D4.

them for 20 years without discussing it. In the interview, reflecting on what led up to this transformation, the informant says:

It was probably the culmination of many things. I felt I was living a life of hopelessness. But I saw that there were people around me who carried something entirely different, a confidence in their own worth that I didn't have in my life; I had given up completely... So, it was a straw that I clung to, thinking that now I have to bet everything on this because I have nothing left... I became a Christian, and it's not that by accepting something, everything is miraculously resolved. Faith grows gradually. But I had an attempted suicide just a few weeks afterward, and I remember praying to God, 'I have made my choice, now it's up to you'.<sup>12</sup>

The story of this informant, which gradually resulted in faith, is unique; it is also a story that demonstrates how life is interconnected to fluctuations of faith, and again, how these fluctuations are interrelated with relations. The story also shares traits that are recognizable from other stories, concerning those who have been especially meaningful influencers in regard to faith: they carried something different; they were there over time, they had integrity, and they were trustworthy. However, a subset of informants would contend that such an interpretation does not provide a comprehensive description. They perceive their experience as encompassing more than just the overt; they encounter an element of transcendence, experiencing Jesus Christ through the person in front of them. For others, the stories aren't as overwhelming. Establishing faith may be the result of friendships that over time shape the framework for Christian faith, but who knows if again it might be the fruits of prayers carried by grandparents over many years. For one of the informants, who became a Christian during their studies, this is exactly so. Also in this case, there are inexplicable elements in the conversion itself, where the informant experiences his hand going up, almost by itself, in a prayer situation at the church he attended, as a response to his desire to be prayed for:

I guess I raised my hand or said something, I don't remember, but it was like you felt that something was happening, which was kind of strange because it was as if you were spinning in the air a bit, almost like a high. It was very special, and prior to that, there had been a lot of talking about it and, in a way, discussing it with other Christian friends and in the Bible study group and with those close in the congregation. As we talked more about it, it became a choice, and because you can't prove it, it's why it's called faith...<sup>13</sup>

However, the conversation reveals that this is likely an experience at the end of a long process. Even though the immediate family does not express faith, friends from junior high have become more aware, and there's also an interesting reflection on his grandmother. He describes himself as a "grandmother's boy," having spent a lot of time with her. He later learned that she prayed for him, and had a Christian faith, even though she felt she did not fit into the church/prayerhouse setting. How much had she contributed, through her quiet faith and prayers, for her grandchild? When asked to describe the traits of those he thinks have been significant in where he is today in terms of faith, he describes them as:

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<sup>12</sup> Informant D4.

<sup>13</sup> Informant C4.

Empathetic and caring about people in a certain way, and yes, it's probably that the care for you and for others, that shines through a bit, and one feels a bit of that 'what would Jesus do' attitude.<sup>14</sup>

This characterization is also close to how the informant described his own grandmother, which obviously makes it intriguing to see this in light of *the integrative model of organizational trust*. Had trust been built in this relationship that continued to influence the informant, even beyond the grandmother's passing?

The study "Establishing faith..." (Bjørntvedt, 2024) highlighted how trust and integrity appear to be central to those who have a significant influence on our Christian faith, and the qualitative study also found how relational elements were crucial for distancing from faith and previous Christian community. It appears that it is not the case that once one has established integrity and garnered trust, such trust is retained for a lifetime. It seems that this trust can also be lost if the informant perceives that the individual begins to act in opposition to the values that previously afforded them this realm of confidence. Consequently, trust, credibility, and influence are all at stake. Some of the individuals articulated this sentiment:

It's possible that my perspective was influenced by the fact that just before our first child was born, my parents separated. I had a close relationship with my mother, but I felt she went off the deep end during that period, and no one understood the reasons behind their divorce. Faith-wise, she did and said certain things that I believe weren't right from a faith perspective, showing signs of unhealthy aspects of faith. This probably damaged my relationship with my mother, but it strengthened my bond with my father. He handled the divorce quite well, considering the challenges of parting after being married for such a long time.<sup>15</sup>

I observe here a manifestation of a phenomenon where the individual, initially closest in relation, loses trust due to what the informant assesses as a series of weak judgments spanning various areas. Over time, these judgments also touch upon faith matters, resulting in the erosion of credibility and trust. What's noteworthy about this informant is their perspective on similar judgments made towards their grandparents, particularly concerning his sister marrying a woman. All of his grandparents deemed this theologically problematic. However, one side was able to look beyond their disagreement and even went on to make a speech at the wedding. In contrast, the other side chose to underscore their disagreement by not attending the wedding at all. The informant's reflections on this are intriguing. The grandparents' theological positions seem to be secondary; it does not seem to be a problem that they have a conservative theological view on this issue. What stands out more is their behavior in that specific context. One side enhanced their credibility by being there for their grandchild despite their disagreements. In contrast, the other side experienced a loss of trust and credibility because of their need to demonstrate their disagreement in this manner. The informant articulated that one side was "self-centered and not very warm", while the other side "has had warmth all along".<sup>16</sup>

There are also examples of those who see an absolute collapse of integrity and trust in what they previously looked up to and aspired to, resulting in a mistrust of the individuals, the institution, and the faith itself. One of the informants had become closely acquainted with the private life of a very prominent free church figure in Scandinavia, as a trainee. This was an important individual whom, I perceive, the informant initially held in trust and deemed credible until she got a closer look into their personal lives for a longer period, where she observed

<sup>14</sup> Informant C4.

<sup>15</sup> Informant C2.

<sup>16</sup> Informant C2.

that much revolved around “strategies on how to achieve the most success, maximize revenues, and how to control people. How do we provide enough information to keep people here without them realizing how fragile it is?”<sup>17</sup> The informant also describes an environment devoid of any restraint against backbiting within the leadership, uncontrollable anger, and patronization. Over time, the central figures no longer seemed like role models in faith, and trust begins to erode completely. When she was stripped of all leadership roles because she stayed overnight with her boyfriend occasionally before they married, it was the final straw. Having devoted so much for so many years, she suddenly finds herself as a *nobody* within this community. I perceive this as a narrative about character, about the capacity to understand, about trust, integrity, and the alignment between one's professed beliefs and the manner in which one treats others. When this alignment is absent, the position one holds as a positive influence quickly dissipates. Right before our interview, when the informant saw a picture of this leader in the media - years after being in contact with him - she described him like this: “He just looks so scary; he looks like a demon”.<sup>18</sup> What was of integrity and trust is now completely gone. Although she tried to connect to the community she once was a part of when moving back home, she found it to be similar to what she had left. Consequently, what there was of trust is now completely gone. Her leaving the church seems to be permanent. She does not seem to look back anymore. There is a breach in the loop of trust, which is again replaced by new breaches of trust. What once was joy became dark, and full of mistrust, and the opposite of good news.

### c. The longing for community

So why is it that the painful experiences for some associated with Christian community make them never look back, while for others, there seems to be both a longing for what they once had and also a partial search back? This is undoubtedly a complex picture that cannot be answered in a simple way. It is composite, something that Gilsvik also points out in his study among disaffiliates (Gilsvik, 2023b). There are many elements in this picture, but it seems to be related to whether bad experiences are followed by additional bad experiences leading into *contamination*, or if that pattern is broken, and the individual is leaning towards *redemption*. The *integrative model of organizational trust* also suggests, that trust is not static but something that evolves through interaction and experiences (Schoorman et al., 2007, pp. 349-350). This theory is primarily directed at an organization, but some of the same dynamics are present in both church communities, friendship, family, where one can argue that these are all forms of organizational structures at a meso-/micro-level. What's intriguing is that integrity and trust don't seem to be permanent assets. If the *significant other* begins to act contrary to what initially bestowed them their role in the informant's life, they appear to lose trust swiftly as a positive influencer of faith. If they continue in this manner, it can act as a deterrent both in terms of the relationship and in relation to faith. I do not have enough empirical data to draw firm conclusions regarding breaches of trust that are followed by new breaches of trust, but there are tendencies in the material to suggest that this not only affects distancing from the previous community, but also distancing from the Christian faith as a whole. If so, this makes sense against the theoretical foundation, and regarding fluctuations of faith.

As mentioned in the introduction, most informants I interviewed connected their faith with the practice of faith in the context of a Christian Community, and some started defending their survey score regarding faith in relation to their absence from Christian community.

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<sup>17</sup> Informant D5.

<sup>18</sup> Informant D5.

Among the informants who have distanced themselves from a Christian community, whether consciously or unconsciously, I also made an interesting observation related to a longing for Christian community once left. An exception is the last informant discussed, for whom the entire concept now stands as a stage in life she is thankful to have concluded.

One of the informants in the study worked in the army for many years, and he consciously detached from the Christian Community as he went into the mandatory service. Mandatory service became nine years in the army, many of them abroad, situated in Africa. Through those years new relationships were formed among fellow soldiers, and also the army priest. Some of those relationships became deep. On a guard mission in the middle of the desert, something happened that took the informant back to what was once a central part of his life:

That night under a fantastic starry sky we sat on the roof of a container to get some overview and it was completely calm and we looked at the sky and we were as small as we ever had been, so Anton asks if I believe, he said - shouldn't we say a prayer? And I remember it was then several years since I had practiced prayer as part of my life, and I thought of it as something that did not fit in the military, if you understand. It was a very character-breaking moment, but then I was like of course, I can do that. So, we had that prayer and I remember it made a very big impression... It was a soul-setting experience.<sup>19</sup>

Over the years in the military, new bonds of trust emerged, which in this sequence of events drew the individual back to the Christian community. Relationships and new bonds of trust are waking the memories of the Christian community he once left, which he still holds in high regard, as something that formed him from an early age. He also tried to connect to a local church when returning to Norway, yet he did not find a sense of belonging within it. Maybe faith does not stand alone, with Christian faith comes an implication of Christian community, and the Christian community seems to have an appeal that should not be underestimated.

Another informant, who placed themselves as a 7 out of 7 on the scale to the question "To what extent do you consider yourself a Christian?", quickly nuanced this during their interview. Even though she placed herself at 7, she was unsure whether others would recognize this: "If people were to judge me, I don't think so, but if God were to, then maybe, you never know."<sup>20</sup> It seems the informant did not believe that God and the church necessarily evaluate her faith in the same way. For this informant, life situations and choices that were made, including her opinions on sex before marriage, created a feeling of not being accepted and no longer wanted in the youth congregation, which is part of the reason she left the community. This feeling still lingers 20-25 years after it happened. Nevertheless, it is clear that her longing for the community that was once there, is real:

...so I chose to move and then my thought was that I would find a congregation here in the area, but darn, it's not easy when you're alone. My husband doesn't have any personal relationship with God or congregations...<sup>21</sup>

It appears that the sense of loss does not diminish, but it is difficult, and for this informant, the choice to work in a Christian kindergarten is a deliberate one. When asked if this is where she finds her Christian community, she confirms affirmatively, "yes, that might well be."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Informant C3

<sup>20</sup> Informant D6

<sup>21</sup> Informant D6

<sup>22</sup> Informant D6

It becomes immediately more complicated when there is no connection to a church, when one wants to bring the children to child ministry. A couple of times in this conversation we touch on this topic related to passing on faith to the next generation, and the pain of seeing that she is not capable of giving what she herself received as a child is touched upon: “And it hurts, it really hurts.”<sup>23</sup> This challenge, the desire to pass to their children what they themselves received, when they are not themselves connected to a local church, is something several informants expressed as difficult.

What is it, then, that they miss? What is the reason that some, whether consciously or unconsciously, have left the community and yet long for it, and sometimes yearn to return to it? Is it a genuine search, or is it the *phantoms of faith*, applied to Christian community? (Gillsvik, 2023a). This is most likely a composite of many different factors. For the informant mentioned, it centers around the notion that life was expected to unfold in a certain way, which ultimately did not happen. When digging deeper into what precisely creates that longing, she replied:

I miss the community, being together in it. When I have been active in congregations or even at work for that matter, I can also feel that there is something there. There is something spiritual, but you do not feel the same spirituality alone.<sup>24</sup>

Even though the Christian community was consciously left behind, after specific experiences that the informant did not find to be good, it is evident that there are still fond memories remaining. There is a meeting with Jesus through a community that cannot be replaced. The same was observed with the informant who had been in military service for many years. He had deliberately left behind the Christian community surrounding youth camps, yet he looks back on most of it with gratitude, which he was very clear about in the interviews. For him, what was needed to re-engage with some aspects of what he had left behind was a person he trusted bringing it up in his then-current surroundings. We see the same pattern with this informant as well:

I believe once again that it has a lot to do with the milieu one is in and the people one meets... I have indeed made some good friends. If any of them went to a church, I would have joined them. I would have gladly joined them.<sup>25</sup>

However, as mentioned, this does not apply to everyone. The informant who experienced a complete collapse of faith, after witnessing the dark sides of an ostensibly glamorous religious facade, does not share these reflections. In that case, the trust in the church seems to be completely shattered. Nevertheless, the breach of trust appears to impact her view of the church as a whole. Even though the main problem of the outset seems to be a strong charismatic leader, undefined Christian hierarchies, and activism – this seems to be the start of a story of *contamination* in regard to faith. For this informant, faith disappeared entirely:

...it began to fade around that time; it was and is a process. It took a long time. It probably started to fade around 2009, 2010, gradually, and then by around 2013 or 2014, I felt that I no longer believed in anything at all. Now, I am completely free of religion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Informant D6

<sup>24</sup> Informant D6.

<sup>25</sup> Informant D6.

<sup>26</sup> Informant D5.

This informant has previously experienced being saved, which makes it interesting to see how she describes this new process:

Informant: "I feel like I've had a reverse salvation story."

Researcher: "So when you let go, you became free?"

Informant: "Yes."<sup>27</sup>

It is also important to note that despite the painful experiences this informant had, especially with prominent leaders, she gave the church another try when she moved back home. Her realization that they were more interested in her hands, in what she could do, rather than who she truly was, became the final straw. Now, when she reflects on whether she still feels a longing for the community, she articulates missing opportunities for constant activity and the social stimulation that the worship community provides, and that's all.

It seems that where trust is broken, perhaps repeatedly, there is a greater likelihood that individuals enter into a *reconstruction* of their identity narrative, to find a future without the faith which was once an important part of their identity. On the other hand, it seems that where trust arises anew with significant others of faith, there is a greater likelihood of a *redemptive* narrative, where what has been leaves obvious traces, but one reconciles with it in a way that does not lead to a breach, but is a part of a larger picture of how faith looks and is practiced by the individual. McAdams describes how some individuals are particularly disposed to *agency*, while others are particularly disposed to *communion* in identity formation (McAdams, 1997, pp. 281-291). This study seems largely to support *communion* as a starting point. If the values that coincide with *communion* are absent, then it seems to stand in the way of attachment, resulting in a potentially greater likelihood of identity reconstruction. This also corresponds with Kalfoss et al.'s study, where negative interaction with church life and relational conflicts were among the factors precipitating feelings of weakened faith, where they also point out that many struggle with a broken trust as a result of the gap between the expectations they had, and how life ended up (Kalfoss et al., 2020). The Christian community, understood as the Church, carries with it certain elements to which the informants – perhaps because they were once a part of it – continue to relate, sometimes from a distance, as long as they do not completely reject the faith. There might be something about *the official model*, the established Church with all its formal structures, doctrines and rituals, that is experienced as a solid foundation, a place that creates belonging, where there is room to construct meaning and identity, becoming *a home* and *a safe haven* (Bulander, 2007; Luckmann et al., 2022).

One of the questions in the quantitative study examines whether "my life experience has made me reconsider my faith". 76.9% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement. Clearly, what we experience in life influences how we approach faith. We approach faith, based on our life story, which is meaningful to us, and this understanding is also subject to change throughout our lives, obviously affecting how we adhere to faith, and to the church.

In the conversation with the informant who expresses relief at being "free from religion," an interesting point emerged that relates to McAdams' life story theory. When I asked the informant if there are good memories that remain, she replied: "If you had spoken to me five years ago, I would have just been bitter and angry and would not have wanted to talk about it..."<sup>28</sup> Faith is obviously closely tied to the life story, and it is quite clear among the informants, that looking back at events now, when they are more processed, puts them in a different light. Birkedal concluded his longitudinal study with the quote in the introduction of the article: "Identity, as it relates to faith and religiosity, is not fixed once and for all. The past

<sup>27</sup> Informant D5.

<sup>28</sup> Informant D5.



does not vanish; new experiences, insights, and reflection continually shape an individual” (Birkedal, 2020, p. 211). At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this does not trivialize the events that have passed, they are there and will remain there, but perhaps time helps many to come to terms with their own story. For this informant, it must be specified that, even though she can now talk about it without bitterness and anger, it does not change the fact that she looks back on being a part of something she refers to as almost a “sectarian” movement, with extensive economic and emotional abuse.

## CONCLUSION

So, *what is the relationship between fluctuations of faith throughout life and the quest for Christian community?* It is obvious that faith and the individual's narrative identity are closely intertwined, and it is constantly evolving in the interplay between life, myth formation, and interaction with faith, which forms meaning for the individual. Smith & Snell also conclude this in their study: “Nothing is determined or static. Society, culture, and institutions are always evolving” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 299). For some, faith turns out to be a stable foundation throughout life, but for the majority, this study points out, there are changes/breaches in faith that relate to life and the complexity of identity formation that is consistent with *life story theory* (McAdams, 1997, pp. 94-95). For nearly 1/4, it seems that this complexity means that faith somewhat shifts back and forth several times in life, but that does not necessarily mean that faith is completely gone, but perhaps more “*a weary faith, that has faced some adversity. Not as 'wild'. Maybe more waiting...*”.<sup>29</sup> Where a breach of trust between trustee and trustor occurs, where there is nonetheless a longing and a search back to the community afterward, it seems that a new trust relationship to a *significant other* Christian has been established, which over time can repair some of what was damaged in the breach, through warmth, integrity, and trust. The fond memories of this community, formative of meaning, do not fade easily. Maybe faith does not stand alone at all, but is deeply connected to the community, or for others, what once was of community. The longing is maybe not for a *stronger* faith, but for the community of faith that collectively searches for God, with a higher meaning that frames *the official model*, that encapsulates what is of *ultimate* significance (Luckmann et al., 2022, pp. 45-51).

What does this imply for the church in practical terms? If there is a fluctuation of faith that is intimately linked to individual life stories, it would presumably be beneficial for the church to identify methods to address this and also demonstrate a level of understanding of the different seasons of faith. This approach would be associated with the church relating to the individual, and also build a theological space that is big enough to handle life, fostering trust without necessarily compromising its theological foundation. Additionally, it is crucial to consider that if many have a quest for a community that was once a part of their lives, how does the church respond to this need? How can the church help the individual with the transition from mere longing to actual reintegration of a community? How can the story become a story of *redemption* in regard to faith?

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<sup>29</sup> Informant B6.

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