

A MIXED METHODS STUDY EXPLORING  
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING  
THROUGH A CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS

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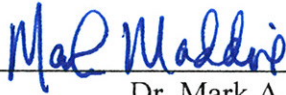
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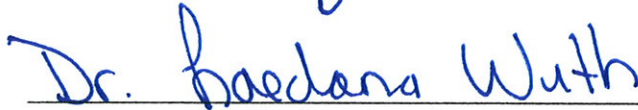
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## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my late parents, Frank and Verna Lang, who provided me with a secure and loving home. It was my mother, in particular, who had an unbending belief in me that I could do whatever I set my mind on. Mom, thanks for that lifelong legacy!

## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the transformative learning that occurred in the alumni of the 22-lesson, Christian discipleship process called the Immersion Experience by Aphesis Group Ministries. Quantitative data was collected from a survey sent out to the 850 alumni. Deep interviews were conducted with 16 participants who had the additional prerequisite of being raised in a religiously confused home of origin. The transformative learning was examined through the theoretical framework of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. An additional lens was resistance to change. Argyris and Schon's theory of action developed the concept of double-loop learning. Their theory was extended by Kegan and Lahey's immunity-to-change perspective. The final lens was a synthesis of Brown's development of wholehearted living, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, positive psychology, and virtue ethics. This has been summarized as living wholeheartedly with virtue. The Immersion Experience seeks to help professing Christians evaluate their inner lives and discern the discrepancies between their espoused Christian beliefs (what they say they believe) and their theories-in-use (what they actually live out) in the attempt to bring them into alignment. The intent is to help believers be able to practically live out their Christian commitment each day of their lives.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Among those interested in God and His practical place in the Christian life, Tanya Luhrmann (2012) in *When God Talks Back* has touched off a widespread academic discussion, including numerous articles and several symposiums in academic journals (Francis, 2013; Luhrmann, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014). Placing her research in the broader context of American evangelicalism, Sandage (2014) reported: “Luhrmann accurately highlights the longing among many evangelicals for relational intimacy with the Divine and a greater integration of cognitive belief in a loving God with the actual emotional experience of feeling loved” (p. 62). Wellman (2014) concurred with this assessment: “Thus, there is little doubt that emotion and a kind of subjective affectivity have become central to American evangelical religious realities” (p. 75). It is not enough for evangelical Christians to believe the right information about God. But they also want to experience a vital relationship with the living God.

Since age 15, the writer has been a follower of Jesus Christ and is acquainted with some of the struggles to live out faith daily. The writer has had the privilege of studying the Bible and theology at several Christian universities and at the graduate level. While these subjects are important, they primarily focused on cognitive, or right-brain, knowledge, which does not necessarily reach into one’s heart and emotions. The struggles experienced by believers in their inner lives—such as fear, anxiety, anger, and shame—require more than a competent handling of scripture to bring about change (Thompson, 2010). These emotions, and the inner struggles that cause them, can drive a believer to adopt coping mechanisms to attempt to manage life’s challenges (Anda et al., 2006; Felitti et al., 1998; Scazzero, 2006). Is there a process of Christian discipleship that will help believers to align their espoused theological beliefs with their inner

lives? This writer believes the Immersion Experience can help believers deepen their faith to truly believe what they espouse.

This study used Mezirow's (1978, 1991) transformative learning theory as the major portion of the theoretical framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience process in the lives of Christians. A mixed-methods approach was used, bringing together the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Initially, a survey was taken of the alumni of the Immersion Experience. Subsequent in-depth, semistructured interviews of 16 alumni from religiously confused homes were then utilized to better understand the phenomenological experience (Conklin, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989) of the participants in the Immersion Experience.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A heartfelt desire for many professing Christians is to have an intimate relationship with their God through the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. The practical outworking of this relationship is to have the emotional and spiritual assurance of God working for their well-being in both the good times, as well as in the periods of tremendous stress and pain (physical, emotional, and spiritual). Discipleship has been a subject of interest since the time of Jesus Christ in that believers have been encouraged to follow the lifestyle of their Savior (Cunningham, 2010; Hindmarsh, 2010; Kalantzis, 2010; Kapic, 2010; Wilkins, 1992). Furthermore, Christ-followers have been directed to a deeper life in their faith as they live on this earth and prepare for their heavenly hope (Arseniev, 1926/1979; Foster, 1988; King, 1998; Nouwen, 1981; Sitwell, 1961; Wilkins, 1992; Willard, 1998). Unfortunately, many Christians in the Western church, when faced with unexpected stress and prolonged pain in their lives, are not pleased with their instinctual emotional response internally or in how they relate to others (Scazzero, 2006). In

fact, the German pastor–theologian Helmut Thielcke once observed that “American Christians have an inadequate theology of suffering” (Yancey, 1998, p. 182). Many types of coping mechanisms and addictions gain a stranglehold on the lives of believers in the same way they plague those outside the church (Anda et al., 2006). In other words, the Christian’s inner life does not match up with personal theological beliefs, causing embarrassment, frustration, and shame (Rule, 2011; Scazzero, 2006; Townsend, 1991/96; Van Vonderen, Ryan, & Ryan, 2008).

A significant aspect of the Immersion Experience is for participants to spend the first six lessons considering the fall of mankind, the resultant personal sin and brokenness, and their families of origin. This exercise is not new or innovative, as it is also encouraged by Christian psychologists, therapists, and counselors (Scazzero, 2006; Townsend, 1991/96). Scazzero (2006, p. 93) strongly stated:

True spirituality frees us to live joyfully in the present. It requires, however, going back in order to go forward. This takes us to the very heart of spirituality and discipleship in the family of God—breaking free from the destructive sinful patterns of our pasts to live the life of love God intends. (p. 93)

This study examined the transformational change that has occurred in the alumni of the Immersion Experience, a 22-lesson Bible-based Christian discipleship process that challenges professing Christians to grow in maturity in their inner lives as they face life’s challenges (Rule, 2011).

## **Background to the Study**

It appears that Christian discipleship curricula tend to be heavily based on a cognitive understanding of the Bible and its application to one’s life (Cannell, 2010; Wilkins, 1992). Human beings are more complex than merely using the left side of their brains or being rational

thinkers (Siegel, 2012). They have a right side of the brain that generates powerful feelings and emotions, which play a large part in their lives as they integrate these with cognitive aspects (Pink, 2005; Siegel, 2012).

Approaching the discussion from a philosophical perspective, Williams (2011) argued for a balance of both emotion, which he called “need,” and reason in establishing and nurturing one’s belief in God:

Believing in God, however, is not simply a matter of believing that something called God exists. It is more like warmly connecting to a person. And for this, satisfaction of need is required—satisfaction of the needs to love and be loved, to have meaning, and other needs mentioned in the existential argument for believing in God. When satisfaction of need is added to evidence, reason–belief turns into warmhearted faith, and when evidence is added to satisfaction of need, one is justified in letting needs draw one to faith in God. Without evidence, satisfying the needs would be indiscriminate. But with it, satisfying the needs with faith in God is warranted. (p. 144)

Writing about spirituality and human emotion, Roberts (2007), a philosopher of emotion, was concerned about getting “the Christian teachings embedded in the individual’s life”:

Christian virtues are, in large part, a matter of being disposed to a properly Christian joy, contrition, gratitude, hope, compassion, and peace. The spiritual Christian is the mature Christian, and the mature Christian is one who feels these emotions in the Christian way. She is “emotionally mature,” because the Christian teachings have shaped her heart, and thus disposed her to behavior characteristic of the kingdom of God. (p. 8)

The Immersion Experience has entered into this discussion as a recently developed small-group discipleship process. As a strong, biblically based curriculum, immersion also seeks to



help Christians vitally connect with the living God. It wholly concurs with Williams (2011) that “need without reason is blind, but reason without need is sterile” (p. 12). Many evangelical Christians desire to have an intimate relationship with their God. Sandage (2014) recognized this as a “larger move toward an emphasis on a personal and relationally intimate form of experiential spirituality among evangelicals” (p. 61).

Transformational learning has to be holistic, addressing the entire person, to be successful (Dirkx, 2001b, 2008; Sloat, 1990). The Immersion Experience addresses the whole person as Christians seek to grow closer to their God and cope with the uncertainties that life throws at them (Rule, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

The research objective (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) was to evaluate the transformational change that has occurred because of the Immersion Experience, a work produced by the Aphesis Group Ministries. This is a 22-week, Bible-based discipleship process that challenges professing Christians to grow in maturity in their inner lives as they face life’s uncertainties (Rule, 2011).

The four research questions were as follows:

1. What impact does growing up in a religiously confused home (home of origin) have on Christ-followers in regard to fully experiencing God’s love in their daily lives?
2. Is there a perception of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults having processed through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience?
3. What are the believers’ instinctive responses (natural or acquired tendencies) to unexpected stress and prolonged pain (emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual),

and how is this demonstrated in critical relationships with God, self, and significant personal relationships?

4. How do Christ-followers view God, self, and others, and what impact does this have on their transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience?

### **Description of Terms**

This study explored transformative learning through a number of facets. It is important to understand the key concepts addressed throughout this research. As a result, these will now be discussed.

**Brokenness.** Nouwen (1992) spoke of the unique brokenness of everyone in their inner person. When one is authentic and vulnerable regarding the deep issues of one's life, openness is developed to be deeply touched by another (Allender, 2005; Crabb, 2003). With regard to Christians who can tend to be self-righteous and pharisaical, Wilhoit (2008, p. 70) stated:

Every Christian must be a broken person. To enter the kingdom, we must acknowledge that the inner peace we yearn for can never come by our own efforts but only as we admit our powerlessness to conquer our self-centeredness and then turn the rule of our life to Christ. We need to live the Christian life as broken people. The grace of God—the grace we need for healing, for the freedom to be good, and for the deep joy we long for—only flows downhill. It is available to the humble: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (I Pet. 5:5).

When an individual experiences deep personal need and recognizes his or her own brokenness, then the gift of grace by God and others is more fully appreciated (Scazzero, 2006; Sloat, 1986; Tournier, 1968). It is out of believers' brokenness and vulnerability that spiritual maturity and

true community can happen (Gorman, 2002; Scazzero & Bird, 2003; Sittser, 2004; Van Vonderen et al., 2008; Wilhoit, 2008; Yaconelli, 2002).

**Evangelical Christianity.** Evangelicalism is a hotly contested topic in this generation (Wills, 2007), especially with the emergence of the political activism of conservative Christians during the last several decades (Stackhouse, 2007b). Pollsters such as the Barna Group, Gallup, and others regularly publish the attitudes and beliefs of evangelicals, which has implications for political elections as well as decisions consumers must make (Stackhouse, 2007a; Steensland et al., 2000; Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

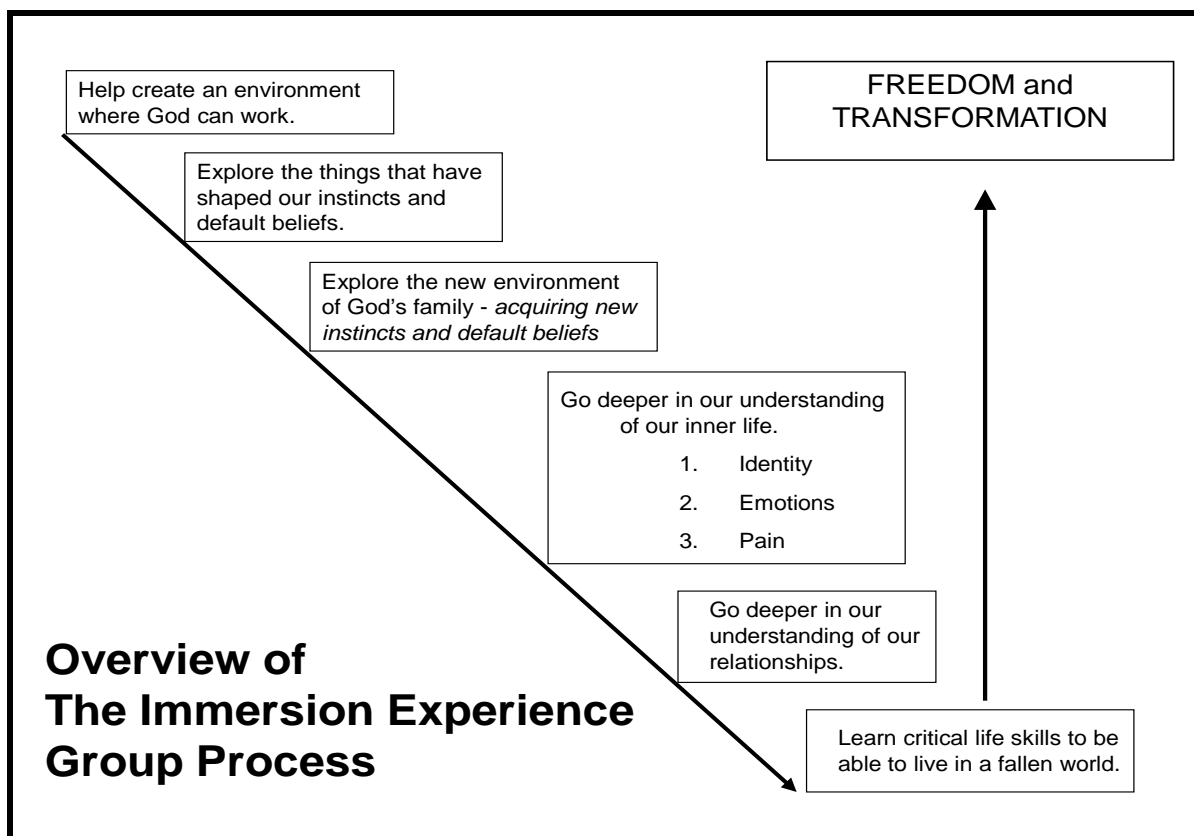
In identifying evangelicalism, Bebbington's (1989) historical study is often cited (Noll, 2003) with his four descriptive criteria: (a) crucicentrism (the centrality of Christ's work on the cross), (b) biblicism (the Bible is the Word of God for faith and practice), (c) conversionism (each person must be converted from sin to salvation and press on toward full holiness), and (d) activism (participating with God in His saving mission to the world, in charitable work, and in caring for His creation). Helping to bring this description up to date, Stackhouse (2007a) added two additional criteria: (e) orthodoxy and orthopraxy (subscribing to the key tenets of their churches—doctrinal, ethical, and liturgical) as well as (f) transdenominational (partnering with other like-minded Christians regardless of denominational affiliation).

**The Immersion Experience.** Aphasis Group Ministries has produced the Immersion Experience, which is a biblically based, small group discipleship process for adults (Rule, 2011). It seeks to help adults evaluate their inner lives, discerning the discrepancies between their espoused Christian beliefs (what they say they believe) and their theories-in-use (what they actually live out) in the attempt to bring them into alignment (Bochman & Kroth, 2010). The intent is to help Christ-followers be able to practically live out their Christian commitment each

day of their lives. The Immersion Experience addresses the inner life by introducing a series of disorienting dilemmas throughout the 22-lesson curriculum to bring about transformative learning and change (Rule, 2011). See Figure 1 for a flow chart of the Immersion Experience, which also shows the major modules.

Figure 1

*Overview of the Immersion Experience Group Process*



Note: Overview of the Immersion Experience Group Process. Adapted from Immersion Experience Review Notes, by T. Rule, 2013, Lesson 1, p. 1.

**Life map or life history.** In the Immersion Experience, the construction of one's life map is an essential part of the process. Consequently, there are a series of reflection questions in the first six lessons to help each participant remember key events and significant experiences throughout one's life. These are entered onto an extended foldout configured with a winding road depicting one's life pathway (Rule, 2011).

Imagined by many as an educational biography (Dominicé, 2000), a life history is a vehicle for a participant to recall not only the events of one's life, but also the opportunity to reinterpret them through a different perspective (McAdams, 2001; Meyer, 2009). The actual telling of deeply personal events, including trauma, in one's life along with the accompanying feelings, can result in a healing process (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker, 1990; Townsend, 1991/96). This is accomplished in the Immersion Experience as the participant verbally shares his or her life map in a safe group with an able facilitator (Meyer, 2009; Pennebaker, 1993). However, the exploration of one's life story is not to be confused with therapy, even when the process involves the disclosing of powerful memories (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker, 1997)

**Religious or spiritual confusion.** Unfortunately, the concept of religious or spiritual confusion is not new to Christians. It is generally a response to abuse, sometimes called church abuse (Yancey, 2001) or spiritual abuse (D. Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Van Vonderen et al., 2008; Zweig, 2003). It is important to understand that a person can be both a victim and a perpetrator of spiritual abuse at the same time (D. Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991).

Figure 2

*Sloat's List of Barriers Leading to Religious Confusion*

- 
1. Instilling a fear of God rather than a love for Him.
  2. Using guilt to manipulate.
  3. Failure to “practice what you preach.”
  4. Neglect of feelings and individual personalities.
  5. Refusal to listen to questions and doubts.
  6. Forcing a list of dos and don'ts that cloud a true understanding of God and of one's sinfulness.
- 

Note: Key Elements Contributing to Religious Confusion. Adapted from *The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home*, by D. Sloat, 1986, Back Cover.

Seeking to exercise control over another in a religious context, spiritual abuse is initiated by a person in authority: a spiritual or religious leader, a parent, or a significant other (D. Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Sloat, 1986; Zweig, 2003). Rigid rules and laws are administered with an accompanying expectation of obedience in an atmosphere of fear (Rule, 2011; Sloat, 1986). See Figure 2 and Appendix I for a detailed contrast between a religiously confused home and a Christ-filled home. Some of the characteristics of those who have been spiritually abused have been mentioned by Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991, p. 40) as “distorted pictures of God and self, difficulty trusting those in authority, problems understanding and accepting [God's] grace.” The unfortunate result is that guilt becomes the Christian's primary motivator in life (Eckman, 2005; Sloat, 1990).

**Resistance to spiritual transformation.** The goal of professing believers to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ is a thing of the past, according to Willard (2010), in spite of the New Testament's strong argument to the contrary (Romans 5:1–5, 12:2; II

Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:14–16; Colossians 3:4–17; II Peter 1:2–11, 3:18). In fact, Foster (2009) maintained that incorporating the formation of the soul, or *heart work*, into the daily experience of the individual Christian and the community of the faithful needs to be the supreme focus of Christ-followers in the decades to come. Willard (2010) unequivocally stated,

There is a prevailing understanding of salvation that poses almost insurmountable barriers to transformation of professing Christians into Christlikeness, which is the meaning of spiritual formation. Simply put, as now generally understood, being “saved”—and hence being a Christian—has no conceptual or practical connection with such a transformation. (p. 45)

The person who would use the blood of Christ shed on the cross for salvation, but have no ongoing use for the Savior, is nothing but a “vampire Christian” (Willard, 2010, p. 53).

**Spiritual formation.** There is a growing recognition in the literature that spiritual formation is much more than teaching a specific content aimed at a cognitive or rational level (McNeal, 2003; Zanzig, 2012). Maddix (2011) saw four vital aspects that define spiritual formation: (a) a focus on transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ (Foster, 2009); (b) a person’s participation with God through the classical inward disciplines, as well as outward demonstrations of service (Boa, 2001; Foster, 1988; Willard, 1988); (c) a lifelong process that occurs in the context of community (McNeal, 2000; Wilhoit, 2008); and (d) the maturing of the individual believer’s spiritual gifts in order to minister to others. In order to help believers integrate their faith commitment into their daily lives, an increasing number of voices are encouraging personalized life coaching, also called spiritual direction (Dubay, 1993; Phillips, 2010), for people to grow in spiritual maturity and to help them find a deeper walk with Christ (Brazelton & Leith, 2008; McNeal, 2003, 2009; Phillips, 2010; Wilhoit, 2008).

**Spiritual maturity.** Coming to faith in the risen Christ through acceptance of him as a personal Savior and being saved from one's sins provides the entrance into God's kingdom. There is joy as sins drop away with relatively small effort. Bible study is meaningful as one discovers the words of God. There is excitement as God answers prayers offered up in simple faith. This early stage in the Christian walk is called *spiritual infatuation* by those familiar with spiritual formation (Thomas, 2002). In the same way that romantic infatuation is self-centered, so is spiritual infatuation. It is concerned with what God and Christianity are doing *for me*.

Maturity in Christ means discarding this infatuation and moving on to form a true friendship with God and partnering with him to help build his kingdom (Benner, 2002; Foster, 2009; Greenman & Kalantzis, 2010). As Thomas (2002) pointed out, this involves being tested by fire and growing in ways that can be painful for the believer (Foster, 2009; John of the Cross, 1585/1990). This resulting brokenness can produce a godly sorrow that allows one to "approach life with a humble spirit born from encountering the tragic with wisdom, appropriate acceptance, and deep reliance on God" (Wilhoit, 2008, p. 71).

### **Significance of the Study**

The objective of this study is to investigate effective and transformative Christian discipleship as believers seek to grow in their relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ, their Savior. How do Christ-followers bring into harmony their espoused beliefs with their inner lives? Also, how does being raised in a religiously confused home of origin affect their ability to fully experience God's love and the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Is there evidence of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults who experienced the 22-week Immersion Experience?



The Immersion Experience is a biblically based, small group discipleship process that encourages adults to examine their inner lives and their reactions to unexpected stress and prolonged pain in the light of their espoused theological beliefs. The failure to bring these into alignment often causes Christians embarrassment, frustration, and shame. If the Immersion Experience can be shown to be an instrument used of God to help Christ-followers truly believe what they espouse, it could be a source of hope to many who struggle in the drama of life.

### **Limitations**

The majority of the Immersion Experience alumni were Caucasian from the western United States. While Aphesis Group Ministries is currently expanding into the Far East, this study generally will not reflect the rich insights of Christians from this part of the world. The educational level of the majority of the alumni is college or university graduate. Up to four years may have passed since some of the alumni have completed the Immersion Experience, previously entitled the “Aphesis Group Experience.” This can result in some memory loss of the specifics of the process. The Immersion Experience curriculum requests extensive reading, which might make it difficult for the less educated. The results of this study may be limited in generalization to other ethnic groups in Western culture as well as to those living in other cultures (Wolcott, 2001).

### **Delimitations**

This study does not include a comprehensive identification and evaluation of the other influences and factors that potentially have affected the transformative learning that occurred in the lives of the Immersion Experience alumni outside of the process. The process does provide each alumnus with a mental map of how to address life’s issues as they are presented.

The data from the survey, the optional essay question at the conclusion of the survey, and the interviews were deliberately divided between male and female alumni to see if any significant trends were noted. This provided two separate sets of data which were compared throughout the study.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

In order to answer the research questions, a mixed-methods investigative study was thought to be the best methodology to utilize. Regarding the quantitative portion, a survey was e-mailed to the 850 alumni of the Immersion Experience. Volunteers were asked to indicate within the survey their desire to be interviewed further, of which 16 were selected for the qualitative portion of the study.

Besides being an alumnus of the Immersion Experience, interviewees also had to have given evidence of being raised in a religiously confused home. Religious confusion regarding one's home of origin is a term used in the Immersion Experience (Rule, 2011) and is familiar to its alumni. Alumni were asked to self-identify in the Likert-scale survey both directly and indirectly whether this description applied to them. Based on the intensity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) of a volunteer's religious confusion, eight men and eight women interview participants were selected by a panel of experts working in the headquarters of the Aphesis Group Ministries. An early question in the phenomenological interview process allowed the 16 participants to personally describe the circumstances of growing up in a religiously confused home and its impact on their view of God, God's love, and the evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Evidence of transformative learning on the part of the respondent survey participants was seen in the comparison of their attitudes and beliefs before enrolling in the Immersion

Experience with their current attitudes and beliefs. Respectively, these were reflected in the second- and third-section responses of the survey. The 16 interviews also explored in greater depth the degree to which transformative learning has taken place. Both of these methods were self-reporting.

## Chapter II

### The Literature Review

#### Introduction

Most adults who enter into the 22-lesson discipleship process called the Immersion Experience come seeking some type of life change and transformative learning. Thus, the subtitle to Rule's (2011) notebook is *Introducing You to Yourself*. As a relatively new discipleship process, the Immersion Experience has not been subjected to any formal research. This mixed-methods study seeks to gain an understanding of the transformative change that occurs in the participants who have completed the process. This chapter summarizes the literature related to this evaluative inquiry in order to construct a lens to examine the assembled quantitative and qualitative data (Mertz & Anfara, 2006).

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws from the spheres of transformative learning and change, action science, psychology's attachment theory, living wholeheartedly, positive psychology, and virtue ethics. The first section of this chapter begins with a discussion of transformative learning as a change process. Transformative learning involves a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) and an alteration in the form of meaning-making (Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 2012). Mezirow's (1990, 1991, 2000, 2003; Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009) conceptualization of transformative learning theory, followed by a number of other authors, emphasizes personal transformation and change, with less focus on social change in the transformative process (Ettling, 2012). This approach fits well within the goal of the Immersion Experience on personal transformation. Other authors have extended Mezirow's theory beyond the primacy of rational critical reflection for change, recognizing the necessity of including

emotion and imagination in a holistic transformative process (Dirkx, 1997, 2001a, 2001b; Taylor, 2009).

In the second section, Argyris and Schon's (1996) models are considered as a primary lens to understand the differences between the espoused beliefs and the theories-in-use by the Immersion Experience participants (Argyris, 1991, 2006). Argyris and Schon's theory of action differentiates between two identified models of interpersonal interaction. Model I, the most common model of interpersonal interaction, places a higher value on sustaining unilateral control and avoiding embarrassment (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Model II interpersonal interaction identifies potential weaknesses in regulating variables, norms, and assumptions, thereby opening up the possibility of transformative learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Argyris and Schon also contrasted two types of learning. Single-loop learning is discovering and correcting errors without changing the underlying assumptions that propel them. This is by far the most common learning style. Double-loop learning involves identifying and questioning one's underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Argyris linked double-loop learning with transformational change (Woodell, 2003).

Kegan and Lahey (2009) gave insight to extending the research of Argyris and Schon (Bochman & Kroth, 2010) by helping people overcome their natural resistance to change. Kegan and Lahey accomplished this by encouraging participants to address their underlying big assumptions. Kegan and Lahey (2001a) described their process as transformative learning.

The third section of this theoretical framework is described as living wholeheartedly with virtue. This particular lens is helpful in understanding the goal of transformative learning and change. It combines the insights of several researchers from the disciplines of psychology, virtue ethics, and social theory. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and Ainsworth (1979; 1978) were pioneers

in their description of the tremendous impact that the primary caregivers have on their infant children. The result is either a secure or insecure attachment pattern, which greatly impacts future relationships.

The significance of focusing on the individual's character in virtue ethics rather than focusing on right or wrong actions was initially introduced by Aristotle (Aristotle, 1999, 2012). The goal for Aristotle was *eudaimonia* or "happiness," which is something closer to the current idea of "flourishing." Brown (2010, 2012) referred to this lifestyle as the "wholehearted life," the letting go of negative and defeating characteristics and proceeding to live life authentically.

It is hoped that by constructing the theoretical framework from the three spheres mentioned above, a helpful lens will emerge to evaluate the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience.

### **Transformative Learning Theory with Extensions**

Transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in a person's beliefs or attitudes. It may involve a transformation of an entire perspective or way of accomplishing a task (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Perspective change can occur when people can no longer cope with the challenges of a new situation (Mezirow, 1978). Increasing a person's knowledge, skills, or competencies within the current perspective is no longer feasible or helpful. Creatively integrating a new experience into their current frame of reference no longer solves the inner conflict. People are made to critically react to their own responses (Mezirow, 1978). They not only see life from a new perspective, but live life from that perspective (Mezirow, 2012). A notable example of transformative learning is author Phillip Yancey (2001), born in 1949 in Atlanta, Georgia. Raised as a bigot in the southern United States during the civil rights movement, Yancey described the perspective change he experienced when his condescending

frame of reference of Blacks was no longer feasible. He had to critically reflect upon what he had been taught about the superiority of Whites over Blacks and respond accordingly.

Significant change in people's lives and in organizations occurs when learning happens at a transformational level (Quinn, 1996, 2000, 2004; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000).

Transformative learning involves experience, reflection, and subsequent development and requires more than merely thinking about the experience itself or how to solve problems.

Learners must critically reflect on the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values that effect how to make sense of the experience and examine long-held, socially developed assumptions, beliefs, and values related to the experience (Mezirow, 1994, 1998).

Learners develop while thinking analytically and become better, more critical thinkers. They also develop as individuals as the critical thinking leads to a change in how they see themselves and the world they live in (Brookfield, 1987, 2009). Learners develop as they learn how to construct and reconstruct their knowledge in light of new experiences. They understand who they are and realize they can choose to change and learn on their own initiative, becoming increasingly responsible for their own actions (Kegan, 2009; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Some cognitive theorists have developed entire systems indicating stages of growth or development from dualistic to more complex ways of thinking (Fowler, 1981; Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Some advancement in complexity needs to be achieved for a person to have the capacity for self-reflection as well as comprehending the perspective of another person (Mezirow, 2006). Contrary to the belief that higher forms of thinking are needed to accomplish transformative learning, this writer concurs with Mezirow (1991) that "transformation theory is not a stage theory" (p. 160). One does not need to have a higher or more sophisticated way of thinking to experience transformative change.

Figure 3

*Mezirow's 10 Phases of Transformative Learning*


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Mezirow's 10 Phases of Transformative Learning

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
  2. Examining oneself
  3. Critically assessing assumptions
  4. Recognizing a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
  5. Exploring options for new roles, relationships, and action
  6. Planning a course of action
  7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
  8. Provisional experimenting with new roles
  9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
  10. Reintegrating into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective
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Note: Mezirow's 10 Phases of Transformative Learning. Adapted from "Transformative Learning Theory," by J. Mezirow, 2009, *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights From Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, p. 19.

In Mezirow's theory, transformative learning is initiated by a disorienting dilemma that triggers self-examination (Joseph & Linley, 2005). See Figure 3 to follow the flow of Mezirow's theory. This is followed by an examination of how to explain the dilemma or adapt to it. Then an alternative perspective is developed and integrated into one's life (Henderson, 2002). The subjective reframing due to critical reflection of one's assumptions that occurs in transformative learning is similar to the double-loop learning advanced by Argyris (Argyris, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Transformative learning is thought through by a person as a new course of action and is followed by developing a plan for implementation. The required new knowledge and skills for transformational learning are then acquired. Based upon absorbing this new



knowledge, new roles are tried and self-confidence and competence are increased. The process is not complete until there is an application of these new terms into one's life (Mezirow, 1981; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Mezirow is commonly criticized for placing too much emphasis on the rational–cognitive way of learning in his concept of transformative learning. From the outset, he did acknowledge the importance of feelings, as well as thought and the will (Mezirow, 1978) but admitted later that the role of emotion had not been adequately represented (Mezirow, 2006). In a discussion of a holistic or extrarational orientation (Cranton & Taylor, 2012), Taylor (2009) agreed with others in recognizing Mezirow's narrow emphasis on rational ways of knowing, including critical reflection. Citing K. Brown (2006), Taylor acknowledged that learners rarely change through a solely rational process (analyze–think–change). Instead, they are more likely to change with an affective approach, as in a see–feel–change sequence. Taylor understood affective-knowing to be inherent in critical reflection. This kind of knowing is a development of awareness of feelings and emotions in the reflective process. There is an interdependent relationship between the physiological process of cognition and emotion. In speaking of the evolving nature of transformative learning, Taylor (2009) pointed out that research has shown it is the affective ways of knowing that emphasize experience and identify for the learner what is personally most significant in the process of reflection. This has also been the focus of research and implementation in the field of higher education's student affairs (Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006) as well as in the developing field of service-learning (Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Nino, Cuevas, & Loya, 2011).

Beard and Wilson (2002) agreed that the affective domain provides the foundation for all learning. A growing number of authors also recognize the significance of emotion in learning by

experience (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, 1996; Dirkx, 2001a, 2001c). Sensitive to the affective aspects of learning, Fenwick (2003) proposed five perspectives on learning by experience: (a) reflecting on concrete experience (constructivist theory of learning), (b) participating in a community of practice (situative theory of learning), (c) becoming aware of unconscious desires and fears (psychoanalytic theory of learning), (d) contending against dominant social norms of experience (critical cultural theories), and (e) investigating ecological relationships between cognition and environment (complexity theories applied to learning). Both affect and experience are connected in significant learning.

In an intriguing dialogue between Dirkx and Mezirow (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006), Dirkx pointed out where he advanced beyond Mezirow in his concept of transformational learning, calling it soul work or inner work (Dirkx, 1997). He understood this as reflecting the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of a person's existence. Moving beyond the traditional focus within higher and adult education on course content to deepen intellectual capacities, Dirkx (2006) recognized the spiritual connotations of learning, life, and work.

In addition to an increasing number of scholars appreciating the role of emotion in transformative learning, there are also those who have emphasized the importance of imagination. Tisdell and Tolliver (2009) described how there has been increasing discussion in recent years on the importance of paying attention to imagination in teaching and learning. Dirkx (2006) took a Jungian perspective regarding imagination in helping educators know themselves more completely in order to teach out of a greater sense of their own authenticity. He suggested working with images that emerge out of emotional experiences and proposed that interaction with such images can serve as a threshold to a deeper understanding of self on a soul level that can affect both teaching and learning (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2009).

Eckman (2005) is a firm proponent of the use of the imagination. Unfortunately, as he pointed out, this runs against the grain of various circles in the Christian church today. In spite of this opposition, Eckman (2005) extolled the values of a healthy use of the imagination:

The beauty of the imagination is that when we focus on the pictures, we enter the world of the pictures, and the emotions of our hearts rise to match the pictures. We can exist emotionally within that world and feel its security and care. (p. 105)

As an example, Eckman (2005) pointed to the Sermon on the Mount as Christ's way of giving his listeners new images for their imagination, representing God as a caring, compassionate Father.

In spite of the attractiveness of advancing oneself through transformational learning, it is not a panacea. Mezirow (2000, 2012) referred to "emotional intelligence" by Goleman (1998) in stating that transformative learning requires emotional maturity, which entails knowing and managing one's emotions as well as being sensitive to others' emotions in relationships.

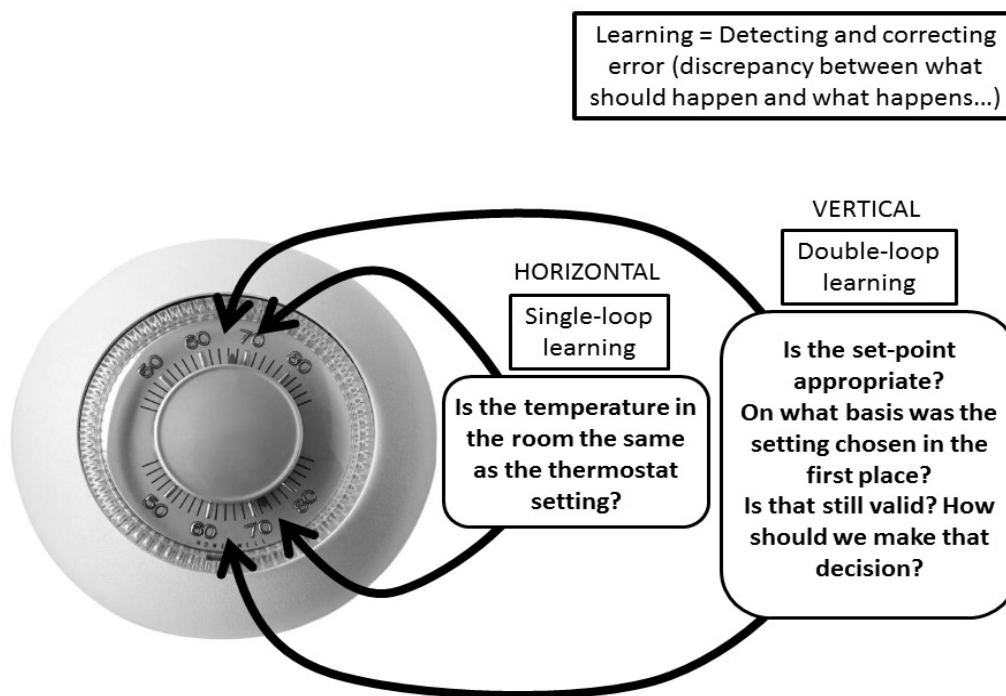
### **Action Science and Resistance to Change**

**Theory of action.** In Argyris and Schon's (1996) view, interpersonal strategies are the primary motivators, whether positive or negative, of individual and organizational transformation. They maintained that all human action, whether conscious or not, is the result of a plan. This plan functions much like a computer program. However, people have two kinds of programs or theories of action operating in their minds (Argyris, 1997). One is their espoused theory: the if-then propositions they believe in their conscious minds that drive their actions. The other program is their theory-in-use, the one that reflects what they actually do. The problem is, due to several factors, individuals are unaware of the discrepancy between the two internal programs, and, thus, their transformative learning is blocked (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith,

1985; Argyris & Schon, 1996). Argyris and Schon (1996) focused on helping individuals become aware of their theories-in-use and then learn more constructive interpersonal processes to bring these two programs into alignment.

Figure 4

*Single- and Double-Loop Learning*



Note: Single- and Double-Loop Learning. Adapted from "Single- and Double-Loop Learning" by D. J. Bochman, 2013, *Single- and Double-Loop Learning*. Unpublished digital presentation.

Argyris and Schon's (1996) theory of action distinguishes between single-loop learning (detecting and correcting errors without changing one's underlying assumptions and values) and double-loop learning (identifying and questioning one's underlying assumptions and values). See Figure 4, which depicts the classic illustration used by the authors. Single-loop learning is a basic learning method and the one most often used by people. It is beneficial for increasing efficiency within an existing framework. However, major improvements come by challenging

one's underlying assumptions and values, which can lead to adaptive learning and transformational change. This is the goal of double-loop learning, as it involves a more comprehensive inquiry into the values of a person's actual theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

Argyris and Schon's extensive research categorized theories-in-use into two models of interpersonal processes designated Model I and Model II (Argyris & Schon, 1974). The theory-in-use of Model I promotes the avoidance of embarrassment and the accompanying feeling of vulnerability. Retaining an atmosphere of harmony and maintaining control of the situation are the most important agenda items behind Model I (Schwarz, 2006). According to Argyris (2000), Model I is virtually a universal description of nearly all observable management and interpersonal relationship patterns.

In contrast to Model I, Argyris stated that Model II is the key to opening up transformative learning in individuals and organizations (Woodell, 2003). Model II is a set of interpersonal processes that focus on issues based on valid information, even if it causes some people to become embarrassed and uncomfortable (Argyris, 1994; Torbert & Associates, 2004). Model II requires willing to confront.

Argyris and Schon (1996) concluded after extensive case studies conducted internationally that nearly 99% of the people they studied reflect Model I patterns of interpersonal interaction. Argyris called Model I the master theory-in-use, stating that it is the nearly comprehensive model employed by individuals, regardless of race, gender, age, educational level, or economic level (Argyris, 2000).

**Immunity to change.** After more than 25 years of research, Kegan and Lahey recently released their findings on what they called people's "Immunity to Change" (Kegan, 2009; Kegan

& Lahey, 2001a, 2001b, 2009). Their research has given insight into extending Argyris and Schon's theory of action (Bochman & Kroth, 2010) with a view to helping people overcome their natural resistance to change. Kegan and Lahey (2009) identified that the change challenges facing today's leaders and their subordinates are not an issue of the will, which they call "technical" in nature. Learning how to remove an inflamed set of tonsils or how to land an airplane with a malfunctioning nose wheel are examples of technical challenges. The difficulty is the inability to narrow the gap between a person's desire to do better (his espoused theory) and what he is actually able to accomplish (his theory-in-use). Closing this gap is an essential learning problem of the twenty-first century. They call this substantive change "adaptive," which is accomplished by transforming one's mind-set. Argyris and Schon called this Model II, or double-loop learning (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1996).

In Kegan and Lahey's (2009) model, adults are helped to identify a significant improvement goal, whether personally or as a group, and then are led through a process to uncover what underlying, and usually hidden, assumptions directly counteract the achievement of the stated goal. This usually results in the discovery of competing commitments within the individual or group that culminates in an immunity to change. By challenging these big assumptions, which many adults personally classify as *the truth*, individuals or groups can begin to take steps to change their behaviors and accomplish their goals (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

### **Living Wholeheartedly with Virtue**

As one approaches the challenge of personal change, it helps to not only have a distinguishable goal in mind but also to have an increased capacity to accomplish it. These areas lead to the disciplines of psychology—attachment theory and positive psychology, philosophy—virtue ethics, and social theory. People's early experiences in life have a distinct impact on the

quality of relationships they will have later as adults. However, no matter how difficult early life experiences have been, people have the opportunity to make sense of their lives and make personal decisions about what life paths to take in the matter of day-to-day living (Siegel, 1999; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

**Attachment theory.** Influenced by the generations that precede them, every generation impacts future generations. Parents do the best job they can in raising their children, given the events of their own lives. However, they may not have had the experiences early in their lives that they would desire to pass on to their own children.

The positive associations with others inside or outside of immediate families serve as the heart of resilience that may have helped people to survive the difficult times in their early years. Providentially, even if difficult childhoods have been experienced, many have had some affirming relationships during those years that offer a seed of hope to assist in overcoming earlier troubles (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Adults are not ordained to repeat the patterns of their parents or of their past. The key is for adults to make sense of their lives, enabling them to build on positive experiences, move beyond past difficulties, and construct a new way of living for themselves and their children (Siegel, 1999; Thompson, 2010). Reflecting on personal childhood experiences can assist in making sense of one's life. While past events cannot be changed, a deeper understanding along with a different perspective can change a person (Meyer, 2009). Making sense of one's life permits a better understand of others and provides the possibility of selecting behaviors and becoming more open to a wider range of experiences (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

A person's life narrative can evolve with age. The events from the past do not change, but by voicing them (Meyer, 2009) and integrating the past, present, and future, one gains more

coherent stages of self-knowledge. This increased coherence of a personal narrative is connected with movement toward an adult secure attachment. Altering an attachment status as a person grows is possible, as studies have shown (Main, 2000; Neborsky, 2003).

Adult attachment can be established by how adults tell the story of their childhoods to another adult. Adults' understanding of themselves is shown through this adult-to-adult interchange. The manner in which the narrative is related, not merely the content, reveals distinctive features of the adult's state of mind regarding attachment. The patterns of the life story are connected with the child's attachment status to that parent as shown in Figure 5 (Main, 2000). Longitudinal studies have shown the general correlation of the adults' life stories to their own childhood attachment categories evaluated 20 years earlier (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). The categories shown in Figure 5 are not meant to be rigid groupings, as it is normal to share elements of several categories. Children may have different attachment patterns to different adults in their lives (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

There are four patterns (see Figure 5) of adult attachment (Bowlby, 1978, 1988). People with a secure attachment have made coherent sense of their own life stories, not blocking out painful aspects that are difficult to recall. This is the single most significant factor as parents seek to influence the formation of their child's attachment pattern. A secure attachment pattern identified by the Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI) reveals an autonomous or free orientation toward attachment-related issues. These adults are apt to pay attention to the feelings of others, value relationships, and be well-integrated socially, emotionally, and cognitively. They can be good leaders or followers, are willing to face and resolve conflicts, and are described by others as cooperative. While not without insecurities, they are willing to face and address them. They are also likely to raise their children in a manner that encourages secure attachment.



Figure 5

*Attachment Categories in Both Children and Adults*

Child	Adult
Securely attached—seeks proximity and quickly returns to play after short separation from the caregiver.	Secure—has coherent narratives to make sense of life history, integrating one’s past with the present and anticipated future.  Earned Secure—has a coherent narrative, but has experienced difficult times in childhood attachment.
Avoidantly attached—seems to ignore return of the caregiver after separation.	Dismissing—early life may have included a prevalence of parental emotional unavailability and rejection. The inner life seems to function with independence, being disconnected from intimacy and emotion.
Ambivalently attached—seems anxious, is not easily soothed, and does not readily return to play after a separation from the caregiver.	Preoccupied or entangled—has experienced inconsistently available, perceptive, and responsive caregiving. Results in an inner life filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and ambivalence.
Disorganizedly attached—appears disorganized and disoriented during the return of the caregiver.	Unresolved trauma or loss/Disorganized—unresolved conditions involve a rupture in the flow of information in the mind and in the ability to attain emotional balance and maintain connections to others, called dysregulation. Can involve severe mood changes without warning, creating chaos: sullenness, outbursts of anger, or sudden shifts in attitude.

Note: Attachment Categories in Both Children and Adults. Adapted from Chapter 5, “How We Attach: Relationships Between Children and Parents,” by D. J. Siegel and M. Hartzell, 2003, *Parenting From the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive*, pp. 101–121.

While there are adults who may not have had a good relationship with their parents while growing up and not be securely attached, it is possible to achieve an earned secure attachment. Earned security shows how adults have come to make sense of their early narrative (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002).

The remaining three attachment patterns show various degrees of insecurity (Siegel, 1999). The second attachment pattern is “dismissing.” This adult’s early life may have

experienced a home in which a parent was emotionally unavailable and unresponsive, failing to acknowledge and empathize with the child's emotional states. The strong message is that emotions do not matter and the world is an emotionally empty place. The child learns not to pay attention to emotion, finding other means of adapting to life's stressors. This could be evidenced by avoiding emotional connection and closeness. The child learns to compensate for the lack of emotional closeness by depending heavily on the benefits of logic and processing messages literally. The child will value the actual words spoken, but miss the nonverbal communication. The results of the AAI for parents who dismiss their children reveal that the parents will relate their narrative rather blandly, void of the rich emotional content that colors life.

The third attachment pattern is also insecure—"preoccupied." Adults with preoccupied attachment have experienced caregiving that was inconsistently available, discerning, and responsive to their needs as children. The result is an emotional state flooded with anxiety, uncertainty, and ambivalence. These preoccupied adults may find difficulty in reliably perceiving the signals of others and effectively interpreting their needs. They may be panicked by doubts and fears about depending on others. Feedback from the AAI shows stories often filled with accounts of residual issues from the past that continue to interject themselves into the present. Adults sidestep the narrative from addressing the presenting issue—a distinct evidence of an incoherent life story. This invasive pattern of residual issues is a direct impairment to mindfulness and may result in inflexibility (Siegel, 1999).

The fourth attachment pattern, also insecure, is "disorganized" or "unresolved trauma or loss" (Siegel, 1999). Parents with disorganized attachment tend to be frequently frightened or frightening to their children. Their behavior towards those they care for appears disorienting and dangerous, as they may abuse their children emotionally, physically, or sexually. These adults

may also suffer from severe emotional disorders such as schizophrenia, severe bipolar disorder, or drug or alcohol abuse. They may have been emotionally deprived as children. Many of these parents say that they love their children deeply, but seem to not be attuned as to how their actions disrupt and disorient their children, preventing their children from developing a coherent sense of their world and an accompanying secure attachment. The AAI profile of such an adult tends to have incoherent life stories, occasionally punctuated by gaps in their stories where traumatic episodes are omitted. The emotional flow of their narratives can be disjointed, demonstrating the failure to make sense of their stories, which is evidence of the incoherent pattern.

What are people to do if they recognize they have an insecure attachment pattern? Will they be left forever with the residual imprints of their parents? Are parents doomed to parent out of an insecure attachment pattern, replicating it in their own children? One must be careful not to answer these questions too hastily or with trite and superficial answers. Thompson (2010), a Christian psychiatrist, issued this warning:

It is not uncommon for those of us who live in the subculture of Western Christianity to expect transformation to happen if we simply recite the verses that assure us of such an outcome. We hear this in various forms from the pulpit and in the Bible studies, parenting workshops, and marriage enrichment seminars we attend. We are familiar with the language: God is faithful; God will provide; Jesus loves and forgives you. And we are admonished to live a particular life: Love your neighbor as yourself; renew your mind; be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect; do not give the devil a foothold. (p. 133)

Theological facts or left brain, cognitive information is not inherently transformative alone (Siegel, 1999; Thompson, 2010). As mentioned above under the section on secure attachment,

people can experience an earned secure attachment in spite of enduring very difficult, early life rejection and trauma. This transformation requires either a meaningful exchange with an outside relationship or a significant change of circumstances. People share the story of their lives with others in a supportive environment, experiencing being supported by another. This enables the right and left brain to integrate as the facts of the narrative weave together with the emotions that may have been suppressed for years (Siegel, 1999, 2007; Thompson, 2010). A person who listens to another's story is able to empathize with and validate the storyteller, no matter how tragic the account. Often, the storyteller gains an entirely new perspective on the narrative through the eyes and understanding of others. For example, the storyteller may have felt like a complete loser after repeated failures. The listeners may reflect on the courage, persistence, and toughness of the storyteller as a survivor. This new perspective can be transformative (Allender, 2005; Meyer, 2009; Thompson, 2010).

**Positive psychology and virtue ethics.** Although it is well and good for people to change, the question remains, toward what goal should a person strive? For Aristotle, an ancient philosopher, the goal was *eudaimonia*, sometimes called “happiness.” Aristotle meant something closer to the current idea of “flourishing,” thus the ultimate goal was the ideal of a “fully flourishing human being” (Aristotle, 2012; Wright, 2010). The path to achieve this goal was to develop character strengths, which would ultimately lead to human flourishing. The way to achieve *eudaimonia*, according to Aristotle, was by diligently practicing these strengths or virtues, just as today, a basketball player trains muscles and practices all of the many ball skills needed to successfully play the game (Comte-Sponville, 2001; Wright, 2010).

Virtue theory, one of the ethical theories in philosophy, begins with the character of the person rather than focusing on right or wrong actions. An act cannot be judged as right or wrong

by only observing the act. The true beginning is to look at the person performing the act. A distinct strength of virtue ethics is that it takes a holistic view of a person, strongly connecting acts with character. Ethical decisions are not made in isolation (Comte-Sponville, 2001; Waller, 2005).

Figure 6

*Comte-Sponville's 18 Great Virtues*

[1] Politeness	[10] Gratitude
[2] Fidelity	[11] Humility
[3] <b>Prudence</b>	[12] Simplicity
[4] <b>Temperance</b>	[13] Tolerance
[5] <b>Courage</b>	[14] Purity
[6] <b>Justice</b> <sup>a</sup>	[15] Gentleness
[7] Generosity	[16] Good Faith
[8] Compassion	[17] Humor
[9] Mercy	[18] Love

<sup>a</sup>: Aristotle's Four Cardinal Virtues are in bold.

Note: Comte-Sponville's 18 Great Virtues. Adapted from *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, by A. Comte-Sponville, 2001. (Aristotle's four Cardinal virtues are in bold type).

What are the virtues that all should seek to practice? One of the problems in answering this question is the temptation to consider any list as a to-do list to check off each item as it is accomplished. Virtue is a process and a journey, not a destination. Aristotle developed a short list of moral strengths, commonly referred to as the four "cardinal virtues": courage, justice, prudence, and temperance (Aristotle, 2012; Wright, 2010). The French philosopher Comte-Sponville (2001) extended Aristotle's foundational virtues to 18 in the following order (see Figure 6): politeness, fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humor, and love. See Figure 6 to see Comte-Sponville's list compared against Aristotle's.

Comte-Sponville's list is only a beginning of what can be an exhaustive enterprise of deriving a complete list of virtues. Western Christianity esteems the insights from the New Testament writers regarding virtue. Wright (2010, pp. 35-36) suggested that Aristotle's proposal for virtue pales in comparison with Jesus' instructions in the New Testament where He utilizes "a significantly different mode." He listed the moral strengths from the New Testament, some not valued by the pagan world of Aristotle: love, patience, forgiveness, kindness, humility, goodness, peace, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Wright, 2010). It is similar to comparing a two-dimensional model with a three-dimensional model. Christ's three-dimensional model becomes something quite different with regard to transformation. Aristotle envisioned a person of virtue, having expended a great amount of individual effort to acquire good character, to be a positive force in the world (Wright, 2010).

Historically, risen from the dead as the risen Savior, Jesus Christ proclaimed himself both king and priest (Walls, 2010; Wright, 2010). Through an act of grace, he called his followers to join him in working out this dual ministry in their lives and in their world. All Christian virtue resides in that endeavor. Christ described his followers as "a royal priesthood" (I Peter 2:9) and "a holy priesthood" (I Peter 2:5) in anticipation of their work in the kingdom of God, which began at the moment of their commitment to follow Jesus. The goal of human life that the New Testament writers held out as the ultimate reality is already given in the life of Christ. Aristotle's *eudaimonia* was a pale shadow of this (Wright, 2010).

Psychologists Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens (2008) proposed 10 "moral emotion-related capacities" that are associated with human flourishing. Their model, called "moral affective capacities (MACs) of caring character," includes trust, love, elevation, empathy, compassion, gratitude, positive pride, guilt, forgiveness, and humility. These progress far beyond Aristotle's

four principle virtues and begin to reflect the concerns that the New Testament writers had for those who chose to follow Christ.

**Living wholeheartedly.** Brown (2010, 2012) called the lifestyle of the fully functioning person the wholehearted life. Stated positively, living wholeheartedly means to cultivate qualities such as authenticity, self-compassion, a resilient spirit, gratitude and joy, intuition and trusting faith, creativity, play and rest, calm and stillness, meaningful work, as well as laughter, song, and dance (Brown, 2010).

Some people need warning signs as they navigate through life's obstacles in order to gravitate toward wholehearted living. Brown (2010) referred to issues that people need to let go of, such as: what other people think, perfectionism, numbing and powerlessness, scarcity and fear of the dark, the need for certainty, comparison, exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth, anxiety as a lifestyle, self-doubt and obligatory behavior, as well as always being in control. The items identified in this paragraph are not to be viewed as one big to-do list to check off as individuals become fully functioning people, but to be seen more as a destination.

Everyone's story seems to have areas that are off limits, cloaked in shame, fear, and humiliation (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2004). People need to face the challenges in their lives if they are to grow and flourish (Ablow, 2007). As individuals contemplate shame and its effects, they need to consider some of its significant aspects. Shame is a universal problem, and people seldom desire to talk about it. In fact, the more people avoid talking about it, the more shame takes control over their lives (Brown, 2010).

It is important to distinguish between guilt and shame. Guilt is felt when one is caught doing something against one's own conscience and can be mitigated through an apology such as

“I’m sorry that I did that.” Shame is about a person’s identity; for example, “No one will ever love me. I’m damaged” (Parravani, 2013, p. 137). Guilt often motivates people to make amends and to move forward in life. Shame debilitates people by convincing them that they are worthless and unlovable (Welch, 2012).

People respond in several ways to shame in their lives. Drawing upon Horney’s (1945) typology of personality types, Hartling et al. (2004) classified three categories in which people respond to shame and humiliation. One is a *moving away* strategy where individuals separate from others by withdrawing, silencing themselves, or making themselves invisible. Those who are powerless, for example, children, often respond in this manner when neglected or abused (Freyd, 1994, 1996, 2001). Another strategy is *moving toward* others by attempting to appease or please them, while at the same time keeping some significant parts of their experience from their relationship, sometimes done unconsciously (Freyd, Deprince, & Gleaves, 2007). This may explain the coping mechanism of those dealing with difficult or abusive relationships (Freyd, 1994, 1996, 2009). Finally, others may demonstrate a *moving against* strategy where they express anger, resentment, and rage against those they believe are responsible for their shame or humiliation (Hartling et al., 2004).

In order to live wholeheartedly, individuals need to develop shame resilience. Brown (2010) identified three items that nourish shame in one’s life: secrecy, silence, and judgment. Especially in the individualistic Western culture, people are tempted to hide their shame and keep it locked up inside of them (Tracy, 2005). As a result, shame grows like a cancer, eating away at a person’s worth. Verbalizing one’s shame renders it powerless in a person’s life (Lynch, McNicol, & Thrall, 2011). Brown (2010) stated, “we need to cultivate our story to let go of shame, and we need to develop shame resilience in order to cultivate our story” (p. 40).



Whether it is stated openly or not, all people desire to be known by trusted others who know the story of their lives, yet do not reject them (Allender, 2005; Buechner, 1991).

## **Conclusion**

The initiating event for transformative learning is, according to Mezirow (2000), a “disorienting dilemma.” Some might figuratively identify this as being hit across the head by a two-by-four to get one’s attention. Being thrown off guard in life opens one up to identifying and understanding underlying assumptions that significantly impact the course of life. When one questions these assumptions under the scrutiny of critical reflection, the result can be transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

Kegan and Lahey (2009) discussed how most people are resistant to change by failing to question their big assumptions, even when facing life and death situations. Failing to reflect on one’s assumptions was identified by Argyris and Schon (1996) as an almost universal theory-in-use by people with a distinct goal of maintaining harmony and avoiding embarrassment, both at the personal and interpersonal levels. This theory-in-use is called Model I by Argyris and Schon (1996). They observed this in 99% of the participants in their extended case study.

A common theme of the various spheres introduced in this literature review was that the key to transformative learning and change is to face one’s underlying assumptions. Oftentimes, these are not readily apparent to the individual, residing as personal blind spots (Argyris & Schon, 1996; B. Brown, 2010, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Rule, 2011).

The quality of attachment to caretakers, while growing up, has a tremendous impact on how adults view life and handle relationships. Even if these early relationships resulted in an insecure attachment pattern, adults can gain an earned secure attachment through positive interactions with others in a supportive environment.

The goal of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing is important to human beings. Life filled with meaning, purpose, and significant personal relationships is highly sought after. The acquisition of virtuous qualities parallels this life goal.

In speaking of wholehearted living, Brown (2010) talked forcefully about the debilitating effects of hidden shame in people's lives. If shame is faced and a choice is made, instead, to live life with courage, compassion, and connection, individuals can flourish even in difficult circumstances.

## **Chapter III**

### **Design and Methodology**

The focus of this mixed-methods sequential explanatory study (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) was on transformative learning that may occur in conjunction with a person having processed through the Immersion Experience, a 22-lesson, small-group discipleship program for adults (see Figure 1). Mixed-methods research has become more popular because researchers believe it enriches quantitative results (Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005).

Four research questions guided this study. They are as follows:

1. What impact does growing up in a religiously confused home (home of origin) have on Christ-followers in regard to fully experiencing God's love in their daily lives?
2. Is there a perception of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults having processed through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience?
3. What are the believers' instinctive responses (natural or acquired tendencies) to unexpected stress and prolonged pain (emotional, relational, physical, or spiritual), and how is this demonstrated in critical relationships with God, self, and significant personal relationships?
4. How do Christ-followers view God, self, and others, and what impact does this have on their transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience?

#### **Research Design**

A mixed-methods, sequential, explanatory study (Creswell et al., 2003; Ivankova et al., 2006) was used to explore the transformative learning and change that may have occurred in the adults who have previously completed the 22-week, small group, discipleship program called the

Immersion Experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As the Immersion Experience has no previously published research results, a mixed-method, sequential, explanatory study appeared to be an appropriate approach. The mixed-methods sequential explanatory study consisted of two distinct phases: a quantitative portion, which also included a qualitative question, followed by a qualitative one. This resulted in three points of data: the quantitative from the survey, a qualitative from the survey question, and the qualitative from the interviews. According to Ivankova et al. (2006), the researcher initially collects and analyzes the quantitative (numeric) data. This is followed by gathering and analyzing the qualitative (textual) data. This second phase helps explain and illuminate the quantitative results obtained in the first phase. The two phases are connected during the intermediate stage in the study. The rationale for this approach is that the initial quantitative results and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem. The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain the numerical findings by examining the participants' experiences and viewpoints in greater depth.

**Philosophical assumptions and worldviews.** Because this study was a mixed-methods design, it incorporated multiple worldviews in its approach. The approach taken in this study followed Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) preference in understanding the type of mixed-methods design chosen as driving the selection of the various worldviews utilized.

Since a survey was initially used as the quantitative portion of the study, a postpositivist worldview was utilized with the theoretical framework of Mezirow's (1978, 1991) transformative learning theory. Various aspects of Mezirow's theory were tested by the survey results.

Subsequently, 16 phenomenological interviews were undertaken as the qualitative portion of the research. The researcher's worldview switched over to a constructivist perspective, while seeking "to elicit multiple meanings from the participants, to build a deeper understanding than the survey would yield, and to possibly generate a theory of pattern of responses that explain the survey results" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 46).

**Quantitative component.** Because the Immersion Experience was relatively new and not previously researched, the researcher realized an instrument would have to be designed to measure the transformative learning and change that might have occurred in the alumni who processed through the curriculum. With the assistance of a nine-person panel of experts which included the staff of Aphasis Group Ministries, the researcher designed a survey.

Using Qualtrics, a web-based survey (see Appendix A) was issued via e-mail to all of the 850 alumni (see Appendix E). The survey consisted of four sections. The first part identified personal demographic information. The second section evaluated participants' attitudes and beliefs prior to their first experience processing through the Immersion Experience. Several of the survey items helped identify whether or not the participants experienced religious confusion in their home of origin. The third section asked the participants to self-identify their current attitudes and beliefs (Rule, 2011). This enabled a comparison of beliefs and attitudes of each participant to see if any transformative learning occurred as a result of processing through the Immersion Experience. The data gathered from the survey provided a backdrop to the rich information gathered from the few who were personally interviewed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This was the quantitative portion of the study.

The fourth section of the survey included an open-ended voluntary question which introduced a qualitative aspect to the survey. This allowed the participants to make personal

comments beyond the structured instrument as to whether they had experienced transformative learning having processed through the Immersion Experience. These comments were analyzed independently from the interviews. The last section also included a final question soliciting those interested to volunteer for in-depth interviews, asking them in addition to provide their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.

**Qualitative component.** A phenomenological approach was also used as the qualitative portion of the study. Phenomenology seeks to understand the individually lived experiences of participants through extensive interviews (Kvale, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Reinharz & Chase, 2003; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003). Conklin (2007) described the unique approach of phenomenology to qualitative research:

Research in this genre of understanding focuses on the participants' experience and meaning making as experienced by them, not on keen descriptions of overt actions or behavior by the researcher. Meaning making takes place at the intersection of the physical world in which experience transpires the mental and emotional world of the participant. This person-world intersect is where phenomenology seems to best lend itself to discovery. (p. 276–277)

With phenomenology, the interviewer seeks to develop a transcendental attitude, remove any personal bias as much as possible, and maintain an objective viewpoint with regard to the research (Conklin, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). It involves a successive series of sifting through the core themes of the participants' experience, at first constructing textural, then structural, descriptions. These themes are then gleaned to construct composite descriptions of both the textural and structural, culminated by synthesizing them into an integrated whole that

captures the understandings and essences of the experience for the group as a whole (Conklin, 2007; Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994).

**Participants.** This study was limited to professing Christians from Western culture, specifically from the western United States where the Aphesis Group Ministries has concentrated its initial efforts. The alumni of the Immersion Experience numbered approximately 850 by the end of 2013. The web-based survey through Qualtrics was e-mailed to all 850 alumni. Beginning the survey were 187 alumni. However, 172 completed the questionnaire. The number of participants involved in each of the statistics varies somewhat because a demographic question may have gone unanswered. Table 1 demonstrates the breakdown of the participants by gender, involvement in vocational Christian ministry, and the year the Immersion Experience was completed. Since it is not uncommon for alumni to repeat the experience or serve as a facilitator for a later group, the completion number is higher than the number of participants. Regarding the highest education level achieved by the survey participants, 76.2% completed at least a university degree with  $n = 185$ . Figure 7 shows the age of the survey participants with  $n = 187$ . The strong participation in the survey by professing evangelical Christians is shown in Figure 8,  $n = 184$ . By far, the highest ethnic participation was white with 84%,  $n = 191$ . The next two most prevalent minority ethnicities were Chinese at 8% and Hispanic at 4%.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants*

Characteristic	Frequency (n = 187)	Percent
Gender		
Male	81	43.3%
Female	106	56.7%
Vocational Christian Ministry <sup>a</sup>		
Yes	76	40.6%
No	107	57.2%
No Response	4	2.1%
Immersion Experience Completion <sup>b</sup>		
2010	45	n/a
2011	61	n/a
2012	75	n/a
2013	79	n/a

<sup>a</sup>: Vocational Christian ministers are individuals in a paid, professional ministry position

<sup>b</sup>: Includes both facilitators and attendants. Some participants completed the experience in multiples years. Some participants went through the program as an attendant and then as a facilitator.



Figure 7

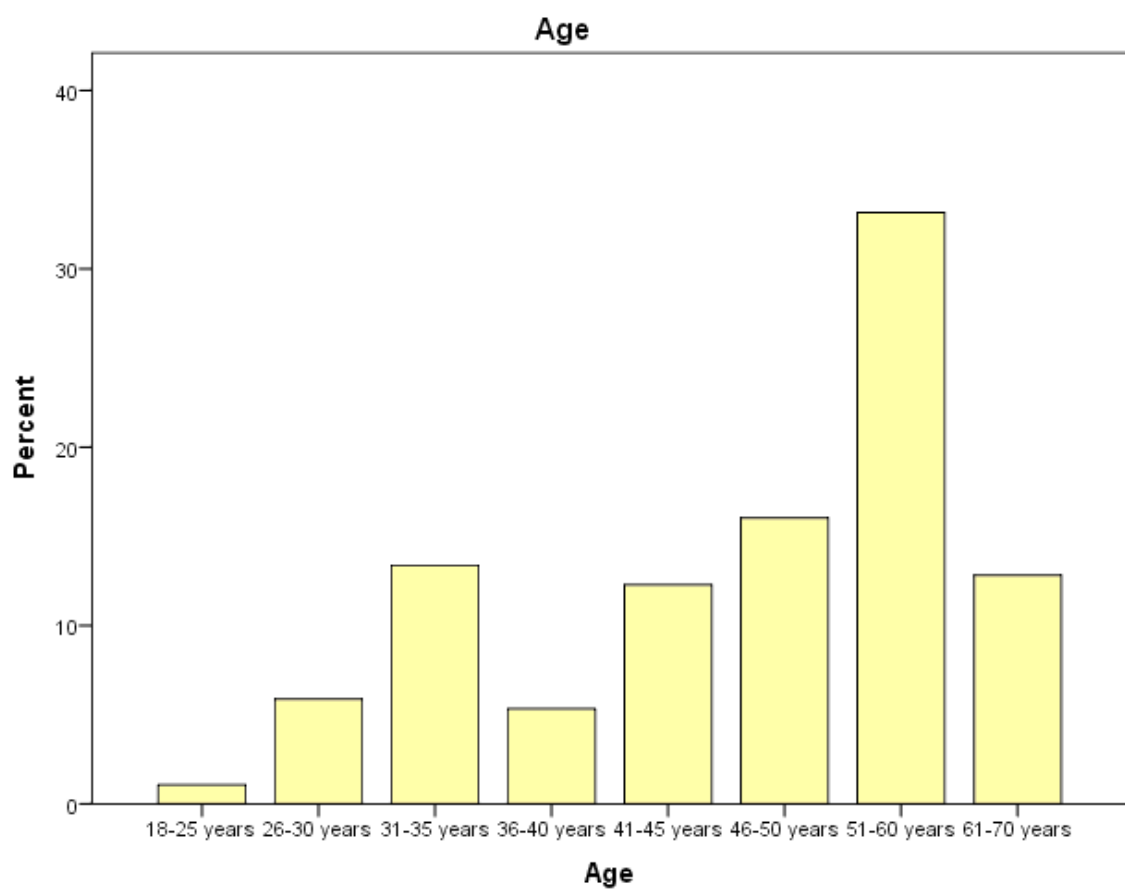
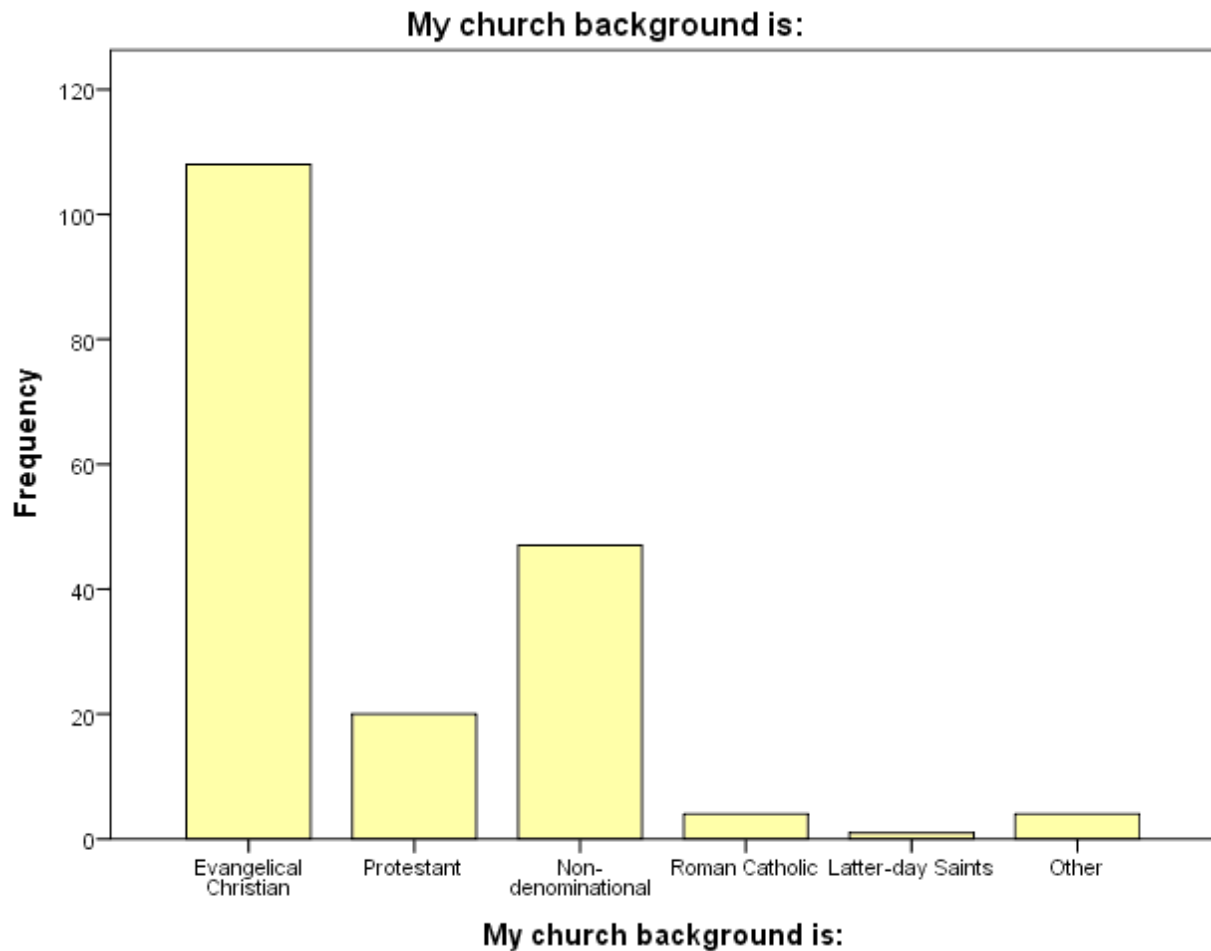
*Age of Survey Participants* $n = 187$

Figure 8

*Church Background of Survey Participants*

$n = 184$

The concluding question on the survey solicited volunteers to be interviewed (Dillman, Christian, & Smyth, 2009). Those willing to participate were asked to provide contact information in order to proceed further. The potential interviewees were initially identified through participating in the web-based survey. The finalists were selected by a panel of experts from the Aphesis Group Ministries' headquarters based on their *intensity* of demonstrating the phenomenon of religious confusion in their homes of origin (Rule, 2011). Intensity provides a

purposeful sampling that demonstrates the phenomenon of religious confusion robustly, but not in an extreme manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003). Indicating a willingness to be interviewed up to two times, the 16 participants were equally divided between male and female (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

The group of 16 participants were adults over 18 years of age and alumni of Aphasis Group Ministries' Immersion Experience. The majority of the alumni of the Immersion Experience were Caucasian, although there has been increased interest among Asian Christians. The adult interview participants were composed of 50% female (Belenky et al., 1986; Love & Guthrie, 1999; Reinharz & Chase, 2003) and 50% male (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003). These believers were further screened to confirm they had grown up in religiously confused homes (Rule, 2011; Thrall, McNicol, & Lynch, 2004; Van Vonderen et al., 2008) based on their survey responses to the appropriate items.

### **Methods for Data Collection**

This research project was a mixed-methods study incorporating a web-based survey composed of Likert-type questions via Qualtrics distributed to all 850 adult alumni, volunteer essay responses to an open-ended question on the survey, and interview questions administered to 16 participants.

**The quantitative component.** The first part of the research was conducted via a survey designed by the researcher (Dillman et al., 2009). The survey was sent electronically in July–August 2013 to all participants via Qualtrics. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality in their involvement.

The survey contained four sections (see Appendix A). The first section contained eight questions, which requested some demographical information from each participant. The second

and third sections were composed of 5-point Likert-type items (Boone Jr. & Boone, 2012; Kislenko & Grevholm, 2008; Uebersax, 2006), the content of which was gathered from a nine-person panel of immersion experts (Trochim, 2006). There were 31 Likert-type items each in sections 2 and 3. The two sections were nearly identical Likert-type items in differing order, measuring previous and current perspectives. The second section identified the participants' beliefs and attitudes in relation to the eight modules addressed by the Immersion Experience at the time they began the 22-week process. The third section asked the participants to self-report their current beliefs and attitudes after completing at least one course of the Immersion Experience. One of the demographic questions allowed the participants to report which year(s) they completed the Immersion Experience, selecting from the available years 2010–2013. The last section contained the optional qualitative question and the invitation to be interviewed.

After the survey was designed, content validity for the instrument was sought. Polit and Beck (2006) proposed this definition: “Content validity concerns the degree to which a sample of items, taken together, constitute an adequate operational definition of a construct” (p. 490). This process involves two steps. First, the instrument designer must carefully conceptualize and analyze the domain of his research subject prior to Likert-item generation (Polit & Beck, 2006; Trochim, 2006). The researcher accomplished this by becoming familiar with the Immersion Experience as both a participant and a small-group facilitator. The researcher also consulted with a nine-person panel of experts to help identify relevant evaluative statements to help draw out the results of the participants' self-reflection regarding the transformative learning that may have occurred during the journey of processing through the Immersion Experience.

The second necessary step to content validity is “to evaluate the relevance of the scale's content through expert assessment” (Polit & Beck, 2006, p. 490). According to both Lynn

(1986) and Polit and Beck (2006), the most widely utilized measure of content validity is the content validity index, or CVI. According to Polit and Beck (2006), there are two types of CVIs that need to be computed: the content validity of individual items (I-CVI) and the content validity of the overall instrument (S-CVI). In order to establish I-CVI, a panel of nine content experts was asked to rate each Likert-type item in regard to its relevance to the underlying construct. Using a 4-point scale to avoid having an undecided midpoint, a popular continuum was utilized: 1 = not relevant, 2 = somewhat relevant, 3 = quite relevant, 4 = highly relevant (Davis, 1992; Polit & Beck, 2006). A score of 3 or 4 on each individual Likert-type item indicated the expert's endorsement of the unedited item. Lynn (1986) recommended a minimum of 78% agreement amongst the nine experts (which would be seven of nine in agreement) regarding each item in order to include it in the final instrument without editing or dismissing it. She introduced a sliding percentage scale to establish the acceptability of each item based on the number of experts employed.

The scale CVI, or S-CVI, utilizes the same 4-point scale to evaluate the entire instrument. According to Polit and Beck (2006), researchers have not been consistently explicit in explaining how they have produced their S-CVI. They prefer to adopt the S-CVI/Ave, or the content validity index for scales averaged. The S-CVI/Ave is determined by the average proportion of the individual items of the entire instrument rated as 3 or 4 by the entire panel of content experts or judges. This places the focus on average Likert-item quality rather than the performance by the judges. Polit and Beck (2006) recommended using a S-CVI/Ave score of 90% or higher to properly validate an entire instrument. This was accomplished by the researcher.

The validated survey was linked to an e-mail sent from the researcher (see Appendix B) to all 850 alumni of the Immersion Experience (Dillman et al., 2009). Access to this alumni list

was given by Aphesis Group Ministries (see Appendix C). Because a 40–50% response was not achieved after the initial contact, the researcher sent out two additional e-mails (see Appendices D and E) to increase the response rate (Dillman et al., 2009).

Internal consistency reliability is also an essential measure to establish for the research instrument. Internal consistency reliability of a Likert survey refers to the extent to which the Likert items in the instrument are consistent among themselves and with the overall instrument (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011). It is recommended that Cronbach's alpha coefficient be used to analyze both sections 2 and 3, as well as the overall instrument (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011; Gliem & Gliem, 2003). This can only be satisfactorily done by summing the scales for data analysis in each section and for the overall instrument. Cronbach's alpha does not provide reliability estimates for single Likert items (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The researcher demonstrated the survey's strong internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The score for the entire survey was 0.900.

The concluding question of the survey asked the alumni if they were willing to be personally interviewed as part of the research project. Those willing to be interviewed were asked to give personal contact information for further dialogue to finalize the selection of participants (Creswell, 2007). These final participants were selected by a panel of experts at Aphesis Group Ministries' headquarters for the intensity of their religious confusion experience growing up in their home of origin (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003). Having contacted the volunteers referred by Aphesis Group Ministries, the researcher proceeded to interview the 16 participants.

**The qualitative component.** Two parts of the study contributed to the qualitative component of the research: a voluntary, open-ended question contained in the survey and the

interviews with the 16 participants. As part of the survey, an open-ended question was asked of the participants: “Describe any paradigm shifts (profound changes in perspective) that occurred in your experience of God the Father and your daily walk with Christ after processing through the Immersion Experience.” This question was made available to all survey respondents, whether or not they grew up in a religiously confused home of origin. These results were analyzed to determine any common categories amongst the participants.

Semistructured interviews were used as the primary data-gathering method to allow for the greatest amount of freedom on the participants’ part to share openly and deeply about their experiences (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Arksey & Knight, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). A key prerequisite for being interviewed was an alumnus’ self-identification of growing up in a religiously confused home. This aspect of religious confusion is openly discussed in the small groups as an important component of the immersion process. Therefore, a handout (see Appendix F) from the curriculum was made available to each interviewee to help with memory recollection. Participants were selected by the criteria of the intensity of their religious confusion phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003). The 16 adult participants living in the western United States were personally interviewed by the researcher (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). With this number of participants, redundancy in responses was reached, signaling the need to terminate the initial interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Some of the interviewees’ demographic information is shown in the following figures: highest education level achieved (Figure 9), age (Figure 10), and church background in home of origin (Figure 11).

Figure 9

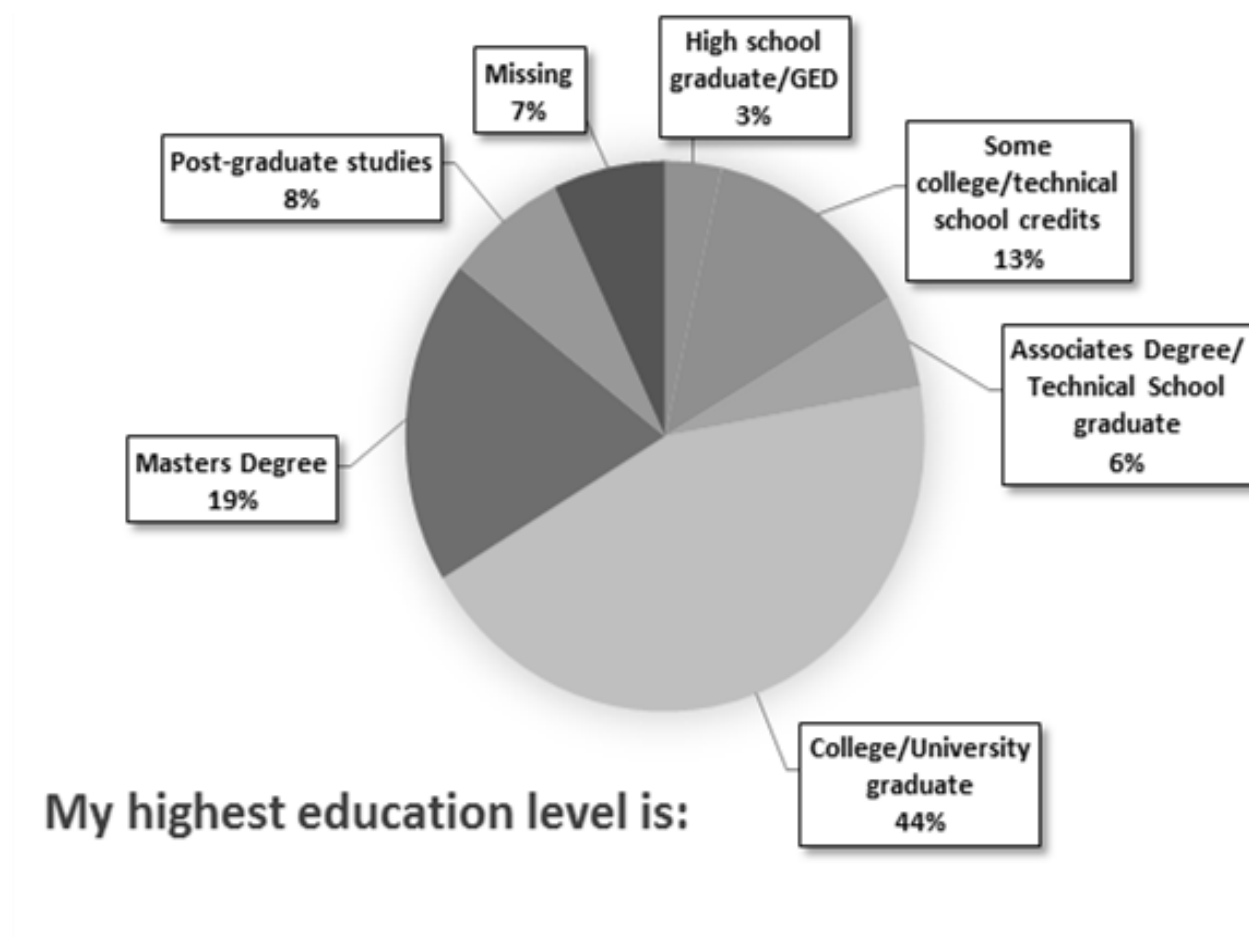
*Highest Education Level of the Interviewees* $n = 16$



Figure 10

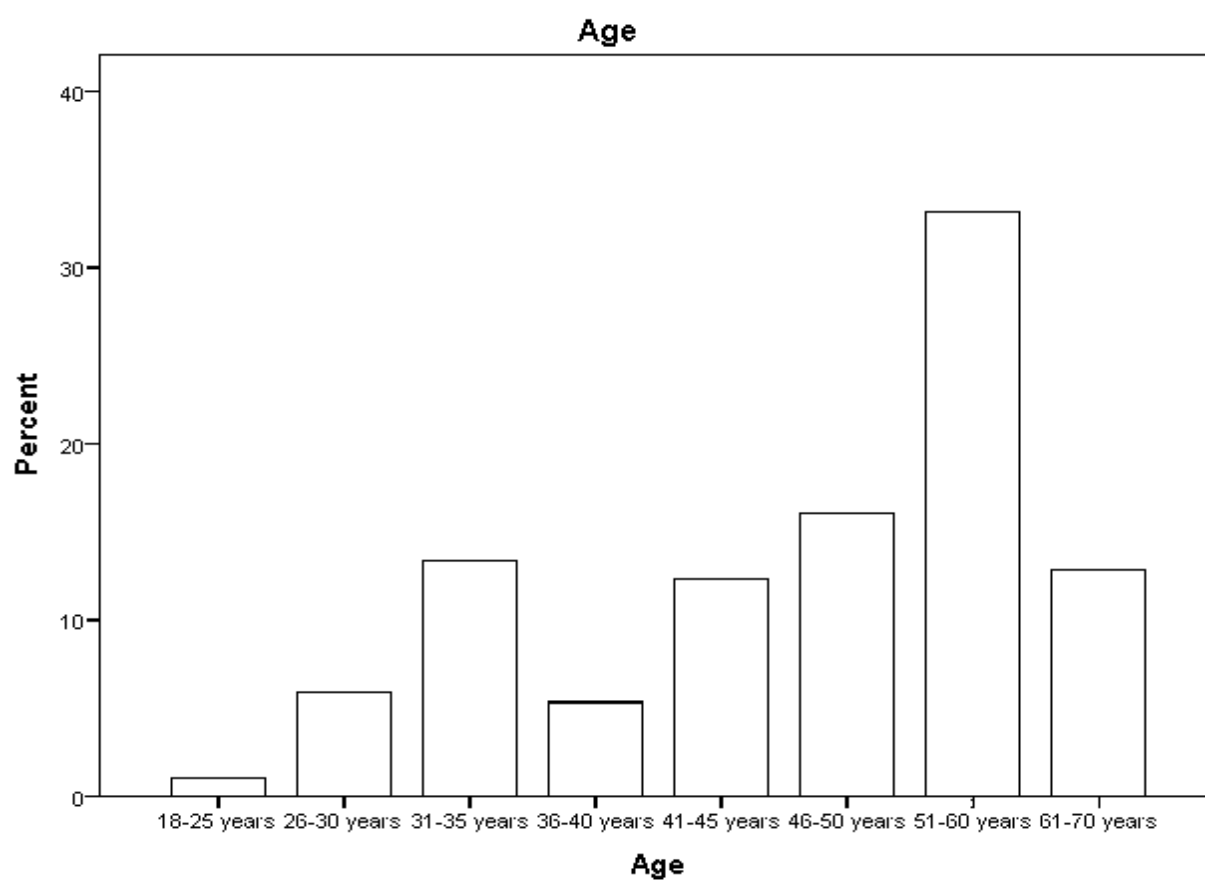
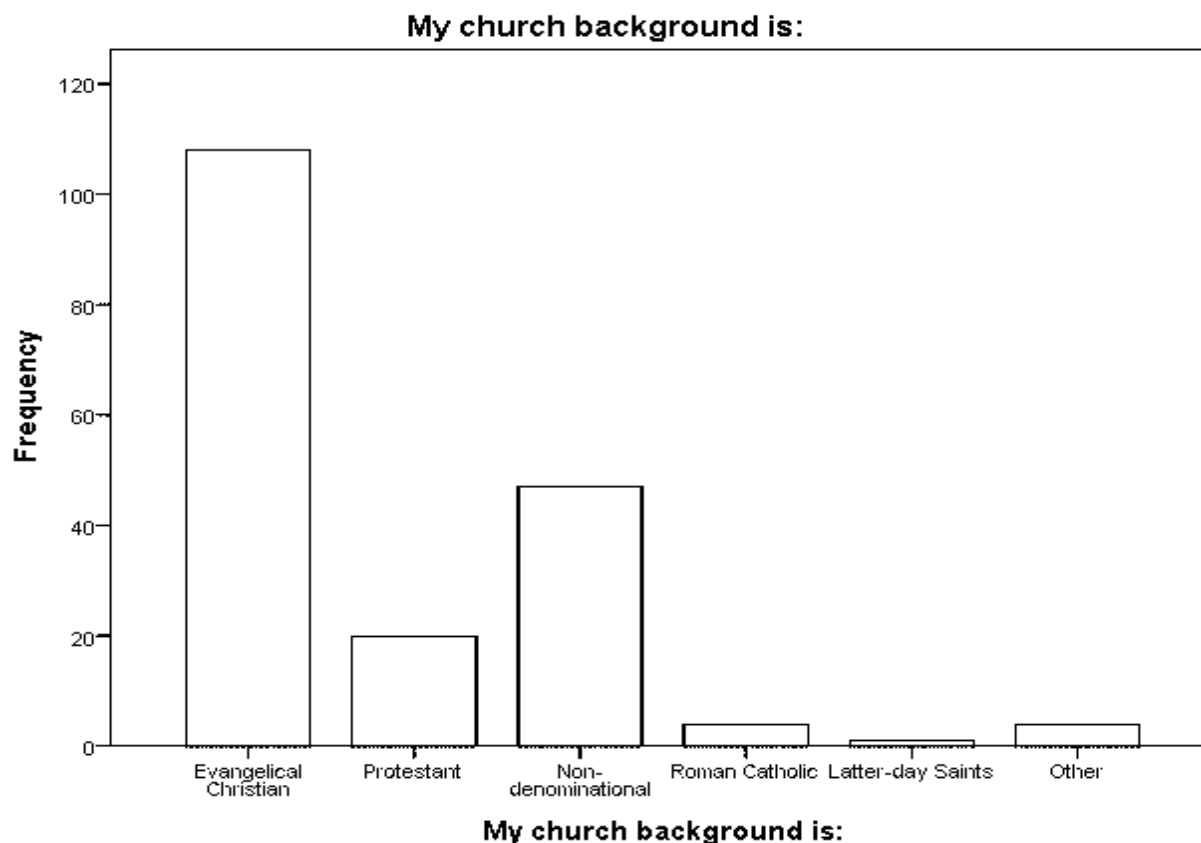
*Age of the Interviewees* $n = 16$

Figure 11

*Church Background of the Interviewees*

$n = 16$

Prior to each interview, participants were given the informed consent form (see Appendix G) to record their consent to be interviewed. Each participant was then interviewed a maximum of two times (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The first interview lasted from 45 to 75 minutes in length, with a list of questions held by the researcher (see Appendix H) to guide its direction (Conklin, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The second interview was used to clarify points, cross-check information, and was shorter in length than the first, approximately 20 to 40 minutes (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

## Analytical Methods

In descriptive research, as undertaken in this study, the primary purpose is to provide an accurate and detailed representation of the characteristics of involvement of the participants with a specific experience. According to Johnson & Christensen (2008), descriptive research normally relies on self-reporting studies like surveys, questionnaires, and interviews to collect data. This study incorporated an electronic survey, using a questionnaire with eight demographic questions, a survey with 62 Likert-type items, and an open-ended question. Follow-up interviews with 16 participants were guided by a set of semistructured questions. All of these methods sought to draw out all of the participants to self-report their experiences of transformative learning and change in conjunction with the Immersion Experience.

**Religiously confused home of origin.** A significant aspect of this study was to interview survey respondents who had self-identified as having grown up in a religiously confused home of origin and to analyze the transformative learning they had experienced after processing through the Immersion Experience. This subject has been addressed in the definition of “religious or spiritual confusion” in Chapter 1 as well as in Appendix F.

Seven of the Likert-type items in the survey (see Appendix A) were used by the researcher to determine if the participant had grown up in a religiously confused home of origin. The directly stated, Likert-type item was statement 50: “I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18).” This was stated by the participant after having processed through the Immersion Experience. The survey participant was required to self-identify as having grown up with religious confusion in order to be selected as an interviewee.

Several indirect, Likert-type items also helped identify this status:

1. Statement 21 stated, “God was more pleased with me when I performed well.”

2. Statement 23 stated, “Before taking the Immersion Experience, I believed that God was disappointed with me when I failed.”
3. Statement 26 stated, “Before taking the Immersion Experience, I felt it was important to work hard to please God.”
4. Statement 60 stated, “Rule-keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home (before age 18).”
5. Statement 64 stated, “Being critical of others was very much a part of my home (before age 18).”
6. Statement 69 stated, “Obeying God’s rules were of highest importance in my home (before age 18).”

Affirmative answers to four of six of these indirect items was used to identify the respondent as religiously confused and, therefore, eligible to be interviewed.

**Quantitative component.** Ordinal data from the Likert-type items included the number of responses for each of the 62 items, the total number of responses from each item, and the overall percentage of returns in both the “before” section (section 2) and the “after” section (section 3). Comparisons of the data were made between the responses of the participants between section 2 (before the Immersion Experience was begun) and section 3 (the current perceptions and attitudes). The data, falling into the ordinal measurement scale, were compared using mode and median for central tendency and frequencies for variability (Boone Jr. & Boone, 2012).

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is a nonparametric test used with ordinal data to determine if there is a median difference between paired observations under two different conditions on the same dependent variable (Altman, 1999; Gibbons & Chakraborti, 2011;

Sheskin, 2011). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was run to determine if there were significant differences between the participants' attitudes and beliefs before processing through the Immersion Experience and after completing the curriculum. Significance was determined at a level of  $p < .05$  (Altman, 1999; Sheskin, 2011).

Cronbach's alpha is a statistical test to estimate the internal consistency of the entire instrument's reliability (Allen & Yen, 2002; Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004; Tanner, 2012; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Cronbach's alpha needs to be applied in each use of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha determines how the Likert-type items relate to all the other items within the survey and to the survey as a whole (Tanner, 2012; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Its value is affected by several items, according to Tavakol and Dennick (2011, p. 54) as "the number of test items, item inter-relatedness, and dimensionality." Cronbach's alpha was administered to the 62 Likert-type items contained in the survey. It was also used to test each group of Likert-type items contained in the major components identified by administering a principal component analysis (PCA) on the second section of the survey measuring the effects of processing through the Immersion Experience. The PCA was reported and discussed.

**Qualitative component.** The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to develop theories, themes, and relationships among the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The qualitative data of this study encompassed two separate portions: the singular, open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts. These were analyzed and coded separately to uncover and develop common themes to assist in explaining the transformative learning and change that may have occurred in the immersion alumni (Creswell, 2007).

**Phenomenological study.** Because the 16 interviews were the primary focus of the qualitative study, their analysis will be addressed first. Phenomenological investigation is unique

in its commitment to report a participant's experience as it actually appears in a person's consciousness (Polkinghorne, 1989). A general approach to analyzing the transcripts of phenomenological interviews is summarized by Polkinghorne (1989):

1. Assemble a number of raw descriptions from a number of people who have had the same experience.
2. Analyze these descriptions with a view to extracting the common elements of the experience.
3. Ultimately create a synthesis from all of the participants' descriptions that is an accurate, clear, and articulate description of the experience. After reading the report, readers should understand better what it was like for a person to live through that experience.

A more detailed description of the methodology used can be found in Moustakas' (1994) modification of Van Kaam's (1966) method of analysis. See Figure 12 for a more detailed explanation of the procedure.

***General qualitative study.*** The singular, open-ended question near the conclusion of the survey was optional: "Describe any paradigm shifts (profound changes in perspective) that occurred in your experience of God the Father and your daily walk with Christ after processing through the Immersion Experience." The procedure used to analyze these essay responses was as follows. The first step in the analysis of the qualitative data was a preliminary exploratory analysis, which involved reading through all of the written responses and gaining a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2005).

Figure 12

*Phenomenological Methodology*

Steps	Description of Action
1. Listing and Preliminary Grouping	Record every expression relevant to the experience.
2. Reduction and Elimination	<p>Determine the significant statements and indicate those elements that are essential to the experience. These are identified with regard to two criteria:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the expression contain a moment of the experience that is required and valid for understanding the phenomenon?</li> <li>Can the expression be extracted and labeled?</li> </ol> <p>Expressions that do not meet the above criteria are eliminated. This includes overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions.</p>
3. Clustering and Arranging into themes the invariant constituents	Cluster the significant statements of the experience that relate closely into groupings or themes. These thematic labels form the core themes of the experience.
4. Validation	<p>The significant statements are checked against the complete transcription of each participant.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the statements explicitly expressed in the complete transcription?</li> <li>Are the statements compatible, if not explicitly expressed?</li> </ol> <p>If the significant statements are neither explicit nor compatible, they are discarded as not relevant.</p>
5. Construction of an Individual Textural Description	Use the themes and significant statements to construct a textural description of each participant. This includes verbatim examples from the interview. This answers the question of “what” each participant experienced.
6. Construction of a Composite Textural Description	Integrating all of the individual textural descriptions, construct a universal textural description for the entire group of participants. “What” did they collectively experience?
7. Employ Imaginative Variation	Similar to brainstorming and intuition, this step uses imagination and free association to understand the structural elements or dynamics that account for the textural description. What are the qualities that help in understanding “how” the phenomenon is experienced by another?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 8. Construction of an Individual Structural Description  | Use the textural description and imaginative variation to construct the structural description of each participant's experience. This answers the question of "how" the experience happened, reflecting on the setting and context in which the phenomenon occurred. |
| 9. Construction of a Composite Structural Description    | Integrating all of the individual structural descriptions, construct a universal structural description for the entire group of participants. "How" did they collectively experience the phenomenon?   |
| 10. Synthesize the descriptions into an Integrated Whole | Write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the composite textural and composite structural descriptions. This should capture the essence of the experience and represents the culmination of a phenomenological study.                       |

Note: Adapted from "Method or Madness: Phenomenology as Knowledge Creator," by T. A. Conklin, 2007, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 16(3), pp. 275-287, and C. Moustakas' *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 1994.

The second step was to initially code the data using open coding. This process examines the data by marking words, sentences, and paragraphs to begin sorting the various conceptual categories and themes that emerge (Creswell, 2005; B. Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Open coding led the researcher to identify sentences and phrases as a beginning to interpret the data.

Axial coding followed as the third step. Axial coding is the grouping of the emerging categories and themes from the data and showing the relationships between the categories (Creswell, 2005; B. Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The result of axial coding was that the researcher was able to identify common themes and categories expressed by the participants.

**Role of the researcher.** The researcher conducted all 16 interviews in person. The researcher hired an person who uses the Dragon 12 software professionally to transcribe the interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999).



In her discussion of a relational approach to phenomenology, Finlay (2009) states “the researcher has a responsibility to build a bridge to the co-researcher, using his or her own special awareness, skills, experience and knowledge” (p. 2). This researcher brought various roles to his research interviews: as a pastor, Army Chaplain, immersion facilitator, and researcher.

Trained for the Christian ministry, the researcher attended undergraduate studies at Biola University, majoring in Biblical Studies. Graduating from Western Seminary with a Master of Divinity degree in Pastoral Studies, the researcher planted two churches for an aggregate of eight and one-half years in the western United States. In 2011, the researcher retired as a Protestant chaplain from the U.S. Army Reserve after 31 years of ministry, having served an aggregate of seven and one-half years on active duty.

Besides preaching and pastoral counseling, the researcher has led and facilitated a variety of small groups and study groups, fostering an easy environment of interaction amongst the participants. The researcher has processed several times through the Immersion Experience during 2011–2012 as a participant. In addition, the researcher served as a facilitator of an Immersion Experience small group in 2013. Altogether, these varied experiences have given the researcher several different perspectives of understanding the small-group discipleship process. These experiences enhance the researcher’s relational approach to this phenomenological study (Finlay, 2009).

The researcher has the ability to gain the trust of the participants, as well as set them at ease through the interview process due to the researcher’s background and experiences, which includes pastoral counseling. The researcher also has the advantage of being seasoned through 63 years of life to have a perspective of maturity.

**Ethics, the protection of human rights, and approval.** Research conducted with human beings is a tremendous privilege and carries with it the responsibility for particular sensitivity to ethical issues. Regarding ethical research practice, Marshall and Rossman (2011) identified three moral principles: (a) respect for persons, or not using participants as a means to an end; (b) beneficence, or taking every reasonable caution to protect participants from any harm; and (c) justice, or sensitivity to redressing societal injustices from the past. Qualitative research practice is inherently relational and not merely procedural (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Ethical considerations must follow the study from beginning to end (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

In order to conduct research on human research participants, this researcher has completed the National Institutes of Health's web-based training course and has been certified to conduct research (see Appendix I).

**Data collection procedure.** The web-based surveys through Qualtrics were accessed by participants through a link in the e-mail message (see Appendices B, D, and E) sent out to the entire pool of 850 alumni of the Immersion Experience (Dillman et al., 2009). The Aphasis Group Ministries has been primarily focused in the western United States. Alumni of the Immersion Experience in this area number 850 participants, providing an adequate pool of potential participants from which to draw (Merriam, 2009). Interviewees who volunteered were solicited at the conclusion of the survey.

The 16 actual interviewees were selected by the panel of experts at Aphasis Group Ministries' headquarters. The researcher contacted those selected and clarified their voluntary involvement in the study (see Appendix J).

A small, Sony, digital, handheld recording device was used to record the interviews to enhance the research's validity (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Riessman, 2008). Permission to record the interviews was obtained before the sessions via the informed consent form (see Appendix G). Interviews took place in a mutually comfortable private or semiprivate setting, ensuring everyone's safety and respecting the rights and confidentiality of the participants (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kvale, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). There was no remuneration for participating in this study. For those interviewees who were met with face-to-face, an offer was extended to purchase them refreshment as a thank-you for their donated time. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher thanked the participants and handed them contact information for the researcher and his major professor (see Appendix K).

**Instruments.** A paper questionnaire of demographic information (see Appendix L) was obtained by the researcher before the actual interview. The interview protocol was designed with semistructured, open-ended questions (see Appendix H), exploring the participants' experience of the Immersion Experience, their family of origin, Christian experience, and any subsequent changes in their lives (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

### **Limitations**

The majority of the Immersion Experience alumni are Caucasian from the western United States. While Aphesis Group Ministries is currently expanding into the Orient, this study generally will not reflect the rich insights of Christians from this part of the world. The educational level of many of the alumni is at least that of a high school graduate or the equivalent, with many having taken courses at the university level. Up to four years may have passed since the alumni may have completed the Immersion Experience, previously entitled the "Aphesis Group Experience." This may result in some memory loss of the specifics of the

process. The Immersion Experience curriculum does request one to three hours of homework each week as well as some supplemental reading, which might make it difficult for the less educated. The results of this study may be limited in generalization to other ethnic groups in Western culture, as well as to those living in other cultures (Wolcott, 2001).

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Introduction

This chapter will present the data collected in the course of conducting this research project. The information came from two sources, but from three trajectories. The first source of data was a survey administered to 850 participants of the Immersion Experience. The survey included four types of information for the researcher: demographic information, 62 Likert-type items, a qualitative question, and a request for volunteers to be personally interviewed. The second source of data was 16 qualitative interviews conducted and compiled into a phenomenological study.

**Research questions.** Four research questions guided this study. They are as follows:

1. What impact does growing up in a religiously confused home (home of origin) have on Christ followers in regard to fully experiencing God's love in their daily lives?
2. Is there a perception of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults having processed through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience?
3. What are the believers' instinctive responses (natural or acquired tendencies) to unexpected stress and prolonged pain (emotional, relational, physical, or spiritual), and how is this demonstrated in critical relationships with God, self, and significant personal relationships?
4. How do Christ followers view God, self, and others, and what impact does this have on their transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience?

The data forming this study come from three different trajectories. These will be examined in three sections that follow.

### **Survey Results: A Quantitative Study**

The survey constructed by the researcher sought to determine if people processing through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience were able to encounter transformative learning. Therefore, the survey was divided into two sections: before and after. Each section contained 31 virtually identical Likert-type items measuring a participant's beliefs and attitudes both before and after taking the Immersion Experience.

The value of a pretest compared against a posttest was considered but discarded for several reasons. First, there was a difficulty with meeting the 22-lesson time length needed and the time constraint of this study. Courses in the United States typically begin either in September, finishing up in March of the following year, or in January, completing in May or June. Second, recent alumni may not fully embrace the implications of the process until several months have passed. Finally, the most significant reason against a pretest is that most participants experience measurable shifts in their understanding and self-perceptions during the length of the process to render a pretest invalid. For example, a recent participant was overheard talking with the lead pastor and commenting, "But I would have told you before that I *trusted* God!" She was experiencing a paradigm shift midcourse in her understanding of God and His work in her life. To have attempted to evaluate her attitudes prior to the immersion process would have been largely meaningless.

Hence, the best solution was to have alumni record their attitudes and beliefs held prior to processing through the Immersion Experience, then to identify their attitudes and beliefs after

immersion. Some of these alumni were removed from the process as much as four years. The themes addressed in the Immersion Experience are listed in Appendix M.

**Survey response rate.** The web-based survey was sent electronically three separate times via Qualtrics to 850 Immersion Experience alumni. Completed surveys were received from July 22, 2013, to October 22, 2013. It was started 187 times but was completed by 172 participants for a 20% response rate. A higher response rate was desired, but prior research indicated that web-based surveys typically acquire a lower response rate than paper-based surveys (Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2008; Shih & Fan, 2008). Zhou and Pinkleton (2012, p. 818) stated, “Although low cooperation rates are not ideal, they do not automatically skew survey responses beyond tolerable limits.”

**Tests administered.** The entire 62-item questionnaire had a very high level of internal consistency as determined by a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.901. Recommended values are 0.7 or higher ( DeVellis, 2003; Kline, 2010).

The Wilcoxon signed–rank test for each pair of Likert-type items in the questionnaire, or 31 pairs, was used to determine if there were changes over time between the stated attitudes and beliefs. Appendix N shows the significance and Appendix O demonstrates the change in mean for the specific scores. Twenty-eight of the 31 items showed significant change. The three that did not were all historical items related to the participants’ home of origin before age 18; for example, “I believe I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18)” is not an item that would be expected to change as a result of processing through the Immersion Experience.

A frequency distribution was also administered to the 31 pairs of items in the questionnaire. Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 show the results of the frequency distribution in related groupings or components. The elements thought to be most helpful in the analysis are shown in

the tables and include the number of responses, percentages, and the difference in mean scores. Also, the qualitative portions, which distinguished between the responses of men and women, were recorded in the frequency distribution tables.

Finally, a principal component analysis was run on the 31 Likert-type items in the “after” section of the questionnaire. This was strategic in that this study sought to determine the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience. The second section of the survey had a high level of internal consistency as shown by a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.798.

These responses were subjected to a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) using ones as prior communality estimates. The principal axis method was used to extract the components, and this was followed by a varimax (orthogonal) rotation.

The first eight components displayed eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (Kaiser, 1960), as displayed in Appendix P. However, the scree plot suggested that only the first four components were meaningful (Cattell, 1966) as shown in Appendix Q. When the percent of variance was considered, the first four components each accounted for  $\geq 5\%$  of the total variance. Looking at Appendix R, the first component alone accounted for 25% of the total variance, the second component accounted for 11%, the third accounted for 7%, and the fourth accounted for 5%. Combined, components 1, 2, 3, and 4 accounted for 49.3% of the total variance, which was less than the minimum ideal of 70% (Kim & Mueller, 1978).

Questionnaire items and corresponding factor loadings are presented in Appendix R. In interpreting the rotated factor pattern, an item was said to load on a given component if the factor loading was .400 or greater for that component and was less than .400 for the others (Hatcher, 1994; Stevens, 1986). Using these criteria, seven items were found to load on the first component, which was subsequently labeled “God Values Me.” Seven items loaded on the



second component, which was labeled “Validating Emotions in a Trusting Community.” Six items loaded on the third component, which was labeled “God the task master.” The fourth component consisted of five items, which was labeled “Religious Confusion.” The order in which the items are listed in each table is significant, indicating the factor loadings are listed from highest to the lowest. Six items did not load sufficiently on the four chosen components and, as a result, were eliminated from further consideration in this study.

The variables that loaded on a given component seemed to share the same conceptual meaning; therefore, this interpretability criteria was a strong indication that the four-component solution (see Table 2) was best (Hatcher, 1994). The first two components, being the strongest, were both positive with appropriate labels. Components 3 and 4 were negative with equally appropriate labels. The answers of all of the items in the latter two components were reversed before scoring them because there were no negatively stated items in the survey.

Table 2

*Results of the Principal Component Analysis*

Four Component Analysis	Number of Items Loading on this Component	% of Total Variance Explained	Internal Reliability/ Cronbach's alpha
God Values Me	7	25.7%	0.879
Validating Emotions in a Trusting Community	7	11.2%	0.758
God the Task Master <sub>a</sub>	6	7.3%	0.814
Religious Confusion <sub>a</sub>	5	5.2%	0.748
Unused questions failing to load sufficiently on a component	6	n/a	n/a
Totals	31	49.3%	n/a

<sub>a</sub>: All answers reversed as there were no negative statements

***God values me.*** This first component accounted for 25.7% of the variance in the survey, and therefore was the most significant and strongest component. It also had a very high level of internal consistency as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.879. For the items included, see Table 3, where the responses of strongly agree and agree have been combined as SA/A and the values of strongly disagree and disagree combined as SD/D. The N designates neither agree nor disagree.

Table 3

*God Values Me*

Statement		SA/A	%	N	%	SD/D	%	$\bar{x}$
1. God likes me.	Male							
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q 13	59	72.8	10	12.3	12	2.04
	<i>n</i> = 76	After, Q49	72	94.7	3	3.9	1	1.49
		Mean Difference						+0.55
	Female							
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q13	66	66.0	25	25.0	9	2.16
2. I feel that God delights in me as an individual.	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q49	90	93.8	6	6.3	0	1.50
		Mean Difference						+0.66
	Male							
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q29	32	39.5	14	17.3	35	43.2
	<i>n</i> = 77	After, Q45	76	98.7	1	1.3	0	0.0
		Mean Difference						+1.61
3. I feel that I am of great worth.	Female							
	<i>n</i> = 98	Before, Q29	29	29.6	28	28.6	41	41.8
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q45	93	96.9	3	3.1	0	0.0
		Mean Difference						+1.67
	Male							
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q14	42	51.9	15	18.5	24	29.6
4. I experience God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.	<i>n</i> = 81	After, Q55	76	98.7	1	1.3	0	0.0
		Mean Difference						+1.19
	Female							
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q14	34	34.0	27	27.0	39	39.0
	<i>n</i> = 94	After, Q55	86	91.5	8	8.5	0	0.0
		Mean Difference						+1.52
4. I experience God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.	Male							
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q35	27	33.8	20	25.0	33	41.3
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q73	67	85.9	9	11.5	2	2.6
		Mean Difference						+1.16
	Female							
	<i>n</i> = 98	Before, Q35	35	35.7	25	25.5	38	38.8
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q73	77	80.2	16	16.7	3	3.1
		Mean Difference						+1.10

Statement			Sa/A	%	N	%	SD/D	%	$\bar{x}$
5. I am worth knowing and having a relationship with.	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q22	48	59.3	20	24.7	13	16.0	2.41
	<i>n</i> = 81	After, Q62	74	96.1	1	1.3	2	2.6	1.56
		Mean Difference							+0.85
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q22	52	52.0	24	24.0	24	24.0	2.66
6. God is more interested in who I am than what I do.	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q62	90	93.8	5	5.2	1	1.0	1.59
		Mean Difference							+1.07
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q27	40	50.0	15	18.8	25	31.3	2.64
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q72	74	94.9	3	3.8	1	1.3	1.54
		Mean Difference							+1.10
7. Pain is a gift.	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q27	53	53.5	15	15.2	31	31.3	2.71
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q72	93	96.9	2	2.1	1	1.0	1.48
		Mean Difference							+1.23
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q24	27	33.3	16	19.8	38	46.9	3.20
	<i>n</i> = 75	After, Q63	63	84.0	11	14.7	1	1.3	1.84
		Mean Difference							+1.36
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q24	33	33.0	23	23.0	44	44.0	3.24
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q63	81	84.4	15	15.6	0	0.0	1.82
		Mean Difference							+1.42

Items 1–6 clearly spoke of God having a relationship with individuals (1, 2, 4, and 5) and of their value in His eyes (3, 5, and 6). Item 1, “God likes me,” had the least mean difference or change in thinking by the respondents at +0.55. The difference in the mean scores between men and women was negligible on all but two items, 3 and 5, which both addressed personal worth in God’s eyes. This indicated that women may have a more difficult time appreciating their worth to God.

Item 7, “Pain is gift,” may not seem to align with the other six items in this component. When people deeply feel God’s love for them and how valued they are, they can trust God to

bring good out of the pain in life that they experience. The mean score difference of both genders indicated they finished immersion with a greatly increased positive understanding of the meaning of pain in their lives.

***Validating emotions in a trusting community.*** This second component accounted for 11.2% of the variance in the survey, and therefore was the second most significant one. It also had a high level of internal consistency as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.758 amongst the seven items. For the items included, see Table 4, where the responses of strongly agree and agree have been combined as SA/A, and the values of strongly disagree and disagree combined as SD/D. The N designates neither agree nor disagree.

Table 4

*Validating Emotions in a Trusting Community*

Statement			SA/A	%	N	%	SD/D	%	$\bar{x}$
1. I feel that being part of a safe community is critical to my emotional and spiritual well-being.	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q40	39	48.8	21	26.3	20	24.1	2.71
	<i>n</i> = 99	After, Q75	71	91.0	3	3.8	4	5.1	1.74
		Mean Difference							+0.97
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q40	58	58.6	20	20.2	21	21.3	2.59
2. I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends is critical to my joy and peace.	<i>n</i> = 94	After, Q75	88	93.6	3	3.2	3	3.2	1.64
		Mean Difference							+0.95
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q33	38	46.9	18	22.2	25	30.9	2.85
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q46	74	94.9	0	0.0	4	5.1	1.64
		Mean Difference							+1.21
3. Trust is very important in my relationships with others.	<i>n</i> = 98	Before, Q33	47	48.0	19	19.4	32	32.7	2.85
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q46	85	88.5	6	6.3	5	5.2	1.63
		Mean Difference							+1.22
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q42	59	73.8	15	18.8	6	7.5	2.20
	<i>n</i> = 76	After, Q57	72	94.7	3	3.9	1	1.3	1.50
4. I believe that resolving my past relational hurt and pain with others is critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, and joy.		Mean Difference							+0.70
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 97	Before, Q42	68	70.1	18	18.6	11	11.3	2.25
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q57	94	97.9	2	2.1	0	0.0	1.41
		Mean Difference							+0.84
	Male								
4. I believe that resolving my past relational hurt and pain with others is critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, and joy.	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q25	31	38.8	23	28.8	26	32.6	2.91
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q47	67	85.9	4	5.1	7	8.9	1.87
		Mean Difference							+1.04
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q25	55	55.6	21	21.2	23	23.2	2.58
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q47	87	90.6	3	3.1	6	6.2	1.65
	Mean Difference							+0.93	

Statement			SA/A	%	N	%	S/D	%	$\bar{x}$
5. Trust is critical to my well-being.	Male	Before, Q39	54	67.5	7	8.8	19	23.8	2.48
		After, Q48	75	97.4	0	0.0	2	2.6	1.00
		Mean Difference							+1.48
	Female	Before, Q39	56	57.7	22	22.7	19	19.6	2.57
		After, Q48	92	96.8	2	2.1	1	1.1	1.44
		Mean Difference							+1.13
6. God is emotional.	Male	Before, Q34	51	63.8	18	22.5	11	13.8	2.33
		After, Q70	73	93.6	3	3.8	2	2.6	1.00
		Mean Difference							+1.33
	Female	Before, Q34	56	56.6	27	27.3	16	16.2	2.51
		After, Q70	87	90.6	8	8.3	1	1.0	1.53
		Mean Difference							+0.98
7. My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.	Male	Before, Q31	27	33.3	25	30.9	29	35.8	3.04
		After, Q66	44	53.8	16	20.5	20	24.6	2.58
		Mean Difference							+0.46
	Female	Before, Q31	41	42.7	20	20.8	35	36.4	2.96
		After, Q66	55	58.5	19	20.2	20	21.3	2.45
		Mean Difference							+0.51

The items in this component combined several themes: safe community (items 1 and 2), trust (items 3 and 5), forgiveness (item 4), and emotions (items 6 and 7). The respective order also indicates the factor loadings from highest to lowest in this component. Items 1 and 2 show to their emotional and spiritual well-being. In order to establish a safe group, trust (items 3 and 5) is essential. No one is anxious to have personal struggles gossiped about by fellow group members. Item 5, “Trust is critical to my well-being,” showed a significant mean difference increase for men versus the women. Men made a stronger shift to agree that trust was important to them.

Items 6 and 7 addressed the importance of emotions. If people are involved in a safe group where they are able to be vulnerable with their deepest issues of life, they need to feel safe to express their true emotions as they honestly share. Men experienced a significantly greater positive shift in their understanding that God is emotional, item 6. Item 7 was “My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.” Even though there was a significant positive shift in attitude regarding this item, the after scores are noticeably lower than the rest of the items. In agreement with this statement were 53.8% of the men and 58.5% of the women.

Item 4 addressed forgiveness. In a trusting community, people can acknowledge their wrongs and be forgiven as well as extend forgiveness. Therefore, the seven variables appeared to share the same conceptual meaning validating emotions in a trusting community.

***God the task master.*** This third component accounted for 7.3% of the variance in the survey. It had a high level of internal consistency, as shown by a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.814. For the items included, see Table 5, where the responses of strongly agree and agree have been combined as SA/A and the values of strongly disagree and disagree combined as SD/D. The *N* designates neither agree nor disagree. The answers for all six variables were reversed for scoring purposes.

These six variables addressed two related themes: pain and performance. Items 1 and 5 dealt with pain as a consequence of God judging one’s mistakes. The respondents made a major movement to disagree with these statements. However, roughly one third of both genders did not disagree that “pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.”



Table 5

*God the Task Master*

Statement			SD/D	%	<i>N</i>	%	SA/A	%	$\bar{x}$
1. Pain feels like God is punishing me.	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q17	38	47.5	18	22.5	24	30.0	2.70
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q51	65	83.3	9	11.5	4	5.1	1.94
		Mean Difference							+0.76
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q17	50	50.0	27	27.0	23	23.0	2.66
2. I feel it is important to work hard to please God.	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q51	78	81.3	11	11.5	7	7.3	2.00
		Mean Difference							+0.66
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q26	14	17.3	18	22.2	49	60.5	3.58
	<i>n</i> = 77	After, Q65	59	76.6	10	13.0	8	10.4	2.10
		Mean Difference							+1.48
3. God is more pleased with me when I perform well.	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q26	20	20.2	21	21.2	58	58.6	3.54
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q65	81	84.4	12	12.5	3	3.1	1.88
		Mean Difference							+1.66
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q21	18	22.5	7	8.8	55	68.8	3.63
4. I believe that God is disappointed with me when I fail.	<i>n</i> = 76	After, Q56	60	78.9	8	10.5	8	10.5	2.11
		Mean Difference							+1.52
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q21	13	13.1	7	7.1	79	79.8	3.87
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q56	73	76.0	13	13.5	10	10.4	2.05
		Mean Difference							+1.82
4. I believe that God is disappointed with me when I fail.	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q23	15	18.5	13	16.0	53	65.4	3.65
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q59	58	74.4	8	10.3	12	15.4	2.15
		Mean Difference							+1.50
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q23	22	22.0	16	16.0	62	62.0	3.51
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q59	68	70.8	18	18.8	10	10.4	2.15
		Mean Difference							+1.36

Statement			SA/A	%	N	%	SD/D	%	$\bar{x}$
5. Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q20	14	17.5	8	10.0	58	72.5	3.74
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q58	53	67.9	12	15.4	13	16.7	2.38
		Mean Difference							+1.36
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 100	Before, Q20	22	22.0	15	15.0	63	63.0	3.59
6. I feel that "I am what I do."	<i>n</i> = 95	After, Q58	62	65.3	19	20.0	14	14.7	2.31
		Mean Difference							+1.28
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q18	21	26.3	9	11.3	50	62.6	3.43
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q53	70	89.7	4	5.1	4	5.1	1.81
		Mean Difference							+1.62
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q18	16	16.2	18	18.2	65	65.7	3.65
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q53	83	86.5	9	9.4	4	4.2	1.91
		Mean Difference							+1.74

The other four (items 2, 3, 4, and 6) all dealt with a person's performance in life. The respondents made a significant move to disagree with all four variables. The only significant gender difference was on item 3: "God is more pleased with me when I perform well." While the genders ended up virtually equivalent, the women agreed with the statement 10% greater than the men prior to immersion.

If people believe that their performance is of utmost importance in God's eyes, then pain encountered in life will seem a natural consequence of not reaching the necessary standard. God will be seen as judge and task master.

**Religious confusion.** This fourth component accounted for 5.2% of the variance in the survey. It had a high level of internal consistency, as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.748. For the items included, see Table 6, where the responses of strongly agree and agree have been combined as SA/A and the values of strongly disagree and disagree combined as SD/D. The N designates neither agree nor disagree. The answers for all five variables were reversed for

scoring purposes. All of the items made a value judgment on the respondent's home of origin before age 18. As such, they were historical assessments and were not expected to shift much between the two sections of the survey. Three items (1, 3, and 5) were not significant in the Wilcoxon signed-rank test assessment, the only three such items in the entire survey.

This fourth component significantly placed religious confusion in one's home of origin (item 2) in conjunction with dysfunction (item 4) and several negative home behaviors: rule keeping (item 1), being critical of others (item 3), and the priority of obeying God's rules (item 5). The only significant shifts in perception by both genders was that of a personal realization that their homes of origin were religiously confused (item 2) and dysfunctional (item 4).

Table 6

*Religious Confusion*

Statement			SD/D	%	N	%	SA/A	%	$\bar{x}$
1. Rule keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home (before age 18).	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q38	21	26.3	17	21.3	42	52.6	3.39
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q60	25	32.1	13	16.7	40	51.2	3.29
		Mean Difference							+0.10
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 98	Before, Q38	19	19.4	11	11.2	68	69.4	3.80
2. I believe I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18).	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q60	17	17.7	12	12.5	67	69.8	3.88
		Mean Difference							-0.08
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q16	28	34.6	13	16.0	40	49.4	3.23
	<i>n</i> = 76	After, Q50	17	22.4	9	11.8	50	65.7	3.72
		Mean Difference							-0.42
3. Being critical of others was very much a part of my home (before age 18).	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q16	28	28.3	11	11.1	60	60.6	3.56
	<i>n</i> = 95	After, Q50	18	18.9	11	11.6	66	69.5	3.88
		Mean Difference							-0.32
	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q41	21	26.3	6	7.5	53	66.3	3.58
4. I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q64	18	23.1	7	9.0	53	67.0	3.56
		Mean Difference							-0.02
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q41	13	13.1	13	13.1	73	73.8	4.08
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q64	16	16.7	6	6.3	74	77.0	4.10
		Mean Difference							-0.02
4. I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 81	Before, Q30	28	34.6	10	12.3	43	53.1	3.27
	<i>n</i> = 77	After, Q67	17	22.1	9	11.7	51	66.3	3.60
		Mean Difference							-0.33
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q30	20	20.2	9	9.1	70	70.7	3.86
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q67	17	17.7	3	3.1	76	79.2	4.11
		Mean Difference							-0.25

Statement			SA/A	%	N	%	SD/D	%	$\bar{x}$
5. Obeying God's rules were of highest importance in my home (before age 18).	Male								
	<i>n</i> = 80	Before, Q43	33	41.3	12	15.0	35	43.8	3.04
	<i>n</i> = 78	After, Q69	30	38.5	19	24.4	29	37.1	3.08
		Mean Difference							-0.04
	Female								
	<i>n</i> = 99	Before, Q43	35	35.4	23	23.2	41	41.4	3.21
	<i>n</i> = 96	After, Q69	34	35.4	18	18.8	44	45.8	3.25
		Mean Difference							-0.04

**Conclusion.** The criteria for arriving at a four-component solution are as follows.

Utilizing Hatcher's (1994) fourfold criteria of determining the number of meaningful components to retain, the decision was made to reduce the eight possible components to four. Besides having eight variables with an eigenvalue  $\geq 1$ , the scree plot made an obvious break after four components. The weakest element was that only 49.3% of the total variance was accounted for in this four-component solution. The preference was to have 70% accounted for in this criterion.

The fourth criterion was interpretability, arguably the most important of the four (Hatcher, 1994). With each of the four components loading five to seven variables apiece, this exceeded the minimum of three per component. The discussion sought to demonstrate that the variables loaded on each component shared the same conceptual meaning. Additionally, the variables that loaded on each component appeared to measure different constructs from each other without overlapping. The rotated component matrix indicated simple structure and its "two characteristics: (a) most of the variables had relatively high factor loadings on only one component and near zero loadings on the others components, and (b) most components had relatively high factor loadings for some variables and near-zero loadings for the remaining variables (Hatcher, 1994, p. 27). Six items from the survey were eliminated from this discussion

due, in part, to this consideration. Close calls where the researcher decided to retain a contested item were component 1 (items 4 and 6), component 2 (item 6), and component 3 (item 6). Three of these contested items had the lowest loading on their respective component, but were retained because of their compatibility with the other items in their component.

The four components that emerged from the principal component analysis served as the main divisions in subject matter for the survey results. The first two components consisted of 14 items, accounted for 36.9% of the variance in the survey, and were positive overall values.

“God values me” was the first and most significant component, accounting for 25.7% of the total variance in the survey. All seven Likert-type items demonstrated significant positive change in attitude as a result of immersion. Four of the items referred to God valuing the individual. The weakest item stated “pain is a gift,” and showed a strong positive change of attitude by both genders. The third subsubject addressed personal worth with two items (items 3 and 5). The women made a noticeably greater improvement than the men in both items. This indicated that the women had a lower view of their personal worth when they entered immersion. However, the genders were roughly equivalent in their attitudes after completing the process.

The second component was “Validating emotions in a trusting community.” There was a significant positive shift in all seven items. However, men made a stronger shift to agree that trust was important to their well-being than the women. Two of the items dealt with the role of emotions in life and were significant in their findings. Regarding God as emotional, men made a stronger positive shift in the beliefs than did the women. The lowest loading item in the component was item 7: “My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.” Significant was that both genders after immersion had noticeably lower agreement scores than

with most other items in the survey: 53.8% of the men and 58.5% of the women. There was a sizable group that did not agree with this statement.

“God the task master” was the third component, containing six items and accounting for 7.3% of the variance in the survey. All of the statement answers were reversed before scoring them as no negative statements were introduced in the survey. There were important shifts in attitudes to disagree with all six items by both genders. Two items dealt with pain in life. Regarding the statement “Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes,” roughly one third of both genders did not disagree with it. The other four statements addressed the felt need to perform in life to be valued. All four witnessed significant shifts in attitudes to disagree with them by both genders. Item 3, “God is more pleased with me when I perform well,” was noteworthy in that before immersion, the women agreed with the statement 10% more than the men.

The last component is simply entitled “religious confusion” and contained five items that accounted for 5.2% of the variance in the survey. All five were historical, referring to the home of origin before the age of 18. Three of the items (1, 3, and 5) showed insignificant change according to the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The two items that were significant, but not indicating a large degree of change, were related to the realization that the participants’ homes were religiously confused and dysfunctional. Regarding gender differences, the women’s perception of both rule keeping being the highest value and being critical of others was noticeably higher than the men.

### **Optional Survey Question: A Qualitative Study**

The survey included an optional essay question: “Describe any paradigm shifts (profound changes in perspective) that occurred in your experience of God the Father and your daily walk

with Christ after processing through the Immersion Experience.” Of the 172 respondents who completed the survey, 106 answered this question for a response rate of 62%. Some answers were one or two lines long; others were several paragraphs in length. These responses were gathered from July 22, 2013, through October 22, 2013. Table 7 shows the results.

Table 7

*Survey Optional Essay Responses*

Type of Change	Men (n = 50)		Women (n = 56)		Total (n = 106)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
No Change	4	8%	2	4%	6	5.7%
Some Change	6	12%	9	16%	15	14.1%
Paradigm Shift	40	80%	45	80%	85	80.2%

Note: Responses to the question, “Describe any paradigm shifts (profound changes in perspective) that occurred in your experience of God the Father and your daily walk with Christ after processing through the Immersion Experience.”

Three categories were created to classify the responses: no change, some change, or paradigm shift. In reading through the comments, it is important to note that *The Aphesis Group Experience* was renamed the Immersion Experience in the fall of 2013. The last date that the participant went through the process impacted the term they use, either Aphesis or immersion. The comments were also sorted by gender to see if there was any significant difference in the experiences reported.

**No change.** Six respondents indicated that they experienced no change after having gone through immersion. A woman wrote, “Any changes have come as a result of church and friends. There was no benefit from this class for me. I’ve had therapy, which made the subject matter very basic.” A man wrote, “I experienced the ‘paradigm’ shift at conversion over 20 years ago.



Sanctification is the process of maturity I have been engaged in over the last five years.

Immersion was part of that process.”

**Some change.** To be placed in the “some change” category, a person indicated some positive results but no profound changes. One man wrote, “Because I grew up in a healthy home, there were not any profound changes in perspective. Even so, there were positive changes in my perspectives on pain (as a gift), emotions, and resolving conflict.” A woman wrote, “I understand God more for what He really is rather than religiously believe Him as before.” A man wrote, “Aphesis reaffirmed many things I already knew and [things] Christ had been continually doing in my life. Aphesis offered some tools and encouragement to help in the ongoing process.” A woman wrote, “I am less hard on myself. I am more empathetic to others.”

**Paradigm shift.** Categorizing the responses was admittedly a subjective exercise. In order for the response to be classified as a “paradigm shift,” respondents needed to communicate that they had experienced a change in life perspective. Some other indications were deeply feeling God’s unconditional love, feeling tremendous worth as a person in God’s sight without being based on performance, or experiencing a deep sense of community in one’s immersion group that evoked transparency and vulnerability. Because four categories were developed to help classify the survey data using principal component analysis, they served this exercise as well. The respondents’ comments overlapped in various areas, depending on the personal impact of the Immersion Experience process on the individuals. The four categories were God cares for me, validating emotions in a trusting community, God the task master, and religious confusion. In the following quotes, the only emphasis added by the researcher is the italics to give greater visibility to key phrases and demonstrate that they fit into the appointed category. The 14 quotes

that follow, six by men and eight by women, should give an accurate impression of the perceptions of many alumni of the Immersion Experience.

*God cares for me.* Throughout the stories that follow in all of the categories, there was a common thread that tied them all together. When Christians deeply feel God's unconditional love and delight in them, the world and their lives are different.

Describing it as an ongoing process, a man who had completed his first Immersion Experience reported:

I realized *how much God loved me* and how important I was to him, and that the shame, guilt, and my doubt of God were instinctive from the fall. God moved in my life in an incredible way to show me *He loved me and that I could truly trust Him*. The rest I am working on, and I will be going through immersion again in September [2013]. Thank you for *this wonderful life changing class!*

Keying in on God's unconditional love, a woman described her transforming experience in straightforward terms:

I now believe that *God is emotional*, that *pain is a gift*, that *emotions are an indicator of what I really believe*, that *the Father loves me deeply and unconditionally just as I am*, and that I have been adopted into a healthy, functional family and can live that reality. I look to God to tell me who I am and what my value and worth are, and to no one else! *These truths have sunk into my heart and have transformed how I view myself.*

A woman who had facilitated several Immersion Experience groups spoke of a special relationship she now has with her heavenly Father:

Aphesis revealed not only the truth about how I felt and what I believed, but gave me great hope and a new realization of *my Good Daddy's love for me* even in the midst of my

sin. Each time I facilitate a group, another layer of the deep wounds is revealed, and I come away realizing at a new level both my brokenness and *the incredible love, even delight, that God has for me*. The way that I deal with conflict within my family has dramatically changed to a healthier perspective. It used to be my first reaction to retreat, but now I try to step back and look at why I react the way I do and to address issues with my children. I still avoid conflict, I still fight the lies about my worth, and there are times when I struggle feeling loved even by God, *but this is no fairy-tale life, and I know that struggles are a part of life and necessary to bring me back to "Daddy"* so that I can understand even *more of His love*. The Immersion Experience has brought me back to what looks more like *the childlike faith of my youth*.

What comes through strongly in this sampling of testimonies is the powerful impact made by a relationship with God the Father of being overwhelmed by His love and delight.

***Validating emotions in a trusting community.*** When disappointments, trials, and failures threaten to engulf people, they need a safe place to honestly express how they feel—not judged—and cared for in the midst of difficulties.

Realizing the impact of a safe, nonjudgmental small group, this man shared his supportive experience:

Seeing just how much I was *shaped by—and still reacting to—my family of origin*, and still afraid to let people see me because I would be *ashamed of who and what I am*, when I opened up and shared that anyway, *I received love, support, and compassion*. That's a whole new experience for me.

Referring to the vulnerable details of her life story in her Life Map, this woman told of her impressions:

*I am so deeply loved by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in spite of how I feel, how I perform, or the mistakes I have made. Processing my Life Map with my safe group was very healing, and I see the importance of sharing with those we trust. I see that in my pain, I grew the most in my faith.*

A man reflected on the insights he received about the value and the rightful place of one's emotions in navigating life's challenges:

God has had me on a journey for some time, showing me how *I had disconnected emotionally to protect myself*. The Immersion Experience really helped me to understand *the God-given value of emotions*. The phrase that has just resonated with me is: "*Our emotions do not authenticate the truth, but they do authenticate what we believe about the truth.*" Additionally, through the process, I was *able to finally grieve my childhood* and not feel like I was dishonoring my parents.

In a similar fashion, this woman discussed her former belief that emotions could not be trusted because they were suspect:

*Emotions are useful* to show us what is really happening inside of our hearts. I used to think that emotions could not be trusted, so being emotional was NOT a good thing. I realize now that *God delights in me all the time*, regardless of what I do. I feel *secure in His love*.

**God as task master.** The issues that appeared in this category were performance with the resulting feelings of failure and worthlessness.

Viewing her relationship with God as one of shame, fear, and distrust, this woman glowed with her story of transformation:

The Immersion Experience *totally transformed my relationship with God*. Before, my relationship with God was *a shame-based relationship*. I felt it was very important to perform, but *I was deeply aware of my inability to perform well enough to please Him*. I was *living in constant shame before God*, no matter how well I performed. *Even though I strived hard to perform well, I knew it was never good enough*. Before, I had a head knowledge of the gospel: I could intellectually understand and explain the gospel. But it was not my actual experience. I did not have *a heart-level understanding* of the gospel. *When I read my Bible, I was constantly condemned*. Now, when I read my Bible, I have a totally different perspective on it. Before the Immersion Experience, I did not personally experience an understanding of what the cross actually accomplished. *I was afraid of God and did not trust Him*. I know now that He is good. I still struggle with fear, it being a default emotion, but I have tools to work through it that I did not used to have. In fact, many of my default emotions still surface during vulnerable times, but now I have tools to work with, and *I do not stay stuck* in them like I used to. *It was a profoundly life changing experience for me*, and I would highly recommend it.

Living every day on pins and needles with God as a personal judge was a perspective in grave need of an overhaul, according to this man's testimony:

I had felt that any bumps in the road were *a direct result of me messing up in God's mind*, and he was trying to discipline me for my short comings. *I always felt that he was punishing me for falling short and was disappointed* in the way I was leading my life. I had no idea that *he loved me continually and unconditionally, no matter how much I messed up*. It was important for me to realize that I'm not a success or failure because of what results I get from my job or other activities.

Feeling that she was overlooked by God for others more deserving, this woman described her transformation upon the deep realization that God personally loves her:

I had read through the Bible many times prior to taking the class, and I believed the Bible was true. However, when it came to God's promises, I believed that He kept those promises for the people He liked more, not for me. *I felt that I was not chosen and that I was overlooked by God because I wasn't good enough.* Realizing this was a lie and finally *internalizing that God actually loves me*—poor behavior, mistakes, and all—has *permanently changed my life.* Although the change in my character and behavior, given that new belief, is taking time, *knowing that He really loves ME no matter what* has helped me grow and trust Him in a whole new way.

Fearing that his mistakes would cause God to abandon him, this man discovered an entirely different relationship with his intimate God:

*I now see God as a loving Father who wants the best for me.* I am *less fearful of God* and feel that *I can be honest in my prayers regarding how I truly feel.* I no longer believe that my mistakes will *cause God to abandon me*, but he will comfort me and come along side me in my trouble instead of leaving. *I have had images of God the Father, Jesus, and me together.* God is on one side of me and Jesus is on the other. I feel safe, accepted, and loved, especially if I am experiencing *feelings of worthlessness.*

Understanding the Christian life as needing to earn God's favor can only lead one to defeat and becoming judgmental (Jacobsen, 2007; Lynch et al., 2011).

**Religious confusion.** Being forced to obey rules in the face of parental authority or with the threat of God's disapproval is a difficult place to live, especially for a small child.

Now aware of the dysfunction that she grew up with, this woman had a new heart for others, even the greatly disadvantaged, as she relayed in her story:

I know who Christ is now. I was not sure before. I now know that *the dysfunctional family experience shapes people lives. I never knew I was both a victim and a victimizer. That idea blew me away, with evidence in my life to back it up. Yikes! I am now much, much less judgmental.* I now ask the question about others, "What happened to him in his family that would make him do that?" I now volunteer to work with female inmates—that was never, in my wildest dreams, of any concern to me. Before they were just such "screwed up people." Why bother? *I was very apathetic before and sarcastic about life and situations. A profound shift in my perspective occurred.* Working with female inmates feels like my destiny—God's ordained intention for my life. How amazing is that!!

Being able to identify the dysfunction in his Christian home of origin as religious confusion, this man rested in God's delight in him:

I realized I was using *success at work and the approval of others to give me a sense of accomplishment and value* rather than *finding my sense of meaning and fulfillment in God.* Before Aphesis, I had no *sense of God's delight in me* and my value to him as a person apart from my performance at work and as a Christian. I also understood *the devastation of growing up in a religiously confused home.*

Raised in a shame-filled and unsafe home, this woman was captivated by the love and delight she felt from God:

For me, the biggest shift was *realizing that God delights in me.* I know I was loved by my parents, but I did not feel the delight and deep acceptance that bring security in that

love. *Shame played a big part in how I was raised. It is difficult to feel safe in that environment. Realizing that God loves me and wants the best for me has helped me be more open and free. Just the thought that my heavenly Father delights in me brings joy to my heart and a smile to my face!!!* He gave His Best—His Son—for me to draw me to Himself in forgiveness and love.

**Conclusion.** An 80% positive response rate that the Immersion Experience had a profound effect on their relationship with God the Father and their daily life with Jesus Christ as Savior was a strong endorsement of this discipleship process. The 14 testimonies clearly pointed at the work of God in their lives made possible by facing past incorrect perceptions and beliefs. When people are convinced of God’s love for them, then they can trust Him to do what’s best for them in life, even when that involves pain.

### **Phenomenological Study: A Qualitative Study**

In this phenomenological study, the researcher inductively searched for the essence of two phenomena: religious confusion and the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience discipleship process in addressing the issues that arise from such confusion.

**The interviews.** Living in the western United States, the 16 participants were all alumni of the Immersion Experience, a 22-lesson discipleship process. See Table 8 for a description of their profile.



Table 8

*Profile of Interviewees*

Demographic Information	Male ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Female ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 16)
Age Range			
31–35	2	1	3
36–40	1	0	1
46–50	4	2	6
51–55	1	2	3
56–60	0	1	1
61–65	0	2	2
Highest Education Level			
Did Not Finish High School	0	1	1
High School Graduate/GED	2	1	3
Some College/Technical School	0	2	2
College/University Graduate	3	2	5
Master's Degree	1	2	3
Postgraduate Studies	2	0	2
Bible College Graduate (Evangelical School)			
Yes	1	3	4
Church of Youth			
Baptist/Bible/Independent	2	3	5
Church of Christ	1	0	1
Disciples of Christ	0	1	1
Friends/Quaker	0	1	1
Lutheran	1	0	1
Mennonite	0	1	1
Church of the Nazarene	2	1	3
Presbyterian	2	0	2
Roman Catholic	0	1	1
Parents in Vocational Ministry During Youth			
Yes	1	3	4
No	7	5	12

Having volunteered to be interviewed in the administered survey, the participants identified themselves as having been raised in a religiously confused home before the age of 18.

They also met a further criterion explained in Chapter 3, where six additional Likert-type survey responses relating to religious confusion were examined. On September 5, 2013, staff in the Aphesis Group Ministry headquarters (consisting of two women and two men) chose eight primary and eight alternate women to interview. They did the same with the male interview candidates. The Aphesis personnel facilitates the international ministry by disseminating the Immersion Experience curriculum, revising the curriculum as needed, and training group facilitators to expand the ministry. None of the headquarters' personnel was chosen to be in the pool of 32 potential interviewees for this study.

The first interview was conducted on September 9, 2013. Several reasons quickly emerged to induce the researcher to increase the number of interviews conducted. The first reason was to fill the researcher's schedule during an out-of-state trip made later that month to interview several of the primary candidates. Several other candidates who met the criteria were invited to be interviewed. Another reason the number of interviews was increased was because several selected candidates changed their minds and decided not to go through with the interview process. The final reason was that several interviewees had grown up in a more dysfunctional home; but not a religiously confused home, which was an essential criterion for inclusion in the study. The last interview was conducted on November 18, 2013. On December 3, 2013, the Aphesis staff (composed of two women and three men) chose the 16 finalists to use for this study, which included eight women and eight men.

The researcher employed semistructured questions (see Appendix H) in an in-depth interview setting with each respondent. During September 2–4, 2013, he piloted the interview questions with three persons (two women and one man) intimately acquainted with the Immersion Experience. Written consent for the interviews was first obtained (see Appendix G)

in addition to some demographic family information (see Appendix L). At the conclusion of each interview, a debrief statement was given to each participant with the contact information of the researcher and his supervisor (see Appendix K). For meetings, the researcher arranged mutually agreeable times in a variety of settings. He used a small Sony digital recorder and presented to each participant a handout from the Immersion Experience curriculum (Appendix F), which compared a religiously confused, dysfunctional home with a healthy, Christ-filled home. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 80 minutes.

The researcher employed a confidential worker to transcribe all of the interviews using the Dragon 12 software program. The participants' names or identities were not tied with any of the recordings. The code names used were, for example, "Male 5." The identities are only able to be accessed from the locked computer of the researcher.

The researcher then edited each transcript to smooth out the punctuation and clean up some of the conversation to enhance its sensibility. This researcher followed the method described by psychological anthropologist Luhrmann (2012, p. ix):

I adhere closely to the transcripts in my quotations, but my quotations are often not exact. When we speak out loud, we use language differently from the way we do when we write, and the written form of spoken speech—the "transcriptese" that types out the grunts, verbal gestures, and conversational hedges of ordinary talk—can make people sound more foolish and more hesitant than they are.

The researcher has retained the meaning of the speakers' words. The following is an example of the way the quotations have been made easier and more palatable to read:

[Original] I think the fruit of the spirit has a new meaning for me. It was like before, I had to do the fruit. You know, it was like self-protection, the fruit of the Spirit, because

so much of my history is doing. You know, I would do this to the honor and glory of God, and do this. So that is something that is being worked on by the Holy Spirit in me at this point. [Question] It is a... it's resting, I think in the love of God and letting him produce the fruit instead of me trying to do it--trying to love, trying to have joy, have peace, patience, the whole 9 yards. Nine... Letting God be God. And just getting involved in what he wants. Not so much what I think he wants. It's a whole new--it's a whole new way of looking at it. [Question] Right. That's the difference. I don't know how to perform them. I've tried for years, but it doesn't work. [Question] Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. That is the nourishment in the vine that comes out in our lives. It's God's love.

[Quotation as it appears in this dissertation] As far as a life skill, I think the fruit of the Spirit has a new meaning for me. Before, I had to do the fruit. It was like self-protection, the fruit of the Spirit. Because so much of my history is doing, I would do this to the honor and glory of God, and do this. That is something that is being worked on by the Holy Spirit in me at this point. So today, it is resting in the love of God and letting Him produce the fruit; instead of me trying to do it—trying to love, trying to have joy... It's a whole new way of looking at it. The difference is I'm not trying to perform them. I don't know how to perform them. I've tried for years, but it doesn't work. It is absolutely [a response to God's love].

The researcher then transformed the interview format to a narrative format, addressing his four research questions. These were then e-mailed to each participant with a request to review and, if needed, to make editorial corrections. A few respondents made minor corrections

in the respective narratives, but all 16 were approved by the interviewees by e-mail. The respondents' quotations were taken from these narrative formats and the original interviews.

**Phenomenological bracketing and the transcendental attitude.** The researcher's attitude in approaching this study of the phenomenon was critical in phenomenology. Considered by many to be the founder of phenomenology, Husserl (1929/1973) said it was essential for the researcher to bracket his natural assumptions of what he observes in the world so that it can be understood without prejudice. There has been a good deal of contention, especially amongst the majority of existential phenomenologists after Husserl, about this notion of bracketing (LeVasseur, 2003). In fact, Conklin (2007, p. 284) concluded that understanding the transcendental attitude appears to be "a slippery process." A helpful interpretation by Stewart and Mickunas (1990) understood that Husserl's use of the three expressions—phenomenological reduction, *epoche*, and bracketing—are interchangeable and refer to the appropriate alteration in attitude required for philosophical inquiry. LeVasseur (2003, p. 419) understood Husserl's intent in bracketing in a manner in which this researcher was comfortable: "The project of bracketing attempts to get beyond the ordinary assumptions of understanding and stay persistently curious about new phenomena." This has the same sense as Langer's (Langer, 1997, 2000) mindful learning where certainty is kept in abeyance to allow the mind to investigate new possibilities. This researcher approached the respondents with an open wonder to see what direction their life journeys had taken. Establishing rapport with each one happened more readily because the researcher was familiar with evangelical Christianity and the immersion process. In many of the interviews, there was a heart connection between the participant and the researcher because of the significant life events that were related.

**Analysis of the interviews and the phenomenological method.** The 16 interviews were divided by gender and then analyzed to ascertain if any significant differences had surfaced. Polkinghorne (1989) prescribed a general approach to analyzing the transcripts of phenomenological interviews that this researcher followed. Initially, one needs a number of raw descriptions from a group of people who have had the same experience. In the current study, all of the participants were raised in a religiously confused home of origin and were alumni of the Immersion Experience. Second, the researcher needed to analyze these descriptions with a view to extract the common elements of the experience. Finally, a synthesis from all of the participants' descriptions formed an accurate, clear, and articulate description of the experience. After reading the report, readers should understand better what it was like for a person to live through that experience. A more detailed step-by-step procedure following Moustakas is shown in Figure 12. Moustakas' steps are particularly helpful when the researcher is unfamiliar with the subject phenomenon. This researcher was very familiar with both evangelical Christianity and the Immersion Experience, which was at the heart of the phenomenon and all of the interviewees. As a result, this researcher merged some of Moustakas' steps to reach a synthesis of the phenomenon.

The researcher extracted themes from each of the eight gender-specific interview narratives. The themes selected answered two questions about what the experience consisted of and how it occurred. These themes were then synthesized into one composite profile depicting the two phenomenon of religious confusion before the age of 18 and what impact the Immersion Experience had on them. Again, this was done separately for the eight women and the eight men. During the discussion, the male synthesis was compared with the female synthesis to discover similarities and differences.

**Results and discussion.** In order to personalize the following discussion, the researcher used first-name pseudonyms from his extended family to identify each of the participants. None of the respondents' actual names were used. The results were divided into two sections, replicating the two main areas of this study: religious confusion and the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience discipleship process in addressing the issues that arise from such confusion. Because there were two syntheses, male and female, which represented all 16 participants, the discussion sought to discover both the similarities and differences between them.

*Religious confusion in a home of origin.* Well-meaning Christian parents are not solely responsible for disseminating religious confusion. It is a malady that can creep into Christians' lives if they become caught up in performing for God and do not keep vital his relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. It is essential to remember when reading the comments of the interviewees that these are their adult perceptions of their childhood homes.

*Features of a religiously confused home.* Most of these families were very active in their church attendance, including Sunday evening and midweek services. However, the priority of all the homes was performance for God: rule keeping, good behavior, and the importance of a person's actions. Reflecting back to her high school years, Diane wrestled to understand the legalism and religious confusion of her own home:

I wondered, after we all grew up, why things were all dysfunctional. When growing up, I knew I wasn't excited about my faith because it was just a bunch of restrictions; I should say my "Christianity." We were in the locker room while everyone else was dancing in the gym. I thought, "Who would want this?" Yet I thought it was normal, so as I left home, I thought, "Why are things so broken in my family?"... Yet I continued doing the

right thing. We came to Christ based on, “Do you want to go to heaven or hell?” So a relationship really wasn’t stressed in our home. The church was more important than we were, so it didn’t draw me to the heart of Christ. It was just guilt based on the rules I wasn’t able to keep, because we don’t measure up to the law and because we can’t keep it and are not supposed to be able to.

Several others came to salvation out of fear of going to hell. Don was a child when he made a commitment to Christ:

I was saved when I was 10 years old by being at a friend’s house we went to church while growing up. And she gave me the question, “If you die today, do you know you’d go to heaven?” And I said, “No.” And I said the sinner’s prayer right there. I mean I knew God was real.

Susie was told the basic biblical facts in her childhood:

You read in your Bible; God loves you—that's it. Jesus died on the cross for your sins so you can go to heaven—that's it. There was no talk of a relationship, no talk of what it means to have God's love or what that looks like. I didn't know it was really possible to even have a relationship until I was about 20 or 21.

Having a personal relationship with God was only a priority for several of the parents for their children. Many participants perceived God the Father as a stern judge ready to punish them if they didn’t meet the standards set by their parents and churches. Rita had the idea that God had His favorites, and she was not one of them:

I used to think that there were certain people that God chose that He liked more, or something. And that’s why they were always so “La la la la, I accepted Jesus and my life has been great and everything.” When people gave those testimonies in church I just felt



like punching them because I felt like they were in another category. I felt like God had separated me, and I was in another category....I thought it was because they were just lucky.

Amy understood Jesus as the buffer between her and God the Father:

Jesus was always the good guy in my life. He is the one who was going to take me to heaven. Even after I understood that it was only by grace, I still wasn't sure about God the Father. It was like He was the judge. My thinking went something like, "It's a good thing I've got Jesus to keep the judge from sending me to hell."

Larry talked about his own anger with God:

I would get mad at God, then He would leave me for a while, and I [would] have to go appease Him....The Scripture I always go back to now is the one in Zephaniah where it says, "He sings over you." If the Father himself can sing over me, I have a hard time picturing Him being really angry with me.

Don viewed God as having a quick temper:

Before, God was always getting ready to punish me. As long as I was doing good, He loved me. The second I screwed up, I knew He had the hammer ready to just pound me. That is not who I see God as now.

As one can see from the variety of understandings mentioned, God as one's judge is not an uncommon viewpoint.

Several of the women and several of the men described their homes since taking immersion as dysfunctional with physical abuse and beatings. This manifested itself as a father's explosive anger, physical abuse by a father, or an alcoholic parent. Rita experienced extreme confusion as she viewed both her church experiences and the abuse of her home:

There were so many of us [in my family], we would fill a whole row. We were not allowed to move or talk. And if we did—because people would always praise our parents for how well behaved we were in church...but then, even if we wiggled or did anything a little child would do—that's one of those things I was realizing; it's pretty hard to sit through an hour adult-level lesson that you have no context for—but that's [what] we were expected to do. So I can remember many times we actually got beat up after church by my dad. People would praise him for how great we looked, and then we knew what was going on at home. So those were linked for me.

The Immersion Experience gave Rita a new perspective on her reaction to the dysfunction of her home:

Mine was a normal child's reaction to a stressful situation. I had never really heard that in all of my counseling, the 12-step program, and all the different things that I had done to try to be more whole. I had never really grasped the concept that I was just a normal kid in a difficult situation. Even how I responded [in rebellion and my addictions] was normal for that situation.

*Responses of children raised in a religiously confused home.* While a majority of the men agreed that their homes were unsafe, all of the women described their homes in this manner. Only several years prior to the interview, Rita had an important insight to counter a lifelong distortion:

I didn't realize until a couple years ago that it was okay to make a mistake—so all my mistakes got wrapped in there somehow. I don't know if that's what my parents intended to imply, but for me, it was all mistakes. You are a terrible person, and you basically deserved to die.

Frank reflected on his volatile home: “I think I’ve always had a big fear of the loss of relationship.”

All 16 participants said they grew up with their emotions being suppressed because they were not appropriate. As a sensitive child, Frank reported how he coped without an emotional outlet with either parent:

I think I was a very injured person. I have always been a very...I don’t know, I think I had a lot of emotion, and I remember I was just very closed off. As a kid—I would spend time with the cat in the closet and talk to it about everything that was going on. That was how I could express emotion.

Alice also felt emotional neglect:

I found myself—even though I came from a Christian family—in the dysfunctional group [during immersion]. Part of that was my emotional makeup. I didn't know that I was loved unconditionally by my family...I think there was some emotional neglect there. I think that's why I stuff myself into that dysfunctional group, because I come from a family background where you don't talk about feelings, and feelings are just shoved underneath the carpet.

Hazel’s mother had a very judgmental view of emotions that she passed down to her children:

“Displays of emotion were discouraged. I think that when I displayed emotions, it was sort of the idea that it's really immature. That's immature behavior. I came to believe that. These emotional people are just immature.”

God’s love and grace were not felt in the majority of the homes. Grace was certainly not exhibited when they felt that an unattainable high standard was continually set before them. In the person of her mother, Hazel had a standard that she could never measure up to:

My mom—I don't remember her ever apologizing for anything she ever did. [Criticizing others] was just so hypocritical. I guess part of it plays into the whole thing that you can't ever meet the standard, so you try. But, if mom is perfect, I can't ever be perfect.

Larry grew up in a traditional church, but he stated: “I was in my 30s before I got any kind of an understanding of what grace was about. [Growing up] was all about God wants you to do this because He wants this *from* you. It was a long time before I got it.”

Personal responses to the religious confusion they felt in their home of origin were fairly uniform between the genders. Most of the men were outwardly compliant sons, harboring resentment until they could escape their homes. Roy began drinking after he left home for college:

My response to this home atmosphere was I was compliant. I wanted to please my parents. So, I would do whatever they wanted. However, there was a lot of resentment that built up in me. It really began to express itself in college when I started drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Speaking of his upbringing, Larry's emotional retort was: “While at home, I was the perfect little rule following valedictorian. My emotional response to my home environment was to squash that down until I could get old enough to get away from home.” Speaking of his volatile father, Bob said: “He emotionally needed to exercise control, and so I grew up with a lot of resentment towards him.”

Except for one woman, the female interviewees responded by being outwardly compliant and going along. The one who did rebel achieved well in school. Hazel said with resolve, “I was the good girl. But even being the good girl wasn't good enough [for my mom].”

For the men, the methods of coping with the pressures felt at home took several directions. While growing up, Bob had a healthy relationship with God to help him through the oppressive regime of his father. Another went to a Christian college but admitted to being “pretty screwed up” when he arrived there. Several others were able to do an acceptable job keeping the rules and performing as expected by their parents and churches. This resulted in a judgmental attitude toward others. Roy remembered:

Growing up, I felt I had pretty much the older brother mentality in the parable of the Prodigal Son: I’m doing the right thing and I’m looking good. As long as I obey the rules, I’m better than that person.

Frank also bragged about his rule-keeping prowess:

I was always trying to carry on a certain persona of someone who was being obedient and followed the rules. I was very good. Because I was trying to earn my value, I was trying to impress people with how good I could follow the rules. I excelled at following the rules.

Half of the men rebelled in some form as they left home. They became involved variously in alcohol, drugs, premarital sex, and extreme activities, including physical fitness. Two were involved in Alcoholics Anonymous to help overcome the addiction of alcohol. Several of the men had grown up with questions of self-value and feeling worthless. They confessed their negative view of themselves acted like a shield, keeping God’s truth from penetrating their hearts. Beaten regularly as a child, Larry said, “I didn’t see me as important. It’s hard to take any of [these truths] to heart when you think that you don’t really matter.”

A majority of the men admitted to having serious bouts with depression. Larry came to realize that the emotional baggage that had built up for many years would not miraculously disappear:

I think that is the most important thing of all—the rest of this stuff that I’ve cleared away—I keep thinking there is something between me and God. Eventually I realize, “No, there isn’t unless I put it up there. If I stop putting it up there, there is nothing between me and God.” So where did all the stuff come from? Now we can try and clear it away—maybe I’m just weird—but reflexes and beliefs that are built up over [decades] I don’t get rid of in a week. Even if I know they’re stupid, I don’t get rid of them in a week.

Fortunately, Larry saw a therapist who helped him as he worked through his issues. Having experienced severe depression for years, Don admitted to having been diagnosed with a chemical imbalance by a psychiatrist just as he began immersion:

Regarding my dealing with stress and pain, I’ve got to tell you that there are a couple of things that go hand in hand. At the same time I was going through immersion, I started seeing a psychiatrist and I was medicated. The truth is, I was completely suicidal and just a mess....The medication has worked perfectly....So yes, my response has changed; part of it because of the medication I take. But again, it’s all based on the foundation that I know God loves me.

With the eight women, coping with the dysfunction in their homes went in one of two directions. Several coped with substance abuse, needing treatment for their addictions later as adults. From her abusive, dysfunctional home, Rita’s heart cried out:

I was definitely afraid all the time. I wondered why God would let our family be the way it was. So you take your rules, and when it's infiltrated with this abusive behavior, as I became a teenager, I rejected everything because I knew there was something wrong.

The rest of the women lived their lives attempting to please God with their obedient performances, while growing resentful and unforgiving in an otherwise stoic relationship with Him. Two spoke of having tender hearts toward God during their childhoods. June received positive encouragement from her godly mother:

My mom was a very godly woman. She truly loved the Lord. So, she always encouraged us to study our Bibles and to pray and to just have a relationship with God. My dad would say the same things, but to him it was something that we were supposed to do. And all he was concerned about was how he looked....I could talk to my mom about [the home situation]. I don't know that I really did experience a lot of frustration over that because I just felt like that was how Christian homes were.

Gail poured out her heart to God in her despair: "I remember as a young teenager writing in my journal, 'God, don't let me grow up to be like my mom. I want to be wholehearted. I want to be your girl.'"

A significant aspect with all but one of the women was the evidence of a deep, one-parent wound, where the women focused on a single parent primarily connected to their religious confusion. In many cases, the other parent was not even mentioned in the course of the interview. The majority focused on their fathers, and the most common reason stated was a lack of emotional connection with them. Alice was heartbroken when talking about her Christian father:

My dad was very distant. He was good. He was moral. He provided for our family. He did all those big things. But I never got an emotional response from him....He wouldn't go that second mile and talk about spiritual things. He wasn't there in some of the big moments in my life.

Rita mentioned receiving regular physical beatings for making any mistake.

Several mentioned a mother (or mother figure), who set unreachable standards of performance, was critical and judgmental, or left them feeling betrayed. As a sensitive teenage girl, Gail recorded her feelings in her journal:

There was a lot of confusion, a lot of anger, and a lot of despair in me growing up. I did not want that dichotomy to exist in me. I remember as a young teenager writing in my journal, "God, don't let me grow up to be like my mom. I want to be wholehearted. I want to be your girl." But I would despair that it was even possible. Is it even possible to be wholehearted, because I sure don't see it growing up?

Most of the women with a father-wound transferred that disconnect to God the Father, which created a trust issue for them. This was true for Diane: "My dad and I were not emotionally connected. In some ways, I believe I transferred how my relationship was with my dad to my relationship with God." Even though she had forgiven her father, Rita realized her heart still needed to be healed:

Over time as we went through the Scripture and even with all the things that I had done--the 12-step and counseling, and all the stuff that I had done—I had never really realized that my view of God was so interwoven with my earthly dad. And I had forgiven my father, but the damage that was done is still needing to be worked out, you know, is that



that I'm not angry at him. But the damage is still all mixed in there, so the damage has to be cleaned up. It doesn't go away with forgiveness.

Having admitted their woundedness, the results in the women were serious trust issues, a lack of self-worth, and feelings of worthlessness. One hears the heart cry of those damaged emotionally in the following accounts. Rita received a devastating message from her abusive father while he beat her:

My understanding of how shame was shut up in my life goes back to not believing that I am a valuable person. The way that my father justified his abuse was to tell me that I was a horrible person and it was my fault that he beat me. I believed him. I'd get so mad at him, but I also realized that there was a core of me that believed him. There was fundamentally something wrong with me, and I was a rotten kid. I don't know why I am still sad about that. I felt I deserved for him to beat me up.

Hazel thought back on how she hesitantly used to approach God:

I'm working on feeling His love. I think that it's a process....I don't have to excuse myself, or clean myself up, or whatever. There was a song in the 1960s; one of the lines was: "Here I am Lord, knocking at your back door again." It was a secular song. I've always felt like that—"here I am Lord, knocking at your back door again." That's really false. God doesn't even have a back door.

Having felt betrayed by her mother, Susie had struggled her entire life with trust:

I've never really trusted anyone. So, like they say in [immersion]; it's just a lower level of suspicion. I've definitely felt that way. I'm still reluctant to trust people. But it's a process with God. That's a hard one for me because it's hard to trust something I can't see. But He does remind me of the times He has shown up in my life. So I have to

believe that He is not going to forget about me or leave me. So the trust issue is still touchy there. I wouldn't say I trust Him with my entire life. I trust Him in certain situations and with certain things. But it's getting to know His character that makes me trust Him more.

All of these issues had serious implications for these women attempting to have a loving and meaningful relationship with God the Father.

***The impact of the Immersion Experience.*** The Immersion Experience is a strong, biblically based discipleship curriculum. As Christian adults seeking a more vibrant relationship with the living God, the 16 participants made the commitment and effort to process through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience—some multiple times. John quoted several Bible verses in support of points he made during the interview. Referring to the Bible, he was careful to point out it was more than acquiring head knowledge:

The Scripture has started to become very personal where it impacts me when there is an emotional response. I think that helps me with the emotional response to the truth of what God says about me. That's when it gets past your head. To me there has to be an emotional connection for it to go to your heart.

In comparing it with other programs that have helped him in his personal journey, John stated the following about immersion: “There has been more Scripture and more biblical truth, more spiritual truth in immersion. So it just puts another layer for me of truth, like knowledge, not in my head, but in my heart.”

Rigorously educated and with a strong biblical background, Bob said of the Immersion Experience: “It's a very demanding study from the leader's perspective—easily, the most

demanding study I've been involved in by far. Nothing even comes close. And I've done a lot of Bible studies over the years."

As the name suggests, the Immersion Experience is to help create the picture of participants soaking in the truths of God as He seeks to transform them. The subjects covered are in Appendix M. The first six weeks of the process intentionally have participants review their background and home of origin. The Immersion Experience does not claim to be therapy, but it can be a helpful partner in the process to bring about holistic health, both spiritually and emotionally. Immersion is an educational process to bring about transformational learning. Significant to the Immersion Experience is the safe group setting it seeks to create for its participants to maximize the effectiveness of the process (Rule, 2011). Therefore, each potential participant is asked to commit to a set of six norms and six values. Norms are easier to observe if they are being followed or violated (see Figure 13 for the list of norms). Values are more difficult to determine whether or not they are being followed, but they are nevertheless highly desired for satisfactory group processing. See Figure 14 for a list of the six values.

Figure 13

*The Norms of the Immersion Experience*

Norm	Description
Confidentiality	Group participants, as well as the facilitators, must commit to maintaining as confidential anything shared in the group sessions to anyone outside of the group, including spouses.
Weekly Attendance	A commitment is required of missing no more than four group sessions with the 22-lesson version or two sessions with the 13-week version.
Absence Policy	If a participant must miss a session, the facilitator should be notified out of courtesy. Participants are encouraged to schedule an individual meeting to catch up on what they missed.
Interruption of Others	A participant is not interrupted while talking during the group session.
Weekly Homework	As it is important for the participants to understand the concepts and principles being presented, they will need to spend 1–3 hours per week doing homework.
Withdrawal Policy	If participants are unable to continue with the group, they are asked to come one additional time to explain to the others the reason for leaving, bid goodbye, and give closure to the other participants. Because of the importance of confidentiality, this helps assure the others of the commitment to them even if they are not to continue the process.

Note: Adapted from “Introduction to The Aphesis Group Experience,” by T. Rule, 2011, *The Immersion Experience*, p. 8. Meridian, ID: Aphesis Group Ministries.

Figure 14

*The Values of the Immersion Experience*

Value	Description
Desire to Mature	We value people who are willing and open to change their attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others, and God. We are all in the process of maturing and learning from God. If a person does not have a desire and a need for change, little can be done to help them mature and grow.
Honesty	This is honesty with us, as well as with others, about what is going on in our lives. This is a fundamental biblical principle in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship with God, others, and ourselves.
Openness/ Vulnerability	Individuals are valued who are willing to gain new awareness and insight from their openness to others about what is truly going on in their lives. In order to understand and support those in difficulty, it is critical to let God and others who are safe know what is going on with us.
True Encouragement	We value building up and affirming one another in truth. However, we do not value giving false praise or patronizing others with shallow Christian platitudes. Many times, the most encouraging thing to do for others is just to listen and understand them.
Respect	We value showing each other respect both verbally and nonverbally. Each one deserves to be heard and understood. Respect each other's time. Please be on time for each session.
Acceptance	We value showing to one another the same unconditional love, acceptance, and grace that God has shown us. When someone chooses to share something that is tremendously shameful to them, acceptance is made evident by the listeners not turning away, but instead drawing near to them with God's compassion and acceptance.

Note: Adapted from "Introduction to The Aphesis Group Experience," by T. Rule, 2011, The Immersion Experience, p. 9. Meridian, ID: Aphesis Group Ministries.

One of immersion's values is honesty. Several men referred to this when removing the masks they had worn for most of their lives. Having processed through immersion, Frank commented, "The mask was completely removed." Larry had developed a very sophisticated mask for the public:

I was still hesitant to trust people with my stuff. I didn't want to tell them all what was going on. I wanted to make everything look good. That's my main defense: I try and make everything look good to everybody. And I'm a very good actor. Everything looks clean and polished and smooth and I can handle this. And that's a huge lie. It looks really good for me on the outside. I can even use a voice that makes it sound like I'm on the radio. It's all an act.

Larry knew several of the fellow participants in his immersion group. One of them bumped into him before the first session began. Larry related the exchange:

The guy asked me, "How come you're in this group? Are they just trying to pad it out with people who don't really need this?" Evidently I put up a good front—I do that. After [the session where Larry shared vulnerably from his past] was over [the guy] said, "Oh, I get it." And that was the reaction I got from most everybody. I don't have to pretend that everything is fine. I was expecting them to say, "What kind of a jerk are you? You've been pretending all this is time?"

Considering the impact of the Immersion Experience, several questions emerged. Was there a positive impact in their lives as a result of processing through this experience? Was it transformational? Did it address the issues presented by religious confusion in the home of origin? The following discussion sought to explore these findings. Suggesting the possible impact of this process, June emphatically stated: "I think every aspect of my life is affected by going through the Immersion Experience."

*Acknowledgment and implementation of emotions.* With regard to validating emotions, everyone became better aware and accepting of their emotions. Most had deeply buried their

emotions during childhood. Having bottled up his emotions for many years, Roy took a big step forward in immersion:

This course puts you in touch with your own feelings. They are legit. God has feelings.

We are meant to feel.

So, through the [immersion] process, I realized that God wants us to go to Him with everything; all of it. It doesn't matter what it is; He knows it all and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter: nothing is going to shock him. So when I realized that, it was kind of freeing to me to go to Him and to be broken—to cry in front of Him and others. To just say, “Hey, I’m not in control: You are.”

By learning to listen to their emotions, most of the interviewees talked about attempting to understand why they reacted so strongly to certain life events; for example, fear, anxiety, or anger. Rather than erupting with a reactive emotional outburst to others, they learned a path to follow that was much more introspective and understanding. Their desire became to discover the source of their emotional hurt triggered as an internal emotional reaction to a situation they were facing. Susie talked about her heightened sense of awareness:

Now I can take a moment to think about where the emotions are coming from. I recently felt betrayed by a friend. But it wasn't the friend that betrayed me; it was the situation around it. So I traced those feelings back to where I first felt them. It was from my mom when I felt betrayed by her when I was younger. So I was able to figure out where those feelings were coming from and not hang onto them so long. I allow myself a certain amount of time to feel something: like a bad feeling, a hurt, or anger. Then I process it and try to find out where this is coming from. I'm also able to believe that people aren't intentionally trying to hurt me.

Taking purposeful steps to “helpfully hide” or temporarily withdraw (Townsend, 1991/96), Larry shared his action plan in dealing with stress:

When my wife is the source of stress, she is the one who is so close to me that little things take off. And we’ve come to some agreements. There are times when I’ll say, “Look, I can’t deal with this right now. Give me 15 minutes. I’m going to go stomp around the block. I can feel the adrenaline kicking up. Anything I say right now, I’m going to regret. So if I say nothing and I go walk around for a little while, maybe you will be mad at me. But at least I will burn some of this off and I can try to be human when I get back.” It’s still not the optimum response, but it is several steps down from where it used to be [when I would blow up in anger]. So yeah, I am still working on doing that...

When he was tempted to feel some emotional discomfort, Frank tried to address it before he found himself numbing the feelings by coping:

It’s an ongoing process to get better at realizing sooner that this is a stressful situation, because it so instinctive to just distract, to walk out, and to do whatever those things are [that keep my mind occupied]. So now, I’m getting better and better all the time at identifying, “Hey, this is stressful; and I am responding out of the stress.” Typically what I first see is, “Hey, I’m having this tendency or desire to go do something.” Suddenly, I have this instinct I’ve got to go find something to do, or whatever my different copings are. Then I’m like, “Oh, wait. I shouldn’t need to go do something right now. What is going on?” And then backtracking up and just exploring what those are. Then being able to say, “Well, this is based on...” I mean, figuring out what the root is, what is causing this discomfort and this pain.



Alice felt insecure in relationships with others. She developed a pathway to help her deal with feelings of worthlessness:

Emotions are the dashboard. They are the indicator of what's going on deep down. In immersion, we use the house illustration where right at the bottom is “my doubting God.” Then we go [up] from there. The base of it is if I doubt that God loves me, then I'm going to go on and I'm going to meet my needs the way that I need to meet them....So that's a life skill that I'm taking with me. I believe that I know God does love me, but it takes a while to process through that and to really feel that—to have that emotion.

Since I used to stuff emotions, this understanding is very new. And that is okay. If I'm feeling rejection or something like that from another person, then I go, “Okay, what is the truth about that situation?” One is that person is not rejecting me; it's just something in their background. Another is, maybe I was too harsh in what I was saying and maybe I do need to ask for forgiveness. Because we're talking about trust and forgiveness, one thing I realize is that God the Father loves me. He delights in me and I'm having my emotional tank filled by Him and not by other people. The fuller my tank is, the more I am able to give to other people. I am able—no matter what their reaction is to me—I am stronger, emotionally, to give because of God's love being imparted to me.

Volunteering as a group facilitator for The Immersion Experience, John had to absorb some emotional blows in his ministry:

There is a man who had been through two immersion groups. He wanted to join [a group that I was going to facilitate]. I'd been warned by another facilitator he was “very unsafe,” that he had “a lot of Bible knowledge,” but he “would use it as a weapon.” So he called me and I told him that he was not going to be able to be in our group. During

the conversation, he just went off on me and called me a “fool” and called me an “idiot.” [He said], “I don’t know how you could’ve been married as long as you’ve been. You’re judgmental. You’re critical.” [He said] all these things. In the past, I would’ve probably crumbled—in the distant past. I felt like God has brought me to a point where [He was saying to me], “This has nothing to do with what I say you are.” I mean, it just didn’t impact me whatsoever. I don’t think it was because there wasn’t any [of my] emotion attached to it or that I was disconnecting or any of that. I just realized it had nothing to do with me. And for me—I was looking at it and I wanted to be humble about it and not egotistical—but it was a victory to realize that this particular person didn’t have an impact on my relationship with God and my emotional state.

Being anchored in God’s unconditional love and aware of one’s valid emotions, a person is better able to understand the slights and attacks by others as not personal. They can even learn to discern their own emotional climate and search for the root causes of their emotional overreactions.

*Opening up in a safe group.* One of the norms of the Immersion Experience that must be committed to prior to enrolling was total confidentiality of what was spoken in the group (see Figure 13). This commitment, along with the actual experience, had an amazing effect on the participants in both the combined group interaction time and the gender-specific small groups where personal Life Maps were shared.

Every interviewee was emphatic about the significance of having a safe group in which to share. Realizing this was a great need in the local church, John said:

Immersion has provided an environment that I think oftentimes is not provided in the church for people to be able to open up and to unpack their baggage. But I just think it’s

how people bond through the intimacy of sharing life together in an environment, which I am not sure exists at all in churches on that level. Because people are fearful of being rejected when they share their deep-most feelings about what they struggle with.

A Life Map in the Immersion Experience is an eight-page (length depends on the age of the person) wavy road on which participants are able to chart major life events and transitions. Personal reflection questions in the early lessons help participants call to memory distant events and experiences that color their lives. Many participants are creative in the ways they record their life journeys. A number write out a narrative from which to share with others. Normally, people are given 30–60 minutes to share their Life Maps. Groups in which this researcher was familiar normally found that the women needed longer time spans for them to adequately share their stories. This vulnerable sharing was followed by gentle interaction and reflection by the other members of the gender-specific small group. For many people, sharing one's Life Map and becoming that vulnerable was extremely intimidating. Facilitators generally shared their maps first to set the tone for the other group members.

About one third of the interviewees mentioned that sharing their own Life maps was not particularly significant to them. There were three reasons for this. Two participants in Christian ministry, one of each gender, shared parts of their life stories on a regular basis, so it was not a new experience for them. Two men and a woman shared parts of their stories regularly at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings while they were in recovery. Dealing with personal self-acceptance issues, one woman felt her lifelong struggle with Christian performance issues was not as attention-getting as the behavioral issues shared by many others. However, all six of these participants were quick to acknowledge the value they experienced in hearing the life stories of others in the group and the closeness that developed as a result.

All of the 16 participants were vulnerable and shared their lives, including deep-rooted shame. Several referred to immersion as “therapy” for them. A professional man, Roy shared his hesitancy at being this vulnerable:

When I think of sharing the intimate details of my Life Map with others in my gender-specific group, it was hard. It was difficult, because I’m really laying it all out there: all my struggles and defeats and addictions. There was a lot of shame. I hadn’t shared that deeply beforehand—not really to that degree and in that type of setting. So, it was very scary—yeah, very scary. The first time I did it, I remember I was just broken up. I was in tears when I went through it. The response of others in the group was actually very affirming....Getting everything out for me, personally was very good therapy. I have always been an introvert. I have never wanted to share. I think it was due to my shame-based [upbringing]—everything had to look good and be good. So, I never wanted to make a mistake. The entire process was very freeing. The result was connecting with others at a heart level.

Bob referred to immersion as personal psychotherapy:

It was just a good; it was basically psychotherapy to an extent. It contained a lot of biblical principles. It’s sort of the best form of psychotherapy in one sense, I think. So there were a lot of “aha” moments as I was working through that stuff. In fact, there’s almost too much to deal with.

Larry surprised himself how intimately he shared his life right away:

In the middle of that class, the filter between my brain and my mouth kind of went down. There were times when I would just tell people [the abuse] hadn’t really happened. I wouldn’t even admit this to myself. So it felt really weird—I’m telling people I’m four

years old and getting punched in the head and knocked down. That wasn't what I intended to say when I walked in the room. But now I can talk to these people about these things.

My Life Map is where it broke through, because I had all of these events on there. I started mapping that to the things I was saying on this questionnaire. In my Life Map, there were a lot of things that happened before I was 13. Then not a lot happened for the next 30 years, maybe 10 or 12 things. But the first two pages were dense. Then the next few were like three or four things here and a few things here. I'm reliving my childhood over and over and over. Okay. Maybe I just needed to see this graphically....I'm starting to see how many things hit over here that really shaped me versus not a lot there. And a lot of those were far back. I need to spend some time over here. There were a couple of the guys in there saying, "Yeah, I had a screwed up childhood too." I was afraid to tell people this because I didn't want them to think...my childhood was supposed to be clean and pure and beautiful. Everybody else's was fine. Then they were saying, "No, you haven't heard mine yet."

During a group reflection, June received some much-needed insight:

Sharing my Life Map was really, really significant. I'd never shared my life completely with anyone. It just made me realize—it was as I did my Life Map that first time—that I began to understand how angry and bitter I was and how much I needed that lesson on forgiveness. I just wasn't even aware that I was depressed, that I was angry, and that I was resentful....I had lived my life like I thought God wanted me to live it. To me, that has meant tamping down the resentment and tamping down the anger. You might feel that, but you are not supposed to ever let it show.

Alice also had to confront the shame in her life:

I think shame is an important aspect. I think that's an underlying lie that God is still continuing to work on with me. If my relationship [with someone] is not close anymore, then I should probably feel some sort of shame that I'm not good enough. That's what pokes up its head in my response, "Oh, they don't really want to spend time with me. I'm probably not worth spending time with." And it coincides with the old thinking process. I need to answer, "No. That's not true. God deeply delights in me. He loves me. He made me who I am." We're in process. I'm not perfect. We all do things to each other. But, that's a huge thing, working through that.

Susie told of the result of bringing shame into the open: "I carried a lot of shame. So, to say those things that were so shameful to me—and to just get it out in the open—they lost a lot of power."

Normally the group facilitators initially shared their Life Maps, leading by example and setting the vulnerability tone of the gender-specific small group. As an experienced facilitator, John shared his strategy:

Regarding establishing a safe group setting, those of us who facilitate have the opportunity to set the tone right from the get-go. So, for me, what I do is share my stuff. I want people to know—just because I'm here facilitating—that I have not arrived, because I haven't.

One of the values (see Figure 14) agreed upon before joining an immersion group was not to share Christian platitudes; for example, "God is so good." Often that and other responses are given when a person listening to another person's pain or shame feels uncomfortable and is just grasping for something to say. Another upfront understanding was that a group will not stop

in the middle to pray for a participant who is visibly showing emotion. This could be construed as favoritism towards the one who is more outwardly emotional than someone else who is not as quick to display his feelings. Acceptance was another value, which included withholding judgment of others. Larry used to be quick to offer advice:

In his small group, when I hear them say, “You know, I did this and I’m really unhappy with myself.” It used to be the first thing for me: I would gather a breath, my finger would point, and I’d say, “You know what you did wrong?”

All of the interviewees were insistent about being accepted and affirmed after sharing their life stories. Gail shared the bond that was created when people were able to finally unburden themselves of the shame they had been carrying:

I realize I had a phenomenal group of women that walked through this with me. We had a level of openness and vulnerability in our group that blew me away. So, it was an amazingly safe place to come and just go spill it on the table: “Here it is.”

They did not feel judged, neither did they feel that someone in the group had tried to fix them, for example, offer advice or suggest Bible verses to correct their mistakes of the past. June was passionate about keeping the group safe:

One of the things that make the Immersion Experience a safe place is that we don't allow platitudes. Knowing that somebody is not going to throw [Bible] verses at me and tell me what I need to do differently is a huge thing for me.

*Establishing a relationship with God the Father.* The huge breakthrough experienced to some degree by all 16 participants was a deep sense of experiencing the unconditional love of God the Father. Larry voiced: “The most beneficial part of this immersion class is how God the Father views us and our relationship with Him.” Rusty talked about going through immersion

the first time: “I would say that my first ‘aha’ moment was probably the very fact that God loves me; that he delights in me. I certainly enjoy my relationship with God a whole lot more than I ever did.”

All 16 interviewees had heard the message for years while growing up that God loved them and that Jesus Christ had paid the price for their sin, but it just did not penetrate their hearts. Frank shared that it was more than intellect:

I had heard that God loves me [while] growing up. John 3:16 is a verse I memorized—probably one of the first I ever memorized, because I grew up in AWANA memorizing Scripture. I knew a lot but never really even thought about it, I don’t think. Or it never really meant anything until probably during [immersion].

Roy had accepted Christ as his Savior as a boy:

Several months into my first Immersion Experience, I had a gradual realization that God loves me no matter what. I came to Christ earlier in life, but it was performance based. So that was a big aha: that no matter what, I am His, good or bad. That first [immersion] was the first time I would ever say I felt it, finally, because for years I knew it in my head. I knew all the data. I knew all the stuff. I had gone up [in front of church]; I had accepted Christ as my Savior growing up. I grew up in a Christian home. But again, I realized that I was confused, because it was very performance oriented.

Susie talked about the importance of having a relationship with God:

Growing up we talked about God, but that was it. I mean, God loves me, but there was no relationship. So I didn't really know what it looked like to have a relationship with God. I knew God loved me, but I didn't know what that looked like or what it felt like.

Hazel also chimed in about the rightful place of emotion:



That's the difference [after immersion], going from the head to the emotions—not just knowing all the stuff. I knew God loved me. Hello. I knew He'd given Jesus for me. I knew all that. Of course He loves me. But no emotion had touched [me].

Diane gradually came to experience God's love towards the end of immersion:

Through [immersion] I was introduced in a new way to God's love. God's love emotionally broke through. It was huge that it broke through, and it wasn't based on my performance. It didn't fluctuate based on my performance. I knew that in my head, but emotionally, it finally went from my head to my heart. It wasn't any kind of magical moment....It was probably toward the end of the process the first time when I realized it had happened. It wasn't like I just jumped off the sofa one day and said, "I am transformed. I get it." I evaluated and realized that my responses were different, that I was more at rest, that I could really trust Him more with the painful situations in my life. I then realized what had happened. It has lasted. It's not like it was just a temporary thing.

After immersion, what they experienced could be termed bonding with God in a relationship of trust. But that is not what John had experienced earlier in his life: "God was such a distant Father. That's the way that I viewed Him. I know now that is not the relationship that He wants to have with me." Fighting the immersion process, Rita admitted that she was a bit of a troublemaker as God patiently wooed her to Himself:

Somehow, wrestling through all of that, I literally felt like God—I had this fabric that made up who I was and who I believed He was—and I felt like He just slowly unwound a thread at a time and just basically wooed me to come to Him and believe that He has always loved me. It felt like He met me where I was and brought me through this very

slow and tender process. I thought, “Well, I’m going to leave this class, and I’m still not going to get it.” They continue to talk about “getting it” in the class. I’m to be one of those who go through this whole darn thing and I’m not going to “get it.” So right around the end, it hit me that something had changed, and I realized that God loved me. There was just that period of a few weeks where I would start to go through that process and I would realize, “Oh my goodness, I actually feel God’s love. Now I actually believe He loves me.”

Responding to the question of why he was enrolled to take immersion for a second time, Larry and his friend tried to explain:

A friend and I were trying to explain the value of immersion to some other men [in our church]. Over and over we kept saying: but what [the facilitators] do is keep telling you, “No, this is how God actually sees you. This is how the Father Himself really sees you. I know you have a problem with that. You might not agree. You may have things getting in the way of this. So we’re going to start down at the foundation and try to get rid of those things that get in the way. But we are just going to keep telling you this is how God sees you until eventually that [message] will get through.”

Susie honestly explained how she struggles to stay living loved by God:

I know God loves me. I don't always feel loved, even though I know He loves me. But I feel like I'm more willing to be in relationship with Him now than I was before, because I'm beginning to see His character.

I've noticed that in the moments when I am living and believing God about His love, the things that I think are important, they fade away: like my behaviors, my unhealthy thoughts, and my bitterness. Those things—like they said in [immersion]—

that you won't want to act like when you're living loved. I've seen that in me; I forget about those things. They don't matter anymore because I'm right here. But then I can also go back to those things and make them important, instead of staying loved.

There was significance in the participants experiencing this relationship on a personal level, not only as part of the world that God loves. Rita glowed: "I finally believed that God loved me individually. Knowing that has changed how I interact with people altogether." Frank was struck by God's attention to him:

It's been so significant that God really does love us, to send his Son for us. That understanding went way beyond my head. I just realized I was saying, "for us." I have trouble personalizing it and saying, "He did it for me." And so, taking it beyond the idea, "Yeah, I'm just part of a group." It was specific for me.

Amy also basked in the Father's love:

It has been amazing to understand God the Father and how much He loves me. He loves us enough to send a Son for us. I have heard that my whole life, but it never made sense until [immersion] about the love of God the Father.

Personally experiencing God's love, Alice explained:

I think one of the "aha" moments [that I had with immersion] was just soaking in the idea that I, as an individual, am worth a Son. That impacted me incredibly. I knew that God had died for the world; I knew that. But, the fact He made it so personal and that He really wants to pursue my heart. And I knew it in my head; I think it was so cerebral.

Roy stated: "I think the immersion process just reinforced the idea that you are worth a son."

Diane gushed about her new relationship:

I would describe the way God views me—He adores me. He rejoices over me with singing. He is crazy about me. I never saw that with my dad, so it's a whole new relationship, a way of growing in that love.

The ability of the interviewees to personally feel God's delight was a different matter from what most of them experienced regarding the unconditional love of God. There were a few women who basked in God's delight. Gail was definitely living loved in her relationship with God:

God delights in me! That relationship is precious to him. Most of the time I feel His delight, which is a far cry from where I was when I started the Immersion Experience. I think I felt loved, but not deeply delighted in. There is a difference there. Feeling loved by God was something that was foundational, but closer to the surface, like there was not a depth to it. I knew that God loved me. But the difference is that there is a depth with that deep delight: God's eyes light up when He sees me. That is different since going through this [immersion] course.

The rest of the male and female participants felt God's delight inconsistently. In many of their minds, God delighting in them appeared more attached to life's circumstances than God's relentless love for them. Hazel was representative of this experience:

When I consider feeling God delighting in me, all I can say is that "I'm working on it."

It's opening up my feelings that are hard. It's been [decades] of stuffing them. This is a new experience, to actually open up to feelings of God's delight and His pleasure.

Roy also experienced God's delight in him inconsistently:

In regards to feeling deeply delighted in by God the Father, I do at times, certainly—at times, very much. It's hard to describe, but it's not all the time. But it is certainly is

much more so than before I took this course, when I started down this path. Before that, I really wouldn't say so; I hadn't felt it in my heart.

One major aspect of religious confusion in the previous section was that of performance—performing for God to earn his approval. Several of the participants mentioned that there were important implications of God's love in relationship to the obedience of Christ-followers. Alice shared about her new understanding:

I was very performance oriented. And so, just resting in that truth that I don't have to do anything, I don't have to perform for God to love me more. That was another part of the “aha” moment, and that anything else that I could do for God doesn't mean anything will make Him love me anymore. So that really affected how I felt and how I viewed what I do as a believer.

Frank shared about a different motivation that drives his life now based on God's love:

I spent a lot of my growing up years trying to earn God's love. This was instead of understanding that God loves me, and that's why I am obedient. So, I had things all twisted around. I had begun to learn this, but it was really reinforced in [immersion]. That was probably my major “aha” in the whole [immersion] process. The significance for me was it dramatically affects my motivations and it dramatically affects my whole life. The reason why you are doing everything suddenly is reversed.

Hazel talked about trying to manufacture the fruit of the Spirit in her life:

As far as a life skill, I think the fruit of the Spirit has a new meaning for me. Before, I had to do the fruit. It was like self-protection, the fruit of the Spirit. Because so much of my history is doing, I would do this to the honor and glory of God, and do this. That is something that is being worked on by the Holy Spirit in me at this point. So today, it is

resting in the love of God and letting Him produce the fruit; instead of me trying to do it—trying to love, trying to have joy... It's a whole new way of looking at it. The difference is I'm not trying to perform them. I don't know how to perform them. I've tried for years, but it doesn't work. It is absolutely [a response to God's love].

A number of the immersion participants in Don's group were very active in his local church. He expressed an insightful observation:

What really surprised me was how much it is the people who were serving the most, involved the most in leading groups, who I never expected to see in [immersion] that were completely and utterly broken. It was because of how the home [situation] was that they grew up in; they never had a chance. They're out there trying with everything they can to do all the work that they can, instead of receiving God's love.

When Christians fully embrace God's unconditional love, then they serve Him out of their heart of gratitude, not from obligation.

*Employment of the life skills of forgiveness, trust, and community.* The three life skills of forgiveness, trust, and living in community were presented during the last three lessons of the Immersion Experience. All 16 interviewees agreed that brokenness was an important aspect to the immersion process—both an honest admission of personal brokenness, as well as seeing people around them as broken. From an immersion facilitator's viewpoint, John said: "That's one thing immersion does from the get-go is it says we, as a human race, are broken people." Rusty agreed: "I was surrounded by people who were willing to admit they weren't perfect. They were willing to admit that they weren't...that they didn't have it all together."

Besides humbling them individually, this awareness of being broken paved the way to forgive those who had hurt them in the past. Another significant ingredient in the forgiveness

formula was for the participants to receive from God His grace and unconditional love. Having personally experienced God's grace and forgiveness, they were better able to be a conduit of God's grace and forgiveness to those who had hurt them. Receiving God's grace unlocked Rita's heart to forgive massive hurt in her life:

Grace was a life skill that really allowed me to forgive for real. I would try to force myself to forgive, but I was doing it on the surface. I mean, I was doing the best I could; I wasn't trying to fake it. I was doing the best version that I had until I really understood grace.

Before Aphasis, I never really understood what grace actually meant. I understood it intellectually, but I could not extend it to people. I didn't feel like I had received it. I think that not knowing that God loved me was that missing piece. So then I started noticing that my interactions would change because—somehow knowing that God loved me—I was able to accept people more where they were. I was naturally extending grace as an overflow of God's love. Then when people extended it to me, I could receive it. That has changed the whole dynamic.

An understanding of brokenness and the infusion of God's unconditional love moved Gail past a major impasse in her life:

It became imperative for me to extend grace to my parents and to cover that multitude of dysfunction with grace and with love. My message was, "We are broken people; we are all broken." It's not just me, nor just my kids, nor just the people around me, but my parents, specifically, are broken people. We live in a really, really sad and sick world. We're all on a journey. As a result, I've been able to appreciate some things about my parents now and the changes I see in them. It felt like before the Immersion Experience,

I was stuck in this thinking about what my parents were like and what their relationship with God was like. It was like I was stuck in a time capsule. So my relating to them was also stuck in that time capsule. Being able to extend grace to them has opened up new levels of relationship with them.

Forgiveness is so essential for Christians, but it is impossible until they fully accept God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness themselves.

Hazel offered introspective insight on this subject of brokenness. She approached life as a Christ-follower from a very early age, determined to honor God with her entire life:

I think that to be spiritually broken is a different concept than just having brokenness of things that happened to you as a person....[Immersion] was a spiritually breaking time for me, seeing my brokenness. I had done everything I knew to do to live the Christian life, basically, since age three. I'm not saying that I didn't willfully do things; I'm not saying that. The direction of my life was always, "I want to do as God wants me to do." To find out that I really didn't know [what that consisted of] was just really hard. In some ways, I found out that I really wasn't doing what I thought I was doing. I thought I was developing this relationship with God, but I didn't feel loved. So, there was a big piece missing that made me feel pretty broken.

I believed that I had performed at a higher level [than many around me]. I don't know if I can say I didn't have any relationship with God, but I definitely didn't feel a relationship. I don't know if you can distinguish that or not. I knew I was a daughter [of the King], but I didn't feel like it.

Part of the brokenness, I think, is brokenness of my pride. I worked so hard; I really did. Everything I knew to do, I did it. But that true intimacy with God just wasn't



there. So I had to look at how much of it—how much of my relationship with God—was motivated by pride: I can do this or I'm going to keep trying. It's not what he wants.

When Christians are obeying to gain God's approval, pride is always lurking in the shadows (Thrall et al., 2004).

Exhibiting trust in God and people is an important issue for Christians. Not only did all eight of the women struggle with trusting other people to have their best interests in mind, they also found it hard to trust God. Moving forward from dysfunction, Rita grew to realize the significance of trust in her life:

I am learning to rely on God, to trust in Him. I don't think I'm totally there. I feel like I trust Him in pockets. Then I will be struggling with something and I'm crying out to Him. Then he will bring me back to Scripture passages—it happened yesterday—about trusting Him and reminding me that I'm not actively trusting Him. So that's why I'm having all this anguish. Do I have to reset it again and ask Him what is there in my way of trusting Him in this area that's different from another area of my life? As my healing goes deeper, I run into new ways that I don't trust Him.

Having been hurt by people in her past, Gail chose to trust:

Trust is one life skill that I'm working on and have been working on—trusting God. And beyond that, trusting those in my life that are close to me. The new thought is: "I believe that you have my best interests in mind." I choose to stand on that conviction because there is a long-standing disconnect there. Just to make those faith choices: sometimes every hour; every day; and every other day. That is a skill that I'm still working on and that God is working on in me.

Diane found that learning trust was walking through the refining fire:

Trust is the life skill that has made a difference in my life after [immersion]. Even though I'm in process and I've got a lot more to learn, I believe I have truly learned what resting in Him looks like. I always wanted it, but I didn't know you had to go through the fire to get it. So you find Him in the midst of your pain, and then He walks with you through that and you see Him like you've never seen Him before. Therefore, I can rest in Him, seeing how trustworthy and faithful He has been and will be.

Though essential for relationships with people and God, trust can be very difficult to secure in light of life's hurts and disappointments (Townsend, 1991/96).

A majority of the men also found it hard to trust God. Larry, having grown up in a volatile situation, gave a sample of the dysfunction he faced when his dad responded to his teenage sister's action:

My dad yelled, "These are not the rules we go by." He got so mad that he turned and put his fist through the wall....Following the rules was just more important. That was the kind of hair trigger anger that was always there. You don't do certain things or your punishment is sudden; it's swift; it's here. This doesn't lead one to become a trusting person.

Having doubted his salvation his entire Christian life, Don came to understand through immersion his need to face up to a decision he had made decades before:

As a boy and a young Christian, I had made a very conscious, a very deep decision, that I could not trust Him. I just did not trust God. He didn't hear my prayer [to keep my parents together], and I just couldn't trust Him. I don't doubt my salvation anymore; I do not doubt God's love. I know that I can trust Him.

Almost all of the men mentioned the importance of continuing to live in community and were practicing that. Don voiced strongly, “Community has been huge!” All eight of the women realized the importance of living in community where they could continue to process life together in honesty and openness. June expressed that immersion was not just a one-time fix for people:

I think one of the most important aspects of this [immersion] experience is to continue to meet together with somebody and continue to go through the things that you didn't have time to completely process. I think that's a lifelong journey, and so that's why community is so important. We need a safe place....God made us to really desire relationship because we need a relationship with Him. He also made us to need a relationship with others. Of key importance to remember is that we don't just take this as something that's just going to fix us, and we're going to be fixed and never have to go back there again. This is a lifelong process, especially when you think about all of the ways that we've been wounded. We need to continue to pour truth in on top of these [wounds], and to be immersed into the truths that we have been reminded of in this process.

After experiencing a lot of hurt and disappointment in her life, Susie saw community as a spiritual lifeline:

When I'm not living in community with people who have clear eyes, who are seeking the Lord, then I don't live like that on my own. It's easy to do [life] for a couple weeks, but then, if I'm not involved in [community], it's hard for me. I go back to my old behaviors, my old ways, my unbelief, and the lies that I tell myself. It's so easy to get wrapped up in that. But then as soon as I get back in that healthy, safe environment, then I think,

“Wow, what was I thinking? I can live a better life. I don't have to live those lies. This is true.”

Hazel answered the question of what constitutes a “clear-eyed friend:”

A “clear-eyed friend” is somebody who actually understands what it means to be immersed in God's love. I think I have an understanding; I'm not there completely yet. It is someone who sees God for who He really is. That's clear-eyed. Someone who sees the word of God for what it really is; who sees Jesus for who He is; who sees the Trinity as a strong [relational] connection into which I am invited. Someone who recognizes the performance trap we fall into.

But there can be major roadblocks to having close community with other believers. Amy confessed a personal lifelong struggle in the area of community:

God's message of love for me through this entire [immersion] process has taught me some valuable insights regarding community. If you're not second-guessing yourself all the time and if you love yourself because you know God loves you, you can love other people. And that brings a lot better community. When you are jealous of somebody because they have more money, better clothes, and they are thin, it is hard to really love her and have good community with her. That's how [immersion] has helped me in the area of community: I'm seeing the people through clear eyes. I'm seeing their heart.

When people are self-focused, they really cannot enter into a caring community and honestly extend themselves and love others.

Several women mentioned what was to them an amazing absence of safe community for many of their fellow immersion participants in their respective church communities. While all the women emphasized safety as critical to their groups, Amy actually admitted that before

immersion, the deep shame and events shared in her safe group would have “appalled” her and would have been rich information for “Christian gossip” in her circles:

I see community as really important. Both times I’ve gone through [immersion], I felt like all the women in each group have just come out with the deep things from their lives. Many of them never have done that before as they didn’t feel safe to be vulnerable. I knew growing up in my church, deep sharing would have been food for “Christian gossip”—“Let’s pray for her.” Someone [in my group] has shared, “I had an affair,” or “I was sexually abused.” In many cases they had never told anybody that. The fact that they brought that out and were willing to share that in class—people were understanding and had empathy. I feel that’s very healing.

It is precisely the critical and judgmental attitudes of many in the church that create unsafe environments for people to share the deep hurts and burdens of their lives and miss the opportunity to experience God’s healing in their lives. However, there are some churches that promote the Immersion Experience and align with its teaching that are creating some safe environments. Roy reported that his church has several ministries encouraging sharing and vulnerability:

I would say a life skill learned in the Immersion Experience is living in community. That was a big one because I was neglecting that for a long time. I was isolated completely. That wasn’t healthy at all. So, living in community is very important. We also have a couples’ group at our church. While none of the other couples have been through the Immersion Experience, we share at a deep level. I never felt comfortable sharing before. There is a lot of stuff that is coming out that people have shared in our group.

Our church also has a men's group called "Men's Fraternity" that meets at 6:00 a.m. during the week. Their thing is to teach men to open up, to share, to learn, to communicate, and not isolate. That's a big thing.

Larry found acceptance, not judgment, in leading his small group at church:

I also lead a community group at [my church] on Sunday mornings, and a couple of the people there are starting to see through [my mask that I put up]....I was waiting for them to say, "How come you're in charge if you're admitting [you have] these kind of problems?" [One of the women] said, "You were afraid to tell me God doesn't want you because you're screwed up? Look around this room. Tell me, who is perfect? There isn't anyone." She said, "Yeah. [God's] got to use somebody who is screwed up. He chose you. You have a problem with that? Take it up with Him, not me." Oh. Okay. I'm starting to realize that even my screwed up things can help somebody else. I'm still working with me.

It's funny. The vulnerability and the pain is the stuff that causes people to say, "I can actually relate to that. Let me open up [and share] some things that I've been trying to hide."

The Immersion Experience has truly been life changing for many who have processed through it. Gail encouraged those considering immersion to be willing to see their lives churned up as they seek an enhanced relationship with God:

I think that the Immersion Experience, for those who are open to it and ready for it, can be a phenomenal tool for God to use in digging up fallow ground in their hearts. It can help move people beyond where they are in their relationship with him and with others.

My encouragement would be to not be afraid; to go there. Yes, it's chaotic. Yes, it hurts sometimes. Yet out of that chaos, God brings order and beauty.

Having graduated from Bible College, Alice said immersion was a different way of learning who God is:

I think [Immersion] was really very life-changing because it put vocabulary to some thoughts I'd had. It's given me vocabulary to be able to engage other people in walking through life, "living loved" so to speak. I am in process. So I just want to pull people with me and say, "Come help me sort this out. What does 'living loved' look like?" I've gone to Bible school. I know how to study the Bible; all that stuff. But when I went through [immersion], it was almost as if this was a different dimension of learning who God is. It is a different way of seeing who God is. It's about digging deeper into some of the lies [I have believed for so long]. It's really been life-changing for me.

How to emotionally connect with God is how Diane described immersion:

I think the [immersion] process is truly transforming, or it can be if you let it. The Holy Spirit does that work in your life. Truly it's the Spirit that has to change our hearts: that comes out in the process. I think that God's love is one of the main themes of [immersion]; and God's love that grips your emotions. I think that one of the main things that stood out in my mind and my husband's, was the fact of how to emotionally connect with God.

In promoting immersion, Rusty tried to zero in on its primary benefit for Christians:

If you take [immersion], your primary relationship with your loving God—or your loving dad, or your loving Abba—will improve so much that it will cause your extended

relationships to improve. Oh, and by the way, things will be a whole lot better in your life because your primary relationship is that much better.

**Conclusion.** This section looked at the twofold phenomenon of religious confusion before the age of 18 and the impact of the Immersion Experience on those affected by religious confusion. It did so through the lens of phenomenology, a qualitative method of inquiry. Interviews were conducted with 16 participants, eight women and eight men, all alumni of the Immersion Experience.

Being religiously confused, the primary focus of the 16 participants was on performance for God to earn His acceptance. That is what the attention given to rule keeping, good behavior, and a person's actions amounted to. Both genders of the interviewees who had a difficult relationship with their earthly fathers transferred that distortion over to God the Father. Many viewed God as a judge waiting to punish them if they messed up in life. With that concept of their heavenly Father, it is no wonder that many experienced a relationship breakdown with God. The participants responded to their religious confusion in a variety of ways. Several of the men and many of the women were compliant, withholding their mounting anxiety and resentment until they could leave their homes. Several coped with alcohol and drugs, premarital sex, and extreme physical activity.

There were a number of positive outcomes for the 16 participants having processed through the Immersion Experience. Everyone became better aware and accepting of their emotions. This was a forerunner to an improved relationship with God the Father. It was also an entrée to a more positive way of dealing with inner anxieties and anger that erupted. By facing their emotions and attempting to trace them back to the source of the residual pain in their lives, they had a good opportunity of applying Christ's healing balm to long-suffering inner hurt.



All of the 16 participants greatly benefited from the safe groups set up within the Immersion Experience. The oftentimes scary opportunity for participants to divulge long-hidden shame from their lives, coupled with the response of affirmation from the group members, allowed God's unconditional love to flow through them, and they were able to experience inner healing. Everyone agreed that no one attempted to fix them after they bared their hearts in raw vulnerability.

The apex of each interviewee's experience of the Immersion Experience was bonding with God the Father in a relationship of trust. This was presented in a variety of perspectives by the participants, but it amounted to removing the doubt and mistrust of God through the teachings and events of one's upbringing and forging a new, enhanced relationship with God the Father. Susie captured the spirit in which God approached everyone through her occasional interactions with her son:

I've even seen it with my son. When I do show him love, his behavior is amazing. He's this whole new kid. I'm just astounded that he would even be that way. I didn't think he could be that way, because I thought I had to make him that way—follow these rules....But when I just love him, he is just like, "Mom, let's hang out. And let's do this." He is just awesome, and he loves me. I'm just amazed. But it's so hard to stay right there.

God's love through His Son Jesus Christ reaches out to each one. It's not about the rules and performance. He just wants an accepting response—a relationship in which He can just "hang out."

Most of the 16 interviewees experienced God's delight in them inconsistently, tying the concept to their present circumstances. Everyone agreed that the aspect of brokenness was

important to the immersion process. Besides cultivating personal humility, brokenness has been a pivotal piece tied together with God's grace that can result in the Christian extending forgiveness to others for past hurts. Extending trust was enhanced during the immersion process. The importance of community was a significant aspect for everyone as well.

Several distinctions between the two genders became apparent in the study. Seven of the eight women related their stories, identifying a one-parent wound most related to their religious confusion during childhood. The most common problem was the lack of an emotional connection with fathers. Such a distinction was not apparent with the male interviewees.

A majority of the men and all of the women found it hard to trust God. Unique to all of the women was their difficulty in trusting other people to have their best interests in mind. They had evidently been hurt enough by people for it to have made an indelible mark.

Several men who had been bound up in feelings of long-standing worthlessness talked about this condition effectively shielding them from absorbing God's truths into their lives. None of the women made mention of this.

Important to both genders was the safe group in immersion and continuing on in community with the same safety in order to be vulnerable. Several specifically mentioned the lack of safe groups in the churches and the crying need for the people of God to be vulnerable. Amy addressed the generally unspoken issue of not keeping what is heard in the groups confidential by divulging that the church of her youth would have gobbled up the shame-filled stories shared in the safe groups and spread them through Christian gossip.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

This study has focused on the Immersion Experience Christian discipleship process. It has sought to understand the nature and effect of religious confusion in the home of origin before the age of 18. The study has also attempted to discern if adults processing through immersion have experienced transformative learning and if this new understanding has helped address the effects of growing up religiously confused.

#### **Research questions.**

Four research questions guided this study. They are as follows:

1. What impact does growing up in a religiously confused home of origin have on Christ-followers in regard to fully experiencing God's love in their daily lives?
2. Is there a perception of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults having processed through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience?
3. What are the believers' instinctive responses (natural or acquired tendencies) to unexpected stress and prolonged pain (emotional, relational, physical, or spiritual), and how is this demonstrated in critical relationships with God, self, and significant personal relationships?
4. How do Christ-followers view God, self, and others, and what impact does this have on their transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience?

The researcher has used the four research questions as the main outline points for presenting his conclusions of the study. However, the order in which they are presented in this

final conclusion has been rearranged to allow a more logical flow of the data. Referring to the above stated research questions, the new order is 1, 4, 3, and then 2.

### **Religious Confusion**

The first research question answered is “What impact does growing up in a religiously confused home of origin have on Christ-followers in regard to fully experiencing God’s love in their daily lives?” Initial consideration was given to the characteristics of religious confusion, followed by the participants’ response to this phenomenon.

**Characteristics of religious confusion.** Reference regarding this subject should also be made to Figure 2. Performance expectations by parents and churches are a main aspect of religious confusion. This is characterized by rule keeping, legalistic restrictions on activities, emphasis on good behavior, the actions of a person, and criticism of others who do not abide by the family rules. There are instances of unrealistically high expectations regarding behavior. In contrast with the men, the survey data indicate that women experience a noticeably higher perception of two actions in their homes: (a) rule keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home and (b) being critical of others was very much a part of my home (see Table 6).

Another feature of religious confusion is the discouragement of emotions. The survey data show significant improvement in both genders to two items relating to emotion: (a) God is emotional and (b) my emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe (see Table 4). Interview participants variously referred to their felt need to stuff, deny, or bury their feelings. In the rare instance of the parent being willing to hear what was frustrating their child, there was no follow-up conversation or attempt to bring about resolution and understanding. One woman interviewee spoke of her mother’s lifelong training that emphasized emotions were a reflection of immaturity. The majority of women interviewees who focused their religious confusion at

their fathers stated they lacked an emotional connection with their dads. Several of the male interviewees also spoke of emotional shutdown in their homes.

Several interviewees mentioned they made decisions to become Christians based on a choice of heaven or hell, not with the concept of entering into a life-changing relationship with the living God through His Son Jesus Christ. Relationship with God was not the emphasis.

Many of the interview participants commented that God's love and grace were not evident in their homes of origin. Several mentioned that they did not learn of grace until they were adults.

**Response to religious confusion.** As exemplified by the following data, religious confusion in the home of origin develops expectations and attitudes that impact how Christ-followers' experience God's love in their daily lives. Several of the interviewees spoke of having a meaningful relationship with Christ while growing up. Unfortunately, this did not protect them from emotional and spiritual hurt in the process. This is evident in Gail's account: "I remember as a young teenager writing in my journal, 'God, don't let me grow up to be like my mom. I want to be wholehearted. I want to be your girl.' But I would despair that it was even possible."

The survey data shows a significant positive shift in attitudes and beliefs on the part of both genders regarding their personal value being wrapped up with their performance in life (see Table 5). On a 5-point scale, both genders show an average improvement of  $> +1.50$  on the four items. The four items are as follows: (a) I feel it is important to work hard to please God, (b) God is more pleased with me when I perform well, (c) I believe that God is disappointed with me when I fail, and (d) I feel that "I am what I do." With regard to items 1 and 2, women made a

significantly stronger shift than the men. This indicates a greater struggle within the women with these issues.

Most of the men and women interview participants grew up outwardly compliant to their parents' wishes—a majority of them with mounting frustration and resentment. Several of the men mentioned they did well keeping the home rules and became judgmental in the process. Half of them rebelled and ran from God as soon as they could leave their homes. Their coping variously involved alcohol, drugs, premarital sex, and extreme physical activities.

The women interviewees coped with their home dysfunction in two ways. Several experienced substance abuse, later needing treatment for their addictions. Most of the other women attempted to earn God's pleasure with their obedient lives, while growing resentful and unforgiving in an otherwise platonic relationship with Him.

A significant aspect with all but one of the women interviewees is the evidence of a serious one-parent wound, where they focused on a single parent primarily connected to their religious confusion. In most cases, the other parent was not mentioned in the course of the interview. The majority of these women focused on their fathers, and the most common wound mentioned was a lack of emotional connection. One woman was beaten regularly. Several mentioned a mother or mother figure, creating issues of setting an unreachable standard of performance, being critical and judgmental, or leaving them feeling betrayed. Most of the women with a father-wound transferred that perception onto God the Father.

Both genders in the interview participants did not learn healthy ways to express their emotions at home. Therefore, they tended to react emotionally to life as circumstances confronted them. Having just validated emotions in their lives, several mentioned the difficulty they have in experiencing God's delight.

Feeling worthlessness is true for a number of the men interviewees and many of the women. This has resulted in serious trust issues they have with other people and also with God. A lack of self-worth results in the development of and the wearing of masks in life to project a different persona. Several men commented on their masks.

Several of the men admitted to having deep bouts with depression and seeking professional help. Two of them mentioned that their lack of self-worth shielded them from absorbing God's truth into their lives.

### **Christians' View of God, Themselves, and Others**

The second research question addressed is "How do Christ-followers view God, self, and others, and what impact does this have on their transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience?"

**View of God, self, and others.** This question addressed Christians' spiritually and emotionally unhealthy view of God, themselves, and others. How did immersion deal with the lack of health to bring about transformative change in their lives?

***Christians' view of God.*** The interviewees described their relationship with God as platonic or stoical, not rich in relationship. A number conveyed they had only an intellectual or head knowledge of the love of God. Several described their salvation experience as a choice between heaven and hell, and they chose heaven. This was not necessarily entering into a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ.

A number of the interview participants described their view of God the Father as a judge waiting to pounce on them when they made mistakes or failed to perform up to His expectations. Their obedience to God was in order to earn His love and favor. Many of those who had a

father-wound with their earthly father transferred the image of that damaged relationship onto God the Father.

Those images of God the Father engender a lack of trust. Many interviewees spoke of their lack of worth. Two males said their worthlessness blocked God's truth from penetrating their hearts and lives. One male interviewee spoke of his lifelong distrust of God and his persistent doubt of his salvation.

These underlying assumptions regarding God contrast with the intellectually received message that God loves these believers as His children. Such an understanding ties into the second lens of this study; namely, resistance to change. Kegan and Lahey (2009) wrote about the need for people truly desiring change to challenge the underlying big assumptions that undermine and counteract their intended change.

***Christians' view of self.*** Christians' unhealthy view of themselves breaks down into two categories. Those that continue to perform to earn God's favor are self-righteous Pharisees. An honest self-appraisal unearthed pride in their achievements.

The other group sees themselves as worthless and shame-filled. Several of the male interviewees in this category said God's truth was not for them. Believers either perform in an earnest attempt to please God, or they quit, yielding to coping mechanisms and addictions.

***Christians' view of others.*** Christians who feel worthless and shame-filled constantly believe themselves to be criticized and judged by others. These believers view others as continually deciding their value and finding them falling short of expectations.

A number of the interview participants have a parent-wound tied to their religious confusion home of origin. The hurtful messages received many years ago still resound in their



memories. The result is a lack of trust in others. The women interviewees stated they have trouble trusting that others have their best interests in mind.

**Transformative change as a result of the Immersion Experience.** The message that Christians receive from immersion as they process through the 22-lesson course is delivered in an intermixed fashion through their views of God, themselves, and others. Interviewees uniformly agree that understanding their own brokenness is humbling, making them teachable in the hands of God. Understanding the brokenness of others, several said, ushers them into forgiveness instead of self-righteousness. They all understand that God validates the emotions He created them with, rather than denying the truth of them cropping up in their lives.

The interviewees were unanimous in stating the value of immersion's safe group setting. This environment enabled all of them to vulnerably share from the depths of their beings and be affirmed in their value before God and the other group members. Several termed the experience as "healing," and the very act of bringing the shame out into the open causes it to lose its power over them. This experience is powerful in striking down people's identity of worthlessness. They begin to accept themselves as beautiful in God's eyes and remove the masks they have been wearing to disguise their true identities.

All of the interview participants encountered the unconditional love of God the Father in a relationship of trust. After the first six lessons, this message was continually brought up like a broken record. Some very quickly enter into this relationship. For others, it takes almost the entire course before they realize that something is different in their relationship with God. It happens almost unnoticeably. As a result, they begin to trust that God really values them just as He made them. All of them begin to experience the delight that God has in them. As Gail said, "God's eyes light up when He sees me."

The interview participants begin to trust that other people are not always judging them or trying to undermine them. They have a better understanding of how to read the emotions they feel rising up within them rather than reacting out of fear and anger. They are able to invite “clear-eyed friends” into their lives to help them process life through God’s wisdom. They are all encouraged to seek out a safe community as a follow-up to their Immersion Experience and were doing so at the times of the interviews.

### **The Christian’s Response to Stress and Pain and Its Effect on Critical Relationships**

The third research question considered is “What are the believers’ instinctive responses (natural or acquired tendencies) to unexpected stress and prolonged pain (emotional, relational, physical, or spiritual), and how is this demonstrated in critical relationships with God, self, and significant personal relationships?” The stressful events listed below intermingle the critical relationships of God, self, and significant relationships together in the people’s lives as issues are confronted.

**Response to pain.** There are three sources of data from the study that address this issue of stress and pain.

***From the survey data.*** Four survey statements relate to the subject of stress and pain. They all show a significant positive shift in attitudes and beliefs after processing through immersion. The one item addressing forgiveness shows that immersion helps the participants to place a higher value on resolving relational hurt rather than allowing it to fester untreated.

The other three survey statements deal with pain and demonstrate significant improvement after immersion. The respondents made a shift to acknowledge God’s hand in the pain they experience for their good and show the respondents’ view of God as judge changing measurably.

***From the interviews.*** The interviewees talked about how they are in the process of learning to trust God “in pockets,” or little by little. It is not instinctive yet for some, so they continue to work through the deep hurt and pain in their lives in order to help them regain trust in spite of the circumstances they are facing. They discussed the temptation to doubt God when trouble hits them, as though God were punishing them. It appears hard for some to move beyond envisioning God the Father as the judge.

Some of the interview participants are still subject to self-criticism in the face of pain. This appears in the tug of their feelings of worthlessness, which are still instinctual. Perceived snubs from friends also are felt as painful. The question continues to haunt some whether others have their best interests in mind.

Some showed concern about their continuing excessive emotional reactions during interpersonal exchanges or circumstances. They walked through their procedure of recognizing the emotion in order to trace it back to where the deeper hurt may be tucked away in their subconscious rather than choosing to strike out at the other person.

A variety of coping mechanisms were displayed in the interviews: distracting via digital games on Facebook, wanting to get up and flee the uncomfortable situation, and numbing out. These are perceived as more socially acceptable, but still accomplishing a similar purpose as alcohol or drugs.

***From the essay question.*** Describing his transformative change because of immersion, a man stated:

I had felt that any bumps in the road were *a direct result of me messing up in God's mind*, and He was trying to discipline me for my short comings. *I always felt that He was punishing me for falling short and was disappointed* in the way I was leading my life. I

had no idea that *He loved me continually and unconditionally, no matter how much I messed up*. It was important for me to realize that I'm not a success or failure because of what results I get from my job or other activities.

**A disorienting dilemma.** A main tenant in Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory is the need for people to have a disorienting dilemma to spur them on to seek change. For the interviewees, both their stated unsatisfactory reaction to stress and pain and their yearning for a closer relationship with God are motivation to make a commitment to process through immersion.

### **Transformative Effect on Beliefs and Attitudes from the Immersion Experience**

The fourth and final research question addressed is "Is there a perception of transformation in beliefs and attitudes (the inner life) producing changed actions (behaviors) of the adults having processed through the 22-lesson Immersion Experience?" Analyzed separately by gender, the three sources of data all affirm that transformation has occurred in many of the adults who have processed through the curriculum. The data sources are considered individually in the following discussion.

**The survey data.** The data from the survey demonstrates significant positive changes in attitudes and beliefs of the immersion alumni. The first component, "God values me," was noticeably the strongest of the four, explaining 25.7% of the total variance of the entire survey. Valued by God and experiencing His delight made a significant positive shift in the attitudes of the respondents (see Table 3). The most significant finding of the survey is God loving and valuing His children, through even the painful circumstances encountered in life. This finding will be exhibited in the other data as well.

“Validating emotions in a trusting community” was second in significance, indicated by the survey results. All of the seven items show significant positive change by the respondents. Immersion alumni experience safe community in their small groups, enabling them to validate and express their emotions and extend trust to the other group members as they share vulnerably from their lives. This experience, combined with that of being valued by God (component one), enables them to more readily extend forgiveness for past hurts in their lives.

“God the task master” was the third component and demonstrated positive significant change by the respondents (see Table 5). This component addresses two related themes: pain and performance. It is not uncommon for Christians in western culture to view God as a judge waiting to punish them painfully if they do not perform up to the perceived standard. This component demonstrates a strong shift amongst respondents away from perceiving God as a hurtful judge after completing immersion. The final component was “religious confusion.” Participants acknowledged that a majority of them grew up in a religiously confused home of origin.

The two variables that show a significant, but not overwhelming, change deal with the respondents understanding their homes to be either religiously confused or dysfunctional. Both of these cumulative responses show the only negative shifts in the entire survey, indicating that immersion gives the respondents words and a language to express their frustration and confusion with the conditions in their childhood homes.

**The essay question results.** Because Mezirow’s (1991, 2009) transformative learning theory is the theoretical framework for this study, the researcher attempted to determine if participants who complete the Immersion Experience undergo transformative learning. Therefore, he included as part of the survey an optional essay question asking respondents if they

and experienced a paradigm shift after completing the Immersion Experience. Five percent of the participants did not experience a change in their attitudes and beliefs. However, 80% reported that their experience was transformative. There are no significant differences in the results by gender.

**The interview results.** Living in the western United States, the 16 participants are all alumni of the Immersion Experience, volunteered to be interviewed in the administered survey, and identified themselves as having been raised in a religiously confused home before the age of 18.

**Religious confusion.** The criteria of religious confusion for the interviewees focused the study to analyze further the features of religious confusion in the home of origin as well as the responses of children, now adults, who experienced this phenomenon. Attachment issues to parents surfaced in the interviews. It is not uncommon for hurts experienced by participants from their parents in childhood to be emotionally transferred to God the Father. This creates trust issues with God for many of the participants. Perceiving God as an angry judge ready to visit punishment on them is a common understanding.

**The Immersion Experience.** Every one of the 16 interview participants had professed faith in Christ Jesus as evangelical Christians before they entered the immersion process. Yet all of them carried sufficient pain and hurt in their lives to seek out the Immersion Experience discipleship process to help them move past roadblocks in their spiritual and emotional lives and gain a more intimate relationship with their God. Several aspects of immersion stand out in bringing about transformative change.

Having newly validated their emotions, the participants are now on a path to acknowledge feelings that erupt from within them, which usually cause them to overreact to the

personal interaction or circumstance they currently face. As an introspective process, they now have the tools to begin to trace those emerging feelings back to the source of deep hurt in their lives with the view of receiving inner healing from God as they are assured of the character of His constant love. A maturing process is recognized by many as they face stress and pain in their lives.

Immersion requires commitment by the participants to a set of norms (see Figure 13), as well as a set of values (see Figure 14). Adherence by group members to these norms and values greatly helps to establish a safe community for the participants to be honest and vulnerable, while sharing deeply shameful aspects of their lives. Bringing shame out into the open robs it of much of its power. Valuing the acceptance of others makes the group safe, as there is no judgment and attempt to fix each other.

It is important to understand the immersion process in order for it to be helpful. While an intimate relationship with God is encouraged beginning with the seventh lesson, participants arrive at this juncture at their own pace. Essential to the process of getting there is gaining an understanding of the following: the place of sin in the fall of mankind, the brokenness of the world and of individuals as a result, the character of God as revealed in the Bible, the new identity of the believer in Christ, and the purpose of emotions and pain in life (see Figure 1). In order for participants to experience the deep love of God the Father, they must learn to trust Him. Trust issues must be addressed to remove the roadblocks that interfere with an intimate relationship of bonding with the living God.

## **Summary**

The strength of the Immersion Experience is helping Christ-followers bond with God the Father in a relationship of trust. A significant aspect of this transformative learning is helping

participants face the pain and hurt in their lives with God beside them encouraging them. This is key to helping people evaluate their underlying assumptions and attachments which can be detrimental to growing in maturity in their faith.

Also of major importance in immersion is the creation of a safe group environment enabling participants to feel free to share vulnerably and deeply. The accepting encouragement by fellow group members relaxes many and motivates them to give voice to their shame. Bringing shame into the open is a powerful step forward to healing and fosters wholehearted living.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the claims of Mezirow (1991) is that transformative learning is permanent. A similar survey could be sent out to the same participants one or more years subsequent to this study to compare the results. The interviewees could be interviewed again one or more years later, especially examining this lasting aspect of the experience.

A concerted effort was made by the researcher to analyze all of the data collected by gender. There were a few distinctions that were noted. Seven of the eight women interviewees experienced a one-parent wound, while three of the men focused on their fathers as the primary source of dysfunction in their homes. The predominance of the one-parent wound among the women experiencing religious confusion is worthy of further research and understanding.

Several of the women's responses on the survey to statements of personal worth indicated that they began immersion with a lower view than the men did. Further research could be focused on this finding, which seems to be based on performance.

The Immersion Experience incorporated a number of participation exercises that had been noted by the interviewees as powerful emotive events. However, the curriculum was still



heavy with cognitive information. Since a revision is currently underway, this writer hopes that more participation exercises may be incorporated in the future.

Two of the male interview participants referred to immersion as “therapy,” while Aphasis Group Ministries maintains it offers an educational discipleship process. Further research could compare and contrast their educational model for transformation with that of clinical therapy.

This researcher has noted a number of similar areas explored by both the Immersion Experience and *Theophostic Prayer Ministry* (TPM) (Garzon, 2004, 2008; Garzon & Poloma, 2005; Smith, 2002/2005), an inner prayer ministry (Garzon & Burkett, 2002; Tan, 2003). While there has been increased interest and research in the efficacy of TPM (Crous, 2009; Entwistle, 2004a, 2004b; Garzon, 2008; Hunter, 2006; Hunter & Yarhouse, 2009; Kleinschuster, 2004; Steyn, 2008; Witherspoon, 2002), a comparison of outcomes of the two ministries would be insightful. In this writer’s opinion, immersion is a discipleship process, whereas TPM operates more as an inner healing surgical process to repair past hurts.

Of the immersion alumni, less than 10% of the survey participants were under age 31 (see Figure 7). Because of the transformative learning offered by immersion, every effort should be made to target young adults who are entering marriage and parenthood to help them achieve emotionally healthy spirituality and curb the powerful impact of religious confusion in the home.

As immersion is expanding into the Far East in a number of locations, it would be helpful to explore the transformative learning by alumni of different cultures other than the western United States.

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## Appendix A

### Survey

#### The Immersion Group Experience (Aphesis Group Experience)

Q88. The following survey should take only 20 minutes of your time. Your answers are confidential. This is a voluntary questionnaire. If you do not feel comfortable answering one or multiple questions, please leave them blank. Your completion of the survey and returning it is your permission to use the data results for this research project. He is an Ed.D. (candidate) student at Northwest Nazarene University. Thank you!

Q3. The following is a list of demographic questions that will help the researcher in the data analysis phase of the study. You are not required to answer the questions.

#### A. Demographic Section.

Q4. My gender is:                    ^ male                    ^ female

Q5. My age is:

^ 18-25 years	^ 26-30 years	^ 31-35 years
^ 36-40 years	^ 41-45 years	^ 46-50 years
^ 51-55 years	^ 56-60 years	^ 61-65 years
^ 66-70 years	^ 71+ years	

Q6. I completed the Immersion Experience (Aphesis Group Experience) as either a participant or a facilitator during the following year(s) [answer all that apply]:

^ 2010                    ^ 2011                    ^ 2012                    ^ 2013

Q8. My church background is:

^ Evangelical Christian                    ^ Protestant                    ^ Non-denominational  
^ Roman Catholic                    ^ Latter-day Saints                    ^ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Q9. I (or my spouse) am in or have been in vocational ministry (in a paid position for ministry):

^ yes                    ^ no

**Appendix A continued (p. 2)**

Q10. My highest education level is:

- ^ did not finish high school
- ^ high school graduate
- ^ some college/technical school credits
- ^ Associates Degree/Technical School graduate
- ^ College/University graduate
- ^ Masters degree
- ^ Post-graduate studies

Q11. My ethnicity/race is (check one or more boxes as needed):

- ^ White
- ^ Black, African American, or Negro
- ^ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish
- ^ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ^ Chinese
- ^ Asian Indian
- ^ Korean
- ^ Japanese
- ^ Vietnamese
- ^ Native Hawaiian
- ^ Filipino
- ^ Samoan
- ^ Other

**B. My Attitudes and Beliefs BEFORE taking the Immersion Experience.**

(1) Strongly agree    (2) Agree    (3) Undecided    (4) Disagree    (5) Strongly Disagree

[Questions in both **BOLD TYPE**, as well as underlined, have had their answers reversed]

Q13. God likes me.

Q14. Before taking the Immersion Experience, I felt that I was of great worth.

Q15. I understood the perspectives and skills needed to resolve my relational hurts and pains caused by others (forgiveness).

**Q16. I believe I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18).**

**Q17. Much of my pain felt like God was punishing me.**

**Q18. Before taking the Immersion Experience I felt that "I am what I do."**

Appendix A continued (p. 3)

**Q19. When I had unresolved conflict with others, I tended to ignore issues rather than work them through a resolution.**

**Q20. Pain felt like the consequence of my mistakes.**

**Q21. God was more pleased with me when I performed well.**

Q22. I am worth knowing and having a relationship with.

**Q23. Before taking the Immersion Experience, I believed that God was disappointed with me when I failed.**

Q24. Pain is a gift.

Q25. I believed that resolving my past relational hurt and pains with others was critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, and joy.

**Q26. Before taking the Immersion Experience I felt it was important to work hard to please God.**

Q27. God is more interested in who I am than what I do.

Q28. Emotions are a gift.

Q29. Before taking the Immersion Experience I felt that God delighted in me as an individual.

**Q30. I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).**

Q31. My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.

**Q32. I have been deeply compromised (my belief system is messed up) by the fall, by culture, by my family of origin.**

Q33. Before taking the Immersion Experience I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends was critical to my joy and peace.

Q34. God is emotional.

Q35. I experienced God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.

Q36. I have been deeply shaped by my family (before age 18) in how I view God and how I live my Christian life.

**Appendix A continued (p. 4)**

Q37. Before taking the Immersion Experience I felt safe being authentic and vulnerable sharing deeply personal things with my group.

**Q38. Rule keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home (before age 18).**

Q39. Trust was critical to my well-being.

Q40. Before taking the Immersion Experience I felt that being part of a safe community was critical to my emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

**Q41. Being critical of others was very much a part of my home (before age 18).**

Q42. Trust was very important in my relationships with others.

**Q43. Obeying God's rules were of highest importance in my home (before age 18).**

**C. My Attitudes and Beliefs NOW after processing through the Immersion Experience.**  
[repeat statements from section B here in a different order]

(1) Strongly agree    (2) Agree    (3) Undecided    (4) Disagree    (5) Strongly Disagree

[Questions in both **BOLD TYPE**, as well as underlined, have had their answers "flipped," or reversed]

Q45. God delights in me as an individual.

Q46. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends is critical to my joy and peace.

Q47. I believe that resolving my relational hurt and pains with others is critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, and joy.

Q48. Trust is critical to my well-being.

Q49. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that God likes me.  
I am valuable to God.

**Q50. I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18).**

**Q51. Pain feels like God is punishing me.**

**Q52. When I have unresolved conflict with others, I tend to ignore issues rather than work them through to a resolution.**

Appendix A continued (p. 5)

**Q53. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that I am what I do.**

Q54. Emotions are a gift.

Q55. I am of great worth.

**Q56. God is more pleased with me when I perform well.**

Q57. After completing the Immersion Experience I believe that trust is very important in my relationships with others.

**Q58. Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.**

**Q59. God is disappointed with me when I fail.**

**Q60. Rule keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home (before age 18).**

Q61. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel safe being authentic and vulnerable sharing deeply personal things with my group.

Q62. I am worth knowing.

Q63. Pain is a gift.

**Q64. Being critical of others was very much a part of my home (before age 18).**

**Q65. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel it is important to work hard to please God.**

Q66. My emotions are a great indicator of what I really believe.

**Q67. I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).**

**Q68. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel I had been deeply compromised (leaving my belief system messed up) by the fall, by culture, by my family of origin.**

**Q69. Obeying God's rules were of highest importance in my home (before age 18).**

Q70. God is emotional.

Q71. I understand and practice the perspectives and skills needed to resolve my relational hurts and pains caused by others (forgiveness).



### Appendix A continued (p. 6)

Q72. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel God is more interested in who I am than what I do.

Q73. I experience God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.

Q74. How I now view God and how I live my Christian life is deeply shaped by my family (before age 18)

Q75. After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that being part of a safe group is critical to my emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

#### **D. Optional Essay Question:**

Q77. Describe any paradigm shifts (profound changes in perspective) that occurred in your experience of God the Father and your daily walk with Christ after processing through the Immersion Experience.

#### **E. Openness to be interviewed regarding my Immersion Experience.**

Q79. I would be willing to be interviewed about my experiences having completed the Immersion Experience/Aphesis Group Experience.

- ☐ yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To: End of Survey/If yes Is Selected, Then Skip To: The following is my contact information:

Q82. Thank you for being willing to be interviewed. Please take several minutes to include some contact information so I can follow up with you. Thanks, again!

Q80. The following is my contact information:

- ☐ My Name: (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ My email address: (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ My Cell. Phone Number including area code: (3) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ My alternate Phone Number including area code: (4) \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix A continued (p. 7)**

Q81. I live at:

- ☐ City/Town: (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ State/Province: (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Country: (3) \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **First E-mail Correspondence**

Subject: Request Help Regarding Survey—Aphesis Group Ministries

My name is James “Jim” Lang and I am conducting research on the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience (formerly called Aphesis Group Experience) 22-week small group discipleship process that you completed.

The following is a list of demographic questions that would help the researcher in the data analysis phase of the study. You are not required to answer the questions. This is a voluntary questionnaire. If you do not feel comfortable answering one or multiple questions, please leave them blank. Thank you.

The questions on the quantitative survey are a review of material studied and discussed during the Immersion Experience curriculum and participants will not be surprised and should not feel uncomfortable answering the questions. Besides the demographic questions, the survey questions ask participants to rank their perceptions about the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience.

## Appendix C

### Aphesis Group Ministries' Approval Letter



March 11, 2013

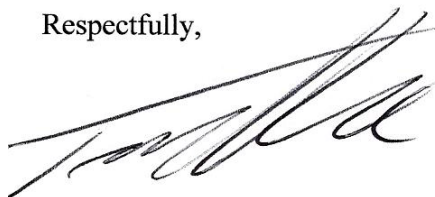
Northwest Nazarene University  
Attention: HRRC Committee  
Helstrom Business Center, First Floor  
623 S. University Boulevard  
Nampa, Idaho 83686

RE: Research Population Access for Rev. James A. Lang

Dear HRRC Members:

This letter is to inform the HRRC Committee that the administration at Aphesis Group Ministries has reviewed the proposed dissertation research plan including the subjects, intervention, assessment procedures, proposed data and collection procedures, interview protocol, data analysis, and purpose of the study. We will email the survey designed by Rev. James Lang and tabulate the confidential results. He may use the results in his research study. From the by-name positive responses, Rev. James Lang has permission to contact alumni of the Immersion Experience, all adults over the age of eighteen, to conduct his research interviews. The authorization dates for this research study are July 2013 through May 2014.

Respectfully,



Tim Rule  
Founder & Director  
208.887.9280  
[www.AphesisGroup.com](http://www.AphesisGroup.com)

## **Appendix D**

### **Second E-mail Correspondence**

Subject: Please Help Aphasis Group Ministries Evaluate the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience!

If you have already completed the short survey, please disregard this email.

My name is James “Jim” Lang and I am conducting research on the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience (formerly called Aphasis Group Experience) 22-week small group discipleship process that you completed.

The following is a list of demographic questions that would help the researcher in the data analysis phase of the study. You are not required to answer the questions. This is a voluntary questionnaire. If you do not feel comfortable answering one or multiple questions, please leave them blank. Thank you.

The questions on the quantitative survey are a review of material studied and discussed during the Immersion Experience curriculum and participants will not be surprised and should not feel uncomfortable answering the questions. Besides the demographic questions, the survey questions ask participants to rank their perceptions about the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience.

## **Appendix E**

### **Third E-mail Correspondence**

Subject: Aphasis Group Ministries Needs Your Help!

If you have already completed the short survey, please disregard this email.

My name is James “Jim” Lang and I am conducting research on the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience (formerly called Aphasis Group Experience) 22-week small group discipleship process that you completed.

The following is a list of demographic questions that would help the researcher in the data analysis phase of the study. You are not required to answer the questions. This is a voluntary questionnaire. If you do not feel comfortable answering one or multiple questions, please leave them blank. Thank you.

The questions on the quantitative survey are a review of material studied and discussed during the Immersion Experience curriculum and participants will not be surprised and should not feel uncomfortable answering the questions. Besides the demographic questions, the survey questions ask participants to rank their perceptions about the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience.

## Appendix F

### Comparison: Religiously Confused versus Christ-Filled Homes

#### *Comparisons between a Religiously Confused, Dysfunctional Home and a Healthy, Christ-filled Home.*

##### **Religiously Confused / Dysfunctional Home**

God's love and grace are talked about, but are not strongly felt among family members.

Rule keeping is the highest value.

The Christian life is emphasized and lifted up to be of highest importance.

What a person does is more important than who they are.

Environment is heavy with unmet expectations.

Environment is unsafe and produces a "*false self*." *The false self* is lived out and daily exemplified by parents.

Good behavior is of high priority.

Boundaries are established by the Law and maintained by rejection of behavior and the person.

Displays of emotions are discouraged and not talked about.

Gratefulness for good behavior is what is most often expressed.

The Laws of God are lifted up and touted as of highest importance.

Doing the right things and being nice is strongly taught.

Parents are proud and self-centered. Authority and rules are overused to influence children.

Parents point out wrongdoing by others, but hide their own wrongdoing in order to appear righteous.

##### **Christ-Filled Home**

God's love and grace are not only talked about, but strongly felt.

Persons are of the highest value.

A personal relationship with God is emphasized and lifted up to be of highest importance.

Who a person is, is more important than what they do.

Environment is one of peace and people feel free to be themselves.

Environment is safe and produces realness. Realness is lived out and exemplified daily by parents.

Good character is of high priority.

Boundaries are established and maintained by rejection of hurtful behavior, but NOT the person.

Displays of non-manipulative emotions are encouraged and talked about.

Gratefulness for people and how God has uniquely made each family member is what is most often expressed.

People are lifted up and touted as of highest importance. God's law is taught and talked about and actively trusted to be His way of protection and providence.

Right doing and kindness is lived out *by the parents* and loving others like God loves is strongly taught and modeled by parents.

*Parents* are broken and humble and use modeling, servanthood, and good communication to influence children.

Parents are quick to apologize for their own wrong doing and ask forgiveness from others in the family.

## **Appendix G**

### **Informed Consent Form— Qualitative Study**

#### **A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

James Lang, EdDc, in the Department of Graduate Education at Northwest Nazarene University is conducting a research study related to your past participation in “The Aphasis Group Experience” (recently renamed “The Immersion Group Experience”). I am evaluating the transformational change (if any) that occurred after completing the small-group experience. I appreciate your involvement in helping me investigate to what extent “The Aphasis Group Experience” benefits those who participate.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an “alumnus” of “The Aphasis Group Experience” over the age of 18.

#### **B. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, thereby volunteering to participate in the study.
2. You will answer a set of interview questions that will be audio-taped and is expected to last 45-75 minutes in length.
3. You will answer a set of demographic questions on standard paper. It should take approximately 5 minutes to answer.
4. You will be asked to read a debriefing statement at the conclusion of the interview.
5. You will be asked to read and edit (if you deem necessary) a written transcript of the interview.

These procedures will be completed at a location mutually decided upon by the participant and principal investigator and will take a total time of about 45-75 minutes. A second, shorter, interview may be needed to clarify and, if needed, to edit the original transcript of the initial interview.

#### **C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

1. Some of the discussion questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. For this research project, the researchers are requesting demographic information. Due to the make-up of Idaho’s population (should that apply to you), the combined answers to these questions may make an individual person identifiable. The researchers will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.



## Appendix G

### Informed Consent Form— Qualitative Study (p. 2)

3. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data from notes, audio
4. tapes, and disks will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the Department and the key to the cabinet will be kept in a separate location. In compliance with the Federal wide Assurance Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).

#### **D. BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may help those involved in Christ's church in general, and in Aphesis Group Ministries programs in particular, to better understand transformational change in the lives of believers.

#### **E. PAYMENTS**

There will not be any compensation for your volunteering for this study.

#### **F. QUESTIONS**

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. James Lang can be contacted via email at jameslang@nnu.com, via telephone at [REDACTED] (R) or by writing: [REDACTED].

Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

#### **G. CONSENT**

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student at Northwest Nazarene University (if applicable).

*I give my consent to participate in this study:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix G****Informed Consent Form— Qualitative Study (p. 3)****Signature of Study Participant****Date***I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study:*

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**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent**

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**Date**

**THE NORTHWEST NAZARENE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW  
COMMITTEE HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN  
PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.**

## Appendix H

### Qualitative Questionnaire

1] Please share with me a significant “ah ha” moment in your life that you experienced going through the Immersion Experience, or after completing it.

2] Could you describe your “religiously confused” home of origin that you grew up in before you turned 18 years of age? Please describe any key relationships that you had with family members. [hand participant chart from the Immersion Experience notebook entitled “Comparisons between a Religiously Confused, Dysfunctional Home and a Healthy, Christ-filled Home”]

3] How has your instinctive response (a natural or acquired tendency) to persistent stress and unexpected pain (emotional, physical, and/or spiritual) changed in how you deal with critical relationships in your life since completing the Immersion Experience? . . . with God; with yourself; with significant personal relationships?

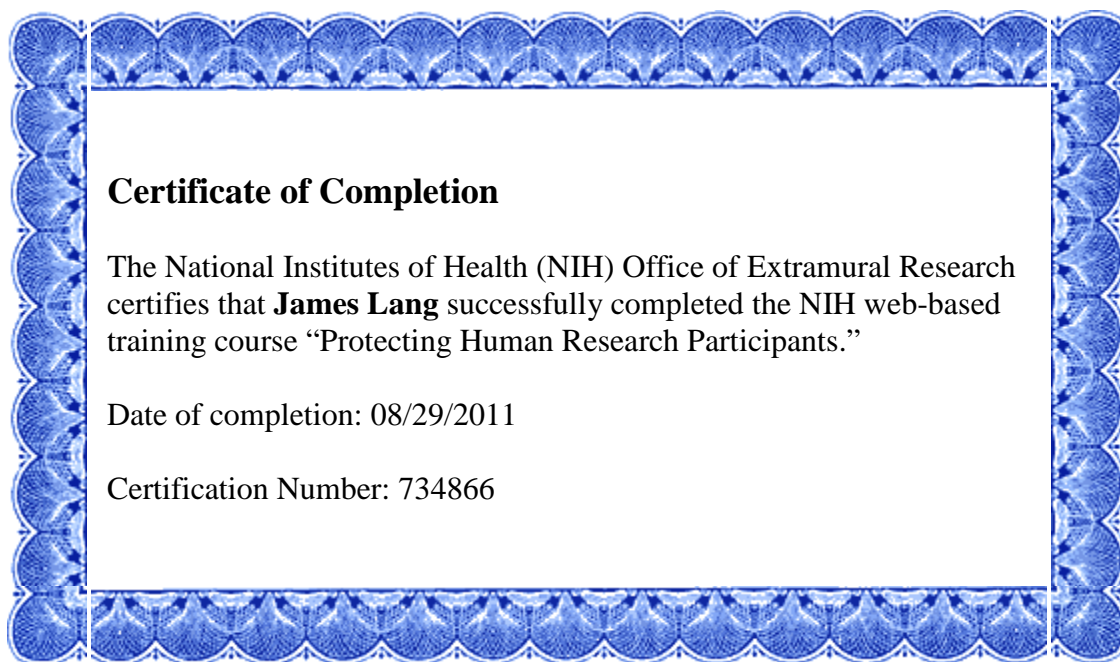
4] Today, how would you describe how God **the Father** views you and your relationship with Him? Do you feel deeply **delighted in** by the Father? As far as you can remember, have you always felt this way? Has this impacted how you **feel** about and how you view yourself and others? What has influenced your understanding?

5] Could you describe any “life skills” learned during the Immersion Experience that make a difference in your life today [forgiveness; trust; love & living in community; fruit of the Spirit]?

6] Is there anything you would like to share about your working through the Immersion Experience that has not come up yet?

## Appendix I

### NIH Certification



## **Appendix J**

### **Verbatim Instructions for Interviews**

Hi \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I truly appreciate your involvement.

#### **Semistructured, Audio-Recorded Interviews**

Up to two (2) semistructured interviews will be conducted with each participant. The interviews will be completed at a public location mutually decided by the participant and the researcher. The first interview will be 45-75 minutes in duration. The second interview, if needed, will be 20-40 minutes in length.

This process is completely voluntary and you can select to discontinue your participation and leave the study at any time. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you can elect to not answer that question.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Thank you for your participation,

James “Jim” Lang

## **Appendix K**

### **Debrief Statement of Qualitative Interviews**

Thank you for participating in this study. The goal of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the Immersion Experience/Aphesis Group Experience on the inner lives of Christ-followers.

After I have had a chance to analyze the cumulative data, I will email you the results and ask for feedback. The purpose of this communication is to ensure that I have captured our discussions accurately and portrayed your thoughts properly.

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. James Lang can be contacted via email at [jameslang@nnu.com](mailto:jameslang@nnu.com) and via telephone at 208-██████ (R). Dr. E. Michael Poe, Supervisor, can be contacted through email at [empoe@nnu.edu](mailto:empoe@nnu.edu) or by telephone at (208)-██████.

Thank you, again, for your participation,

James “Jim” Lang

## Appendix L

### Demographic Family Information

Disclosure of the following information is voluntary. Taking a few minutes to complete this could help me move forward in the interview without asking additional questions.

1. **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. Type of **church** I grew up in: \_\_\_\_\_
3. My family:
  - a. **My parents** that I primarily lived with growing up (such as: mother, father, step-father, foster parents, grandparents, etc.):  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. **Marital Status** (such as: single, widowed, divorced, married): \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. **My birth order** in relationship with my siblings (such as: brother, sister, adopted brother, step-sister):
    - 1) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 2) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 3) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 4) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 5) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 6) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 7) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix M

### The Subjects Taught in the Immersion Experience

Module	Lesson	Lesson Subject
Introduction		
	1	Introduction to the Immersion Experience
Module 1—Understanding the Impact of Spiritual and Cultural Origins		
	2	Understanding our Spiritual Origin
	3	Understanding our Cultural Origins
Module 2—Understanding the Impact of Family Background		
	4	Understanding the Hurting Home
	5	Understanding the Effects of the Hurting Home
	6	Understanding Your Particular Family Background
Module 3—Understanding Your New Family/Relating to Your Heavenly Father		
	7	Recovering from an Unhealthy Background
	8	God the Father's love and Acceptance
	9	Understanding God the Son's Love and Acceptance
	10	Understanding Our New Family Environment
Module 4—Understanding Your Identity		
	11	Understanding the Importance of Identity
	12	Our New Identity, Part 1
	13	Our New Identity, Part 2
Module 5—Understanding and Managing Your Emotions		
	14	Understanding Your Emotions
	15	Managing Our Moods and Painful Emotions



## Module 6—Understanding and Managing Your Pain

- 16 Understanding Pain and Our Responses to Pain
- 17 Managing Our Pain

## Module 7—Understanding Your Relationships

- 18 Understanding Relational Patterns
- 19 Understanding Healthy Communication Skills

## Module 8—Developing Life Skills

- 20 Learning Forgiveness
- 21 Learning to Trust
- 22 Learning to Love and Live in Community

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Note: Adapted from “The Immersion Experience,” by T. Rule, 2011, *The Immersion Experience*, pp. 1-378. Meridian, ID: Aphesis Group Ministries.

## Appendix N

### Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test: Significance

Item #	Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test—Significance Likert-Type Item	Reversed Answers	p-value	Significant
<b>Valued by God</b>				
29, 45	I feel that God delights in me as an individual.		< 0.0005	Yes
14, 55	I am of great worth.		< 0.0005	Yes
35, 73	I experience God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.		< 0.0005	Yes
22, 62	I am worth knowing and having a relationship with.		< 0.0005	Yes
13, 49	God likes me.		< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Home of Origin/Effects of the Fall</b>				
36, 74	I have been deeply shaped by my family (before age 18) in how I view God and how I live my Christian life.		< 0.0005	Yes
32, 68	I have been deeply compromised by the fall, by culture, by my family of origin.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
30, 67	I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Religiously Confused Home of Origin (before age 18)</b>				
16, 50	I believe I was raised in a religiously confused home.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
43, 69	Obedying God's rules were of highest importance in my home.	Yes	0.401	No
41, 64	Being critical of others was very much a part of my home.	Yes	0.566	No
38, 60	Rule keeping was the highest value growing up in my home.	Yes	0.350	No
<b>Personal Value and Identity Based on Performance</b>				
18, 53	I am what I do.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
21, 56	God is more pleased with me when I perform well.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
26, 65	I feel it is important to work hard to please God.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
23, 59	I believe that God is disappointed with me when I fail.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
27, 72	God is more interested in who I am than what I do.		< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Emotions and Pain</b>				
28, 54	Emotions are a gift.		< 0.0005	Yes
34, 70	God is emotional.		< 0.0005	Yes
31, 66	My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.		< 0.0005	Yes
24, 63	Pain is a gift.		< 0.0005	Yes
20, 58	Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
17, 51	Much of my pain feels like God is punishing me.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Trust</b>				
39, 48	Trust is critical to my well-being.		< 0.0005	Yes
42, 57	Trust is very important in my relationships with others.		< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Forgiveness</b>				
19, 52	When I have unresolved conflict with others, I tend to ignore issues rather than work them through to a resolution.	Yes	< 0.0005	Yes
15, 71	I understand the perspectives and skills needed to resolve my relational hurts and pains caused by others.		< 0.0005	Yes
25, 47	I believe that resolving my past relational hurt and pain with others is critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, and joy.		< 0.0005	Yes
<b>Community/Vulnerability in a Safe Group</b>				
37, 61	I feel safe being authentic and vulnerable sharing deeply personal things with my group.		< 0.0005	Yes
33, 46	I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends is critical to my joy and peace.		< 0.0005	Yes

40, 75	I feel that being part of a safe community is critical to my emotional and spiritual wellbeing.		< 0.0005	Yes
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### Appendix O

#### Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test: Change in Mean

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test—Change in Mean Likert-type items	Reversed Answers	Mean Before	Mean After	Change in mean
<b>Valued by God</b>				
I feel that God delights in me as an individual.		3.09	1.45	+1.64
I am of great worth.		2.82	1.44	+1.38
I experience God's delight in me in deep & meaningful ways.		3.03	1.90	+1.13
I am worth knowing and having a relationship with.		2.55	1.58	+0.97
God likes me.		2.10	1.49	+0.61
<b>Home of Origin/Effects of the Fall</b>				
I have been deeply shaped by my family (before age 18) in how I view God and how I live my Christian life.		1.95	2.96	-1.01
I have been deeply compromised by the fall, by culture, by my family of origin.	Yes	3.71	4.26	+0.55
I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).	Yes	3.59	3.88	+0.29
<b>Religiously Confused Home of Origin (before age 18)</b>				
I believe I was raised in a religiously confused home.	Yes	3.41	3.81	+0.40
Obedying God's rules were of highest importance in my home.	Yes	3.13	3.17	+0.04
Being critical of others was very much a part of my home.	Yes	3.85	3.86	+0.01
Rule keeping was the highest value growing up in my home.	Yes	3.61	3.61	0.00
<b>Personal Value and Identity Based on Performance</b>				
I am what I do.	Yes	3.55	1.86	+1.69
God is more pleased with me when I perform well.	Yes	3.76	2.08	+1.68
I feel it is important to work hard to please God.	Yes	3.56	1.98	+1.58
I believe that God is disappointed with me when I fail.	Yes	3.57	2.15	+1.42
God is more interested in who I am than what I do.		2.68	1.51	+1.17
<b>Emotions and Pain</b>				
Emotions are a gift.		2.69	1.62	+1.07
God is emotional.		2.42	1.55	+0.83
My emotions are a reliable indicator of what I really believe.		2.99	2.51	+0.48
Pain is a gift.		3.22	1.83	+1.39
Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.	Yes	3.66	2.34	+1.32
Much of my pain feels like God is punishing me.	Yes	2.68	1.97	+0.71
<b>Trust</b>				
Trust is critical to my well-being.		2.53	1.44	+1.09
Trust is very important in my relationships with others.		2.23	1.45	+0.78
<b>Forgiveness</b>				
When I have unresolved conflict with others, I tend to ignore issues rather than work them through to a resolution.	Yes	3.44	2.33	+1.11
I understand the perspectives and skills needed to resolve my relational hurts and pains caused by others.		3.03	1.94	+1.09
I believe that resolving my past relational hurt and pain with others is critical to my experiencing God's love, peace, & joy.		2.73	1.75	+0.98
<b>Community/Vulnerability in a Safe Group</b>				
I feel safe being authentic and vulnerable sharing deeply personal things with my group.		3.13	1.83	+1.30
I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends is critical to my joy and peace.		2.85	1.63	+1.22

I feel that being part of a safe community is critical to my emotional and spiritual wellbeing.		2.64	1.69	+0.95
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### Appendix P

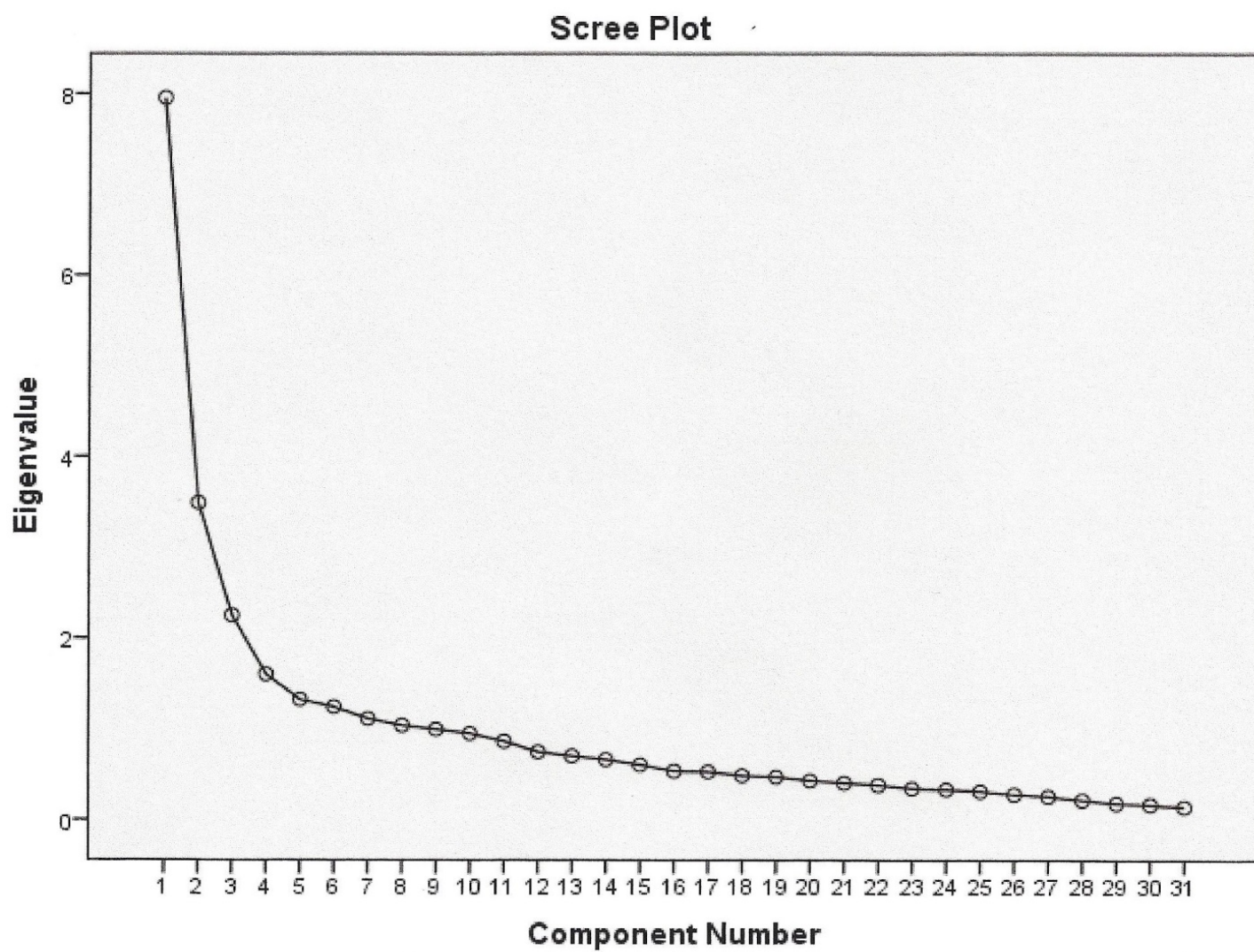
#### Principal Component Analysis—Total Variance Explained

Total Variance Explained				
Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings				
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	
1	7.955	25.660	25.660	
2	3.485	11.241	36.901	
3	2.251	7.261	44.163	
4	1.602	5.167	49.329	
5	1.321	4.263	53.592	
6	1.240	4.000	57.592	
7	1.109	3.579	61.170	
8	1.037	3.345	64.515	
9	.994	3.205	67.720	
10	.948	3.059	70.779	
11	.862	2.780	73.559	
12	.745	2.403	75.962	
13	.700	2.257	78.219	
14	.660	2.129	80.348	
15	.603	1.945	82.293	
16	.536	1.728	84.022	
17	.528	1.704	85.726	
18	.485	1.564	87.289	
19	.471	1.519	88.809	
20	.431	1.390	90.198	
21	.406	1.309	91.507	
22	.383	1.235	92.742	
23	.346	1.117	93.859	
24	.335	1.080	94.939	
25	.315	1.015	95.954	
26	.282	.909	96.863	
27	.259	.834	97.697	
28	.219	.706	98.403	
29	.183	.590	98.992	
30	.169	.546	99.538	
31	.143	.462	100.000	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

## Appendix Q

## Principal Component Analysis—Scree Plot





## Appendix R

## Principal Component Analysis—Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that God likes me.	.812			
God delights in me as an individual.	.789			
I am of great worth.	.756			
I experience God's delight in me in deep and meaningful ways.	.692		.333	
I am worth knowing.	.609			
Pain is a gift.	.593			
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel God is more interested in who I am than what I do.	.593		.416	
Emotions are a gift.	.442	.410		
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel safe being authentic and vulnerable sharing deeply...	.342			
How I now view God and how I live my Christian life is deeply shaped by my family (before age 18).	-.322			
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that being part of a safe group is critical to my e...		.750		
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that being vulnerable with safe friends is critical...		.742		

## Appendix R (continued)

## Principal Component Analysis—Rotated Component Matrix (p. 2)

Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
After completing the Immersion Experience I believe that trust is very important in my relationships...		.731		
I believe that resolving my relational hurt and pains with others is critical to my experiencing God...		.659		
Trust is critical to my well-being.		.639		
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel I had been deeply compromised (leaving my belief system messed up) by the fall, by culture, by my family of origin.		[-.558]		.300
God is emotional.	.309	.541		
My emotions are a great indicator of what I really believe.		.444		
When I have unresolved conflict with others, I tend to ignore issues rather than work them through t...		.372		
Pain feels like God is punishing me.			.719	
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel it is important to work hard to please God.			.701	
God is more pleased with me when I perform well.			.691	
God is disappointed with me when I fail.			.687	

## Appendix R (continued)

## Principal Component Analysis—Rotated Component Matrix (p. 3)

Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>				
	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Pain feels like the consequence of my mistakes.			.679	
After completing the Immersion Experience I feel that I am what I do.	.389		.649	
I understand and practice the perspectives and skills needed to resolve my relational hurts and pain...			.389	
Rule-keeping was the highest value while growing up in my home (before age 18).				.778
I was raised in a religiously confused home (before age 18).				.738
Being critical of others was very much a part of my home (before age 18).				.732
I was raised in a dysfunctional home (before age 18).				.696
Obeying God's rules were of highest importance in my home (before age 18).				.581

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.